



Spontaneous social role inferences[☆]



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Perceivers spontaneously infer information about people from their behavior.
- We proposed that perceivers infer others' social roles from their behaviors.
- Three studies documented spontaneous role inferences (SRIs).
- SRIs were cognitively efficient, forming under cognitive load.
- SRIs had downstream consequences for trait impressions of targets.

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ABSTRACT

Past research has demonstrated that perceivers spontaneously infer individuals' goals, beliefs, and traits from their behaviors. These inferences processes are essential for predicting others' future behaviors and, thus, for smooth social interaction. Given that social roles (e.g., professor, mother) are also predictive of an individual's future behaviors, we proposed that perceivers spontaneously infer individuals' social roles from their behaviors. Across three experiments, including two different paradigms, we documented that perceivers formed spontaneous role inferences (SRIs) from single behaviors. SRIs occurred unintentionally, efficiently, and had important downstream consequences for impression formation. Namely, SRIs led perceivers to rate targets as higher on role-consistent traits. Together, these findings provide the first empirical demonstration of a novel process in impression formation.

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Spontaneous social role inferences

One of the earliest questions asked by social psychologists was: how do perceivers distill knowledge of another person from his or her behaviors? Humans have an unparalleled ability to extract valuable social information, such as intentions and dispositions, from the mere observation of another person's behavior. Given that others' social roles also provide important information about their intentions and future behaviors, we propose that perceivers also readily infer individuals' social roles from their behaviors.

It has been argued that perceivers' ability to quickly and readily infer others' mental states serves an evolutionary imperative: the ability to anticipate and predict others' future behaviors is necessary for cooperation and, consequently, survival (Humphrey, 1980; McCarthy &

Skowronski, 2011; Schaller, 2008; Whiten & Erdal, 2012). Knowing another person's traits would be particularly important for anticipating his or her future behavior (Heider, 1958). Consistent with this view, a large body of research has now demonstrated that perceivers readily extract trait information from others' behaviors, a process called *spontaneous trait inference* (STI; Winter & Uleman, 1984; see Uleman, Saribay, & Gonzalez, 2008, for a review). For instance, upon learning that Adam helped an old lady cross the street, perceivers infer that Adam is helpful. STIs occur quickly (Todd, Molden, Ham, & Vonk, 2011), without intention or awareness (Carlston & Skowronski, 1994; Todorov & Uleman, 2003) and are highly efficient (Crawford, Skowronski, Stiff, & Scherer, 2007; Todd et al., 2011; Todorov & Uleman, 2003). These findings generated a body of research documenting that perceivers also spontaneously infer targets' goals (Hassin, Aarts, & Ferguson, 2005). Thus, perceivers see in a single behavior the target's disposition and intentions.

Documentation of spontaneous inferences about others' traits and goals demonstrates some of the important social perception processes that enable smooth interaction. Yet people's actions are not solely caused by their internal states, such as goals and traits; their behaviors are multiply determined by their internal states and their situations. Indeed, social perception maps onto this reality in that, upon observing a

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behavior, perceivers spontaneously infer properties of the target and of the situation (Duff & Newman, 1997; Ham & Vonk, 2003; Lupfer, Clark, & Hutcherson, 1990; Todd et al., 2011). For example, perceivers learning that an old lady jumped over a fence spontaneously infer that the fence is low. In the present work, we propose a novel inference process focusing on another determinant of individuals' behaviors: their social roles.

Social roles, or positions in society that are associated with specific expectations, responsibilities, and obligations, have been part of life since the earliest human societies (Massey, 2001). Social roles are a hybrid of dispositional and situational influences on human behavior. Social roles reflect disposition because people may be more or less suited to fulfill specific roles (e.g., a leader), and fulfilling a social role may lead a person to more fully develop or exhibit specific traits (e.g., assertiveness). Yet social roles are also situational because they are defined at a societal level, encompass rights and responsibilities that are mutually agreed upon by members of that society, and are likely to change over time (e.g., graduate student to professor).

Social roles are important predictors of human behavior in every society. In the U.S., adults' behaviors on an average weekday are largely determined by one type of social role: their occupation (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011). Moreover, people define themselves in part by the social roles that they occupy, such as *student* (McConnell, 2011). Thus, understanding the social roles of others would be extremely useful for forming impressions and being able to predict their future behaviors across a variety of situations. Given the importance of social roles in predicting behavior, we hypothesized that perceivers spontaneously infer social role information from individuals' behaviors. Spontaneous social role inferences are conceptualized as the process by which perceivers form a mental association between the individual and the inferred social role on the basis of that individual's behavior. Consistent with previous research (see Carlston & Mae, 2003; Uleman et al., 2008), we use the term *spontaneous* to indicate that the proposed inference process occurs *unintentionally* and *efficiently*. Across three experiments, we investigated the formation of spontaneous role inferences (SRIs) and its process characteristics.

Experiment 1

Experiment 1 investigated SRIs using the probe recognition paradigm developed by McKoon and Ratcliff (1986). This paradigm has been successfully adapted to examine two other types of spontaneous inferences: STIs (e.g., Uleman, Hon, Roman, & Moskowitz, 1996) and spontaneous situation inferences (SSIs; e.g., Ham & Vonk, 2003). In our adaptation of the probe recognition paradigm, participants read about people engaging in behaviors that afford inferences about their social roles. Immediately following each sentence is a probe word, and participants must decide whether the probe word was in the sentence. In experimental trials, the probe word is the implied social role. Control trials consist of trials in which the probe word is a role neither implied by nor contained in the sentence immediately preceding it. If the sentence led to an SRI, then it should be more difficult for participants to correctly respond “no” on experimental trials than on control trials. Therefore, evidence of SRIs is derived from longer latencies for correct responses or more false recognitions (erroneous “yes” answers) on experimental trials than on control trials. It is also important to note that SRIs impede accurate performance. Thus, to the extent that participants are motivated to do well on the task, they will not intentionally form SRIs. As such, evidence of SRIs is also consistent with the hypothesized unintentional nature of the process.

It is difficult to predict whether SRIs will produce effects on false recognitions or response latencies for any given sample of participants (Uleman et al., 1996). In addition, the likelihood of finding significant differences on both false recognitions and response latencies is reduced due to the speed-accuracy tradeoff (e.g., Wickelgren, 1977). Therefore, significant differences on either dependent measure are considered to be sufficient evidence of spontaneous inferences (Todd et al., 2011;

Uleman et al., 1996). Because we had no a priori hypotheses about whether evidence for SRIs would be exhibited in participants' false recognitions or response latencies, we analyzed both dependent measures. We hypothesized that participants would form SRIs, such that their false recognitions would be higher and/or their accurate response times would be longer for experimental trials compared to control trials.

Pretest 1: generating role-implying behaviors

Mirroring the research on STIs and SSIs, we generated a set of sentences that reliably implied social roles. For this purpose, the experimenters generated seventy-one sentences describing individuals performing different behaviors. These sentences were shown to a group of 34 undergraduates, who were asked to generate three social roles of individuals likely to perform each behavior. The social roles generated for each sentence were then collapsed across synonyms (e.g., “father” and “dad”) and counted. Responses were not counted more than once if a single participant generated synonymous social roles to a sentence. Eight sentences were chosen for implying eight different social roles in at least 40% of the pretest sample (approximately the same consensus rate as the pretested materials in Ham & Vonk, 2003). Appendix A displays the eight sentences, their implied social roles, and the percentage of the sample that mentioned the implied social role.

Because our goal was to distinguish SRIs from STIs, we sought to develop stimuli that would not elicit STIs. To this end, we had also asked participants to generate three traits for each behavior. The eight role-implying behaviors did not reliably imply traits. Whereas the average sample agreement for implied roles was 68%, the average agreement for implied traits was only 16.5%. Although we cannot rule out the possibility of the role-implying stimuli eliciting STIs, the pretest established that stimuli more strongly implied roles than traits.

Method

Participants

In this and both subsequent experiments, we based sample sizes on norms in this research area. Eighty-seven undergraduates at a large public university were assigned to one of two between-subjects conditions of spontaneous inference type (role vs. trait). The STI formation condition used the same paradigm and similar materials, but it does not address our current research question and is not reported in this manuscript.

Forty-six participants (28 females) completed the SRI condition of the experiment in exchange for partial course credit. The average age was 19.67 years ($SD = 1.49$).

Materials and procedure

Upon entering the lab, participants learned that they would be participating in a reading comprehension task. They were told that they would read one sentence at a time. Following each sentence, a probe word would appear on the screen. The participants' task was to indicate as quickly and accurately as possible whether the probe word had been in the sentence immediately preceding it. To aid in the speed of their responses, participants were asked to place their index fingers on the “I” and “E” keys throughout the task. We counterbalanced whether “I” or “E” was assigned to the “yes” or “no” response option. Participants completed four practice trials with probe words unrelated to social roles prior to the experimental task.

Experimental materials consisted of sixteen sentences. Eight of the sentences had been pretested for implying unique social roles (e.g., “The person studied at the library” implying *student*; see Appendix A). Eight additional filler sentences explicitly included social role information as well as trait information (e.g., “The reporter was curious and

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