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Reports

Impressions of impression management: Evidence of spontaneous suspicion of ulterior motivation

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ABSTRACT

Many forms of self-presentational behavior are very common; so social perceivers are experienced at observing them. In contrast with existing views, we argue that inferences about ulterior, self-presentational motives may be formed as spontaneously as other trait inferences. Applying a relearning paradigm, we assessed implicit, spontaneous inferences about ulterior motives. Participants read behavior descriptions, some of which could imply ulterior motivation (e.g., "John volunteered to help paint his boss' house," which can imply "ingratiating," or the correspondent trait "helpful") and descriptions that could not ("John volunteered to help paint his friend's house"). We assessed spontaneous inferences about ulterior motives (e.g., ingratiating) and about traits that directly corresponded with the behavior (e.g., helpful). Results showed that participants spontaneously activated the ulterior motive just as much as the correspondent inference. This indicates co-occurring spontaneous inferences of ulterior motives as well as correspondent traits.

Impressions of Impression Management: Evidence of Spontaneous Suspicion of Ulterior Motivation

Self-presentational behavior occurs every day and everywhere (e.g., Leary, 1995), and ingratiation and self-promotion are the most common varieties of it (Jones & Pittman, 1982; Vonk, 2001). Therefore, social perceivers may be proficient at detecting ingratiation and self-promotion, especially prototypical forms such as ingratiation towards the boss or a beautiful woman (Vonk, 1999a,b). As a result of everyday practice, perceivers may even recognize this behavior and its motives spontaneously, without much cognitive effort.

The general view in social cognition, however, is that without any effortful thought, behavior is typically taken at face value due to the correspondence bias (see, Gilbert & Malone, 1995). Thus, when a subordinate compliments his boss, our first, spontaneous inference should be that he expresses genuine admiration. Whenever such self-presentational behaviors are observed, theoretically there are three possibilities:

(1) The self-presentational motives go unnoticed and the behavior is taken at face value; this follows from the correspondence bias;
(2) The behavior arouses suspicion of ulterior motivation and is carefully scrutinized. According to Fein (1996), suspicion of ulterior motivation evokes sophisticated attributional analysis, that is, conscious and deliberative thought. Thus, self-presentational motives can be detected but this requires cognitive elaboration;
(3) The behavior is spontaneously, without much conscious effort, attributed to self-presentational motives. Here, we argue that this occurs more than is predicted by current theories on correspondence bias and suspicion of ulterior motivation.

Social-cognitive literature indicates that even complex higher mental processes become automatized when frequently exercised (Smith, 1994; see also Smith & Lerner, 1986). Examples are spontaneous trait inferences (STIs; Uleman, Newman, & Moskowitz, 1996; see also, Uleman, Adil Saribay, & Gonzalez, 2008), inferences about goals of actors (Hassin, Aarts, & Ferguson, 2005), about properties of an actor's situation (spontaneous situation inferences, SSIs; Ham & Vonk, 2003; Lupfer, Clark, & Hutcherson, 1990; see also, Ham & Van den Bos, 2008), and about goal-directed behavior (Aarts & Dijksterhuis, 2000). We propose that, even though inferences about ulterior motives interfere with the human tendency toward inferring correspondent traits (e.g., friendly behavior is guided by a friendly disposition), the process of detecting self-presentational motives shares important similarities with other frequently exercised higher mental processes. If perceivers regularly observe particular styles of self-presentation (e.g., flattery) and if they engage in systematic corrective processes each time they do, these corrections may become proceduralized (Bassili, 1993; Smith & Lerner, 1986) and occur spontaneously (Vonk, 1998, Exp. 5), just as other well-practiced cognitive activities.

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Corroborating this assumption, previous studies (Vonk, 1998, 1999a) suggest that some forms of self-presentation are identified with little cognitive effort. However, in these previous studies, explicit measures were used (see also Fein, 1996; Fein, Hilton, & Miller, 1990; Vonk, 1999a): participants judged an actor on explicit (e.g., Likert-type) rating scales. And because explicit questions induce thoughtful, intentional responses (Uleman, 1999), these previous studies do not demonstrate that such inferences are made spontaneously.

Spontaneous non-correspondent inferences

The first purpose of the present study is to provide empirical evidence of the spontaneity of inferences about ulterior motivation. Social-cognitive research studied spontaneous inferences in great detail, but methods and findings have never been applied to inferences of ulterior motivation and self-presentational behavior. Various methods have been developed to measure STIs and to guarantee that dependent measures reflect spontaneous inferences (for an overview, see, Uleman et al., 1996). In the current study, we will adapt such a research paradigm to investigate spontaneous inferences related to suspicion of self-presentational motives.

In the literature on person perception, a fundamental difference is drawn between correspondent and non-correspondent inferences (Jones & Davis, 1965; Jones & McGillis, 1976). Although both types of inference reflect internal causes of behavior, the term correspondence refers to the extent to which the behavior and the underlying disposition are "similarly described by the inference" (Jones & Davis, 1965, p. 223). So, a correspondent trait inference takes the behavior at face value, whereas a non-correspondent trait inference refers to potential motives other than conveying a true reflection of the self, that is, self-presentational motives in many cases. For instance, in case of helpful behavior, the inference of the motive to help would reflect correspondence; the inference of the motive to ingratiate would reflect non-correspondent inferences (still informative about the target). When forming an impression of others, people can face an attributional dilemma (see Fein et al., 1990): an actor's behavior corresponds with an internal correspondent trait (e.g., helpful) or the actor aims at gaining some desired end state (e.g., trying to ingratiate).

Multiple spontaneous inferences

If perceivers indeed make spontaneous inferences about ulterior motives, the question arises how these relate to correspondent inferences which, as we already know, are also made spontaneously. Previous research indicates that multiple, sometimes even competing inferences, are drawn initially in the impression formation process (Reeder, Vonk, Ronk, Ham, & Lawrence, 2004) and that spontaneous inferences can be activated jointly (Ham & Vonk, 2003; Todd et al., 2011). For instance, the behavior "John lifts the stone" can lead to co-occurring activation of the inferences 'strong' (referring to John) and 'light' (referring to the stone), even though they designate internal vs. external causes of the behavior (Ham & Vonk, 2003).

Assuming that multiple inferences are drawn in case of self-presentational behavior, this would imply even more inconsistency among the inferences than in the previous studies. For example, when participants read that "John volunteered to help paint his boss' house," they might instantly think of "helpful" and "ingratiating" at the same time. These inferences are evaluatively inconsistent (see also footnote 1) and they exclude each other more or less as possible causes of the behavior: Unlike inferences about internal and external causes, they do not work in an additive way. Yet we do assume that both will be spontaneously activated. Investigating this possibility constitutes the second aim of our study.

We presented participants with descriptions that imply either only a correspondent trait (CT) or can evoke suspicion because they can imply either ulterior motivation (UM) or a correspondent trait (CT). To this end, we manipulated actor-target dependence in descriptions. Dependence is a powerful cue in detecting ulterior motivation (Vonk, 1998, 1999a). In our stimulus materials, the actor is either dependent on the target (e.g., "Jake tells the customer that the coat suits him well," where Jake can be considered dependent upon the customer) or not dependent (e.g., "Jake tells his friend that the coat suits him well"). When the actor is dependent on the target, the description can imply either an ulterior motivation (e.g., "sales talk"), or a correspondent trait (e.g., "complimenting"). Without dependence, the ulterior motive is less likely and the description predominantly implies a correspondent trait ("complimenting").

Note that slight variations in the context and target of the behavior allow us to create short sentences, as required to demonstrate spontaneous inferences (e.g., Fazio & Olson, 2002; Uleman, Hon, Roman, & Moskowitz, 1996), while also including cues pointing to ulterior motivation. As in other STI research, participants were presented with multiple descriptions. To avoid a description activating inferences easily applicable to subsequent descriptions, we selected a variety of self-presentational behaviors and settings within the ingratiation and self-promotion domains (see Appendix 1).

For descriptions implying both a UM and a CT, we expect to find evidence for both types of spontaneous inferences. For descriptions implying only a CT, we expect to find evidence for activation of a CT-only. Also, these descriptions allow us to examine if the strength of a CT is reduced in case of a CT + UM inference.

The generalized relearning paradigm

We measured spontaneous inferences using an implicit measurement paradigm, the "grid relearning paradigm" (Ham & Vonk, 2003)—an adaptation of Carlston and Skowronski's (1994) relearning paradigm with a broader application scope. In the three tasks of this paradigm, participants are presented with a 4×4 information grid. In the first task, in each cell of the grid, behavior descriptions are presented in the cells, for example, "Bart offered the attractive woman a ride home." Participants are instructed merely to read the descriptions. In the second task, cue words are presented in each cell and participants are asked to memorize which word is presented in which cell. Finally, in the third task, recall for the words from the second task is tested. In some cases (labeled a relearning trial), the cue word presented in the second task represents an inference (in this experiment, an ulterior motive or a corresponding trait) implied by the description presented in that same cell in the first task. For example, "womanizer" is presented in the same cell where the description "Bart offered the attractive woman a ride home" has been presented. In such cases, assuming that an inference of ulterior motive has already been activated spontaneously during the first task, this implies that participants are now observing a combination they already saw before. In effect, then, they are *relearning* the combination. In other cases (labeled learning trials), the cue word presented in the second task is not an implication of the description presented in that same cell in the first task. For example, "womanizer" is presented in the same cell where the description "Ben jumped over the fence" has been presented in the first task. So, in the learning trials, relearning does not occur.

In general, the paradigm is based on the idea that relearning is more effective than learning. If the inference represented by the cue word (either a UM or a CT) has been activated spontaneously while reading the description in the first task, recall should be better in relearning trials than in learning trials because the exposure to the behavior has produced a spontaneous inference with residual effects that facilitate learning in the second task. These facilitation effects (indicated by lower error rates) were found in several studies on spontaneous social inferences (Carlston & Skowronski, 1994; Carlston, Skowronski, & Sparks, 1995; Ham & Vonk, 2003), and the present study will use them to examine spontaneous activation of ulterior motives along with correspondent traits. We expect to find facilitation