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# Actor-Observer Bias in Close Relationships: The Role of Self-Knowledge and Self-Related Language

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*Attributional biases are studied in the context of close relationships. Whereas the actor-observer bias implies more partner attributions than self-attributions, the egocentric bias predicts more self-attributions. Both phenomena can be reconciled within a language-based approach. Partner attributions prevail at the abstract level of adjectives, whereas self-attributions are more likely at the concrete level of action verbs, reflecting a rule to talk in less abstract terms about the self than about others. An alternative explanation based on multifaceted self-knowledge is refuted in Experiment 1. Experiment 2 replicates and extends the opposite attribution biases at different language levels, using free-format self- and partner descriptions. A comparison between short-term and long-term couples reveals a temporal decline in dispositional attributions. These findings support the role of language in addition to self-knowledge and perceptual determinants of attribution biases.*

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**T**he actor-observer bias in attribution (Jones & Nisbett, 1972) continues to be an intriguing topic of research and theorizing (Fiedler, Semin, & Koppetsch, 1991; Kahneman & Miller, 1986; Sande, Goethals, & Radloff, 1988) with important implications for many social issues, such as interpersonal conflicts, moral judgment, or satisfaction in close relationships (Fincham, 1985). The robust and reliable tendency of actors' self-attributions to be less dispositional (internal) and more situational (external) than observers' attributions of the

same behaviors (reviewed by Watson, 1982) highlights the impact of differing perspectives on the attribution process. The discrepant roles of the actor and the observer, or the self and the other, create a constant potential for divergent perceptions and interpretations of the world. Understanding the causes, mediators, and limits of the actor-observer bias not only is of practical significance but also provides a challenge to theories of attribution and perspectivity.

Traditionally, the phenomenon has been explained in terms of the perceptual differences of actors and observers or in terms of differential knowledge about the self and the other (Jones & Nisbett, 1972; Storms, 1973). Thus observers' tendency to make internal (actor) attributions may be due to the actors' providing the figure against the ground of their perceptual field, whereas actors attend to the environmental determinants of their behavior. In fact, by using video recording of behavior to reverse the figure and background perspectives for actors and observers, their typical attribution styles can also be reversed (Storms, 1973).

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Of course, the perceptual account does not logically exclude that other factors may contribute to the bias as well. The self/other comparison confounds so many differences that a monadic explanation is in fact rather unlikely. Thus another factor that suggests itself is the extremely asymmetric knowledge we have about ourselves and other people (Greenwald & Banaji, 1989; Jones & Nisbett, 1972; Markus, 1977). The representation of the self in memory is related more to personality attributes and behavioral episodes than any other social knowledge structure, and the self may simply be too complex and rich a structure to permit simplifying ascriptions of dispositional attributes. Self-knowledge provides multiple evidence for almost all traits and their opposites—extravert as well as introvert, elated as well as depressed, peaceful as well as aggressive—and this knowledge may be too varied and complex to justify one-sided inferences of particular traits or dispositions.

#### THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE

Communication and language habits provide still another factor that is inextricably confounded with attributional perspectives. There is good evidence (Fiedler & Semin, 1992; Semin & Fiedler, 1989, 1991), and good reasons, that communicators tend to describe themselves concretely in terms of manifest behaviors and leave it up to observers to provide more abstract interpretations and evaluations. On one hand, commitment to Grice's (1975) principle of cooperation forces communicators to be informative and interesting and, therefore, to provide interpretations and evaluations beyond mere descriptions; this leads to a general tendency to become more and more abstract (i.e., to move from verbs to adjectives) in communication (Fiedler, Semin, & Bolten, 1989; Higgins, McCann, & Fondacaro, 1982). On the other hand, this tendency toward abstractness is moderated by Grice's maxim of quality, entitling communicators to keep self-descriptions as specific and factual as possible. Thus to appear unbiased and objective, self-related communications should refrain from interpretations and self-evaluations (because social norms prevent one from being one's own referee) and instead rely on concrete facts and situational details (because we may have privileged knowledge of the specific circumstances of our own behavior).

In any case, it is an empirical fact that self-referent language is less abstract than other-referent language (Fiedler & Semin, 1992; Fiedler et al., 1991; Semin & Fiedler, 1989), suggesting a linguistic component for the actor-observer bias. Dispositional attributions from an observer perspective may reflect, at least to some degree, the more abstract language used to describe others' behavior. Moreover, this language bias is more general

than the attribution bias in that the former is not confined to causal explanations but is also found in narrative or merely descriptive reports of past episodes that subjects provide of themselves (Semin & Fiedler, 1989). It can even be generalized from the interpersonal (i.e., actor-observer) level to the intergroup level (Fiedler, Semin, & Finkenauer, 1993a).

The language approach not only suggests a long-neglected alternative or supplement but also offers a solution to a theoretical conflict between the actor-observer bias and the seemingly contradictory notion of an egocentric bias (Ross & Sicoly, 1979). With respect to married couples or close relationships, the actor-observer bias predicts more internal or dispositional attributions to the partner than to the self. By contrast, several partner studies have obtained an egocentric bias (Ross & Sicoly, 1979; Thompson & Kelley, 1981), yielding more responsibility attributions for mutual activities to the self than to the partner. Theoretically, this is explained by the enhanced availability of self-related information in memory. Although the perceptual and epistemic perspective predicts partner attribution, the egocentric memory bias predicts more self-attributions than partner attributions.

This obvious theoretical conflict can be resolved when language use is taken into account. Based on linguistic analyses of free verbalizations among young couples, Fiedler et al. (1991) demonstrated an actor-observer bias (partner attribution) and an egocentric bias (self-attribution) at the same time, albeit at different language levels. More partner attributions were obtained at the abstract level of *adjectives* (ADJs), whereas self-attributions prevailed at the more concrete level of *interpretive action verbs* (IAVs)—a pattern consistent with the hypothesized language habits. IAVs (e.g., *help*, *hurt*, *insult*) are linguistic devices to describe manifest behaviors in specific contexts, but unlike *descriptive action verbs* (DAVs, e.g., *call*, *meet*, or *touch*), IAVs are not purely descriptive but already entail some degree of interpretation, evaluation, and causal inference (cf. Semin & Fiedler, 1988, 1992). Neither the availability account of the egocentric bias nor the perceptual account of the actor-observer bias can explain the opposite biases obtained at different language levels.

#### THE MULTIFACETED SELF

Although the study by Fiedler et al. (1991) suggests the potential usefulness of a language approach in refining attribution theory, the differential language styles may only reflect the different knowledge representations of the self and others, rather than genuine communication rules. Such an alternative explanation of the tendency to ascribe more ADJs to others than to the self is

advanced in a noteworthy article by Sande et al. (1988). These authors compared self-ratings and other ratings regarding antonymous trait pairs like *serious-carefree*. On bipolar scales (with opposite poles representing the antonyms), the self was rated less extremely than other persons. However, on separate unipolar scales for the two antonyms, the summed ratings for the self was systematically higher than for other persons. Apparently, the bipolarly elicited self-judgments lead to a compromise or decision conflict because of the "multifaceted self," which is seen as having both properties marking the ends of bipolar dimensions to some degree. According to Sande et al. (1988), then, the actor-observer bias reflects too many (even opposite) traits associated with the self rather than any (perceptual) process that prevents self-attribution of traits.

Granting such a knowledge-based account, the language effect may be nothing but a secondary reflection of the multifaceted self rather than a manifestation of language rules. Although we have interpreted the tendency to use concrete action verbs and to avoid abstract ADJs in self-descriptions within Grice's (1975) principle of cooperative communication, the Sande et al. (1988) principle may as well account for the reversal from an egocentric bias to an actor-observer bias. Thus the decision conflict or inability to choose one rather than another attribute in self-attributions may be confined to the abstract level of ADJs, suggesting highly diagnostic information and stable dispositions (Semin & Fiedler, 1988). At the same time, the richness of self-knowledge might facilitate self-attributions of manifest behaviors at the level of IAVs that have much weaker implications and consistency constraints than ADJs. An explanation of the findings of Fiedler et al. (1991) can thus be found in the possibility that multifaceted self-knowledge is more readily expressed at the level of manifest behaviors, whereas self-description or presentation at the ADJ level leads to decision conflicts. The critical prediction that arises from these considerations is the following: The phenomenon described by Sande et al. (1988) should be restricted to, or at least more pronounced at, the ADJ than the IAV level. If no support is obtained for this prediction, then the opposite biases at different language levels can be assumed to be independent of the richness of self-knowledge.

We have, therefore, two competing explanations for the reversal from an actor-observer bias at the ADJ level to the egocentric bias at the IAV level. This reversal may be due to either differential language habits or the multifaceted structure of self-knowledge. Consequently, we applied the technique of Sande et al. (1988) to self-ratings and partner ratings of attributes at different language levels. In particular, we tested two implications derived from the notion of the multifaceted self. First,

the tendency to ascribe more antonymous properties to the self than to others should be confined to, or much stronger for, ADJ than IAV attributes. Thus people should ascribe to themselves opposite ADJs like *hostile* and *peaceful* to a greater degree than they do to others. However, this tendency should be eliminated or even reversed for IAV attributes like *endorse* versus *contradict*.

In addition to the above prediction regarding the reversal of attribution biases, the multifaceted self was originally proposed to account for the actor-observer bias. The viability of this explanation can also be tested within our language approach. The central assumption here is that people claim to possess antonymous traits to a greater extent than do others. Because ADJs as well as IAVs imply a cause or origin within the sentence subject (i.e., the IAV *help* also implies that the subject person is *helpful*), the above assumption holds for ADJs as well as IAVs. However, we included another class of interpersonal verbs—namely, *state verbs* (SVs, such as *admire*, *abhor*, and *like*), which have different attributional implications (cf. Semin & Fiedler, 1988, 1991). Unlike ADJs and IAVs, SVs imply an external cause outside the sentence subject rather than a dispositional attribution (i.e., *S abhors O* implies something abhorrent about *O* and does not support an *S* attribution), as demonstrated in many studies on implicit verb causality (Brown & Fish, 1983; Fiedler & Semin, 1988). On the abstractness dimension, SVs occupy an intermediate position between IAVs and ADJs. If the Sande et al. (1988) effect is to account for the actor-observer bias in the internal attribution of traits or dispositions, it should not generalize to SVs that suggest external attributions rather than traits or dispositions within the sentence subject. A similarly strong effect for SVs as for ADJs or IAVs would indicate that the multifaceted self is not specific to the actor-observer bias as an inference from behaviors to subject dispositions but reflects the generally higher accessibility of self-related information, regardless of which attribution it fosters.

Moreover, there is an important difference between ADJs and verbs that is relevant in this context. When subjects are asked to judge the applicability of an ADJ pair (*tolerant* vs. *restrictive*) to the self or someone else, the stimulus term represents the end product of the inferential process—that is, the attribution itself. By contrast, when the stimulus is a pair of IAVs (*help* vs. *hinder*), the end product of the attribution is not the verb but a trait derived from the verb (i.e., *helpful* vs. *hindering*), and subjects may judge these trait terms rather than the verbs themselves. To examine this possibility, we conducted a parallel study in which only ADJs were used as stimuli, but these ADJs were derived from the word stem of an IAV (IAVs<sub>adj</sub> like *helpful*) or an SV (SVs<sub>adj</sub> like *envious*), or were not derivable from any verb (genuine ADJs<sub>adj</sub> like

*cold*). Previous research (cf. Semin & Fiedler, 1991) has shown that comparisons of these subgroups of ADJs reflect similar differences as comparisons of ADJs and the respective verb classes.

Finally, we addressed another, more subsidiary, aspect of the findings of Sande et al. (1988)—namely, that not only the self but also the people we like are multifaceted. It is hypothesized that likeable people are expected to have “a greater capacity to respond in a flexible and adaptive manner over a wide range of situations” (p. 17). This would reflect a kind of self-serving bias, whereas our language account would not actively predict differential effects for likable versus unlikable persons. Unfortunately, likability may have been confounded with familiarity in Study 4 of Sande et al. For a check on this possibility, we asked our participants to rate not only themselves and their current partners on the various scales but also a former partner with whom they had been involved in a close relationship. The rationale here was that former partners are similar in familiarity but certainly less liked than current partners. However, this facet was only subsidiary to the present study. The main purpose here was to apply the Sande et al. account to self attributions and partner attributions at different language levels. Although the first study focused on the self-knowledge account, the second study returned to the alternative account in terms of self-related language.

#### EXPERIMENT 1

For an empirical test of the above predictions, the Sande et al. (1988) technique was slightly modified. Rather than letting subjects judge themselves and their partners on separate unipolar and bipolar rating scales, we computed different scores derived from unipolar ratings only. That is, a pair of two unipolar scales was constructed from each antonymous attribute pair (see Figure 1), and two indexes were defined to measure *attribute richness* (AR) and *decision conflict* (DC). The first index, AR, is simply the sum of both antonymous ratings, reflecting the belief that somebody is characterized by both poles of an attribute dimension. The second index, DC, is the absolute numeric difference of the two ratings, intended to capture the judge's readiness (versus reluctance) to make a definite choice for one rather than the other attribute of a pair. Figure 1 illustrates that over a wide range of the scale, these two aspects can vary independently; for instance, two ratings with a constant DC value (i.e., a constant horizontal distance) can move from left to right to yield quite different AR scores. Only extreme AR values (i.e., ceiling or floor effects) will restrict the DC so that any correlation between AR and DC would reflect an empirical relationship between at-

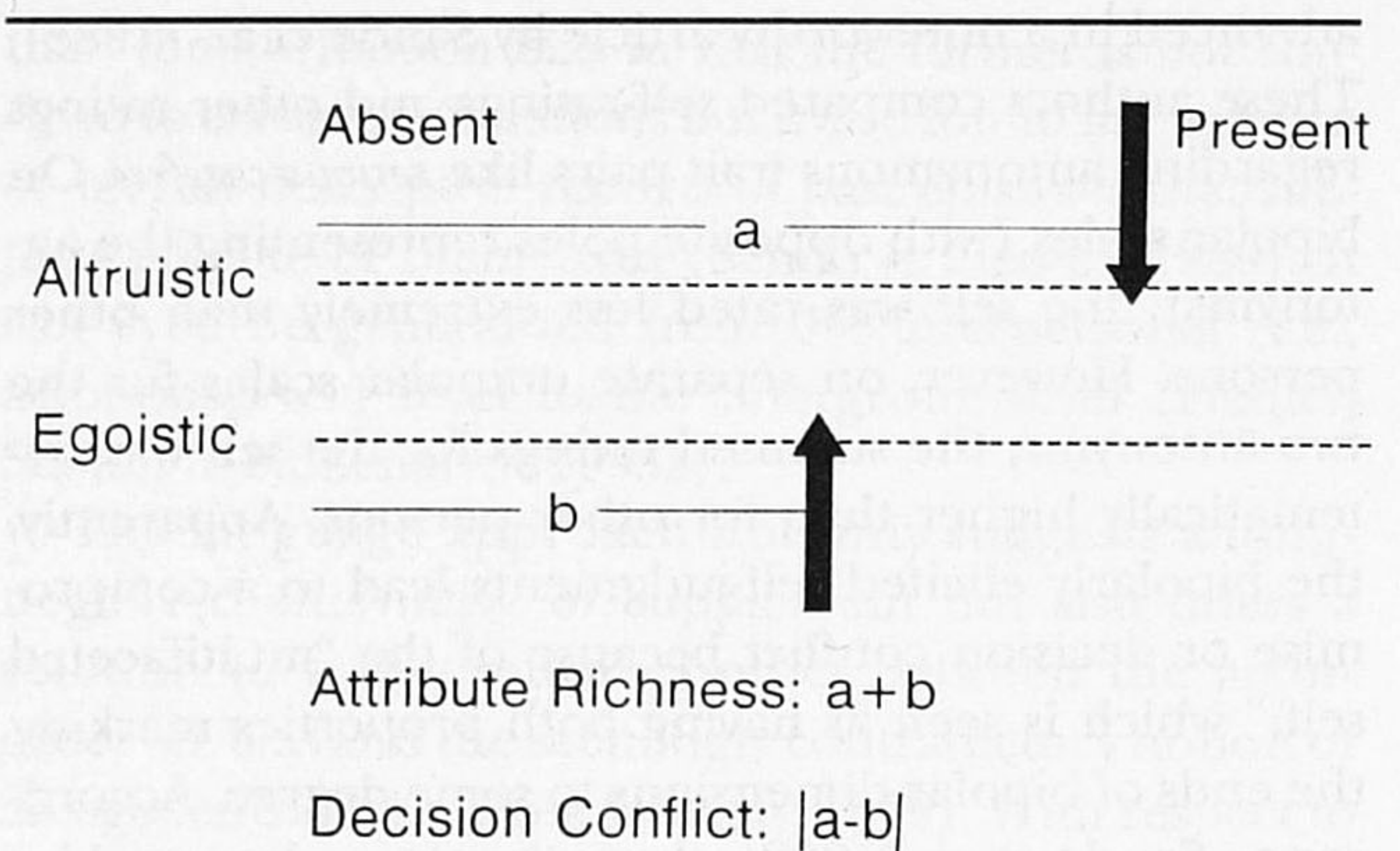


Figure 1 Graphical illustration of two scores intended to measure attribute richness (AR) and decision conflict (DC), Experiment 1.

tribute richness and (lack of) decision conflict rather than a measurement artifact.

Replacing the AR and DC scores for the data obtained from unipolar and bipolar ratings, respectively, should have several advantages over the original method. First, the two scores are no longer based on different judgment processes that may characterize unipolar and bipolar rating tasks (e.g., response styles, semantic conflict, forced dimensional comparison on bipolar scales). Second, the bipolar format is hardly representative of real-world judgments that are rarely constrained to a bipolar decision. Third, we reasoned that the psychological interpretation of the AR and DC scores is more direct and unambiguous than the more complex measures used previously. For instance, a nonextreme rating on a bipolar scale may be due to AR (i.e., the target person's value on both attributes is high) or a DC (the target's value on both attributes is similar but may be low), or both. These different aspects may be disentangled using the modified methodology.

#### Method

*Participants and design overview.* Voluntarily participating in this study were 17 male and 17 female subjects between 18 and 50 years of age. All participants were either students or people living in the same houses or flats as students, and they were either married or involved in close (heterosexual) relationships. They were recruited either on campus or at home. These partners had had a relationship for at least 6 months. Moreover, all participants had been involved in an earlier relationship with another partner.

Three target persons (the self, the current partner, and the former partner) had to be judged on each of three linguistic levels using one of two stimulus sets. Nine

TABLE 1: Matched Adjectives and Verbs Used in Stimulus Set 1 (English Translations of German)

ADJ	SV	IAV
Aggressive vs. good-natured	To hate vs. to love	To attack vs. to reconcile
Suspicious vs. confident	To suspect vs. to trust	To spy vs. to go bail
Respectless vs. respectful	To despise vs. to esteem	To deride vs. to applaud
Fearful vs. fearless	To be afraid of vs. to feel strong	To escape vs. to oppose
Egoistic vs. unselfish	To envy vs. to grant	To contest vs. to renounce
Tolerant vs. intolerant	To accept vs. to reject	To endorse vs. to contradict
Sociable vs. unsociable	To like vs. to dislike	To care for vs. to neglect
Hostile vs. peaceful	To abhor vs. to be attracted	To repel vs. to invite someone
Appreciative vs. contemptuous	To value vs. to depreciate	To praise vs. to blame
Reverential vs. disdainful	To admire vs. to ignore	To follow someone vs. to counteract

NOTE: ADJ = adjective; SV = state verb; IAV = interpretive action verb.

female and 10 male participants received Stimulus Set 1, consisting of 10 ADJs, 10 SVs, and 10 IAVs, whereas the remaining subjects (8 female and 7 male) received Stimulus Set 2, consisting of 10 ADJs<sub>adj</sub>, 10 SVs<sub>adj</sub>, and 10 IAVs<sub>adj</sub>. Each participant rated all three target persons on all 30 stimulus pairs in three successive blocks of a questionnaire. The order of the 30 items per target was randomized independently, and all six possible permutations of the three target blocks were used about equally often across participants. The resulting design for both stimulus sets consists of two independent variables, target person and language levels, and two dependent measures, AR and DC.

*Materials.* In constructing Stimulus Set 1, we employed 10 semantically matched triples of ADJs, SVs, and IAVs (see Table 1) that can be used to refer to the same behavior in the same situation (e.g., *aggressive, hate, attack*) at different linguistic levels. These matched triples had been selected in the context of previous research (Fiedler, Semin, & Finkenauer, 1993b) and can be considered to be representative of interpersonal language, because they cover a wide range of the dimensions describing social episodes (cf. Forgas, 1982). For each of these 30 basic terms, the best fitting antonym was chosen, according to the present researchers' consensus. The resulting materials are listed in Table 1.

Stimulus Set 2 was constructed similarly, but under the constraint that all stimuli had to be ADJs not included in Stimulus Set 1 and had to share the word stem with an IAV (*assert* → *assertive*), an SV (*envy* → *envious*), or no morphologically related verb (*serious*). It was not possible to select matched triples of ADJs<sub>adj</sub>, SVs<sub>adj</sub>, and IAVs<sub>adj</sub> under these constraints. Because the morphological links between verbs and ADJs in German are quite different from English, we refrain from reporting Stimulus Set 2 (this is available from the authors). With respect to using German stimulus materials in the present Experiments 1 and 2, it should be noted parenthetically that the actor-observer bias and other attributional bi-

ases (like the egocentric bias) have also been obtained in German (Fiedler, 1983; Fiedler et al., 1991; Semin & Fiedler, 1989).

*Procedure.* Each participant worked through the booklet with the experimental instructions on the cover page while the (female) experimenter was present. The instruction text stated that the study was concerned with how we perceive ourselves and our partners. Moreover, because most people have been involved in more than one close relationship, it was argued that we were also interested in judgments of a former partner. The rating scale format was explained and illustrated with an example. Participants were asked to "indicate, without deliberating too much, their subjective judgments of the extent to which they perceive the behaviors and traits to be present in themselves as well as their partner and their former partner." Ten stimulus pairs appeared on each of the remaining nine pages of the booklet. All three target blocks (i.e., three pages for 30 stimulus pairs) were introduced with the following judgment prompt: "Please rate the degree to which the following attributes (traits or behaviors) apply to [target]." The two opposing attributes of each pair appeared in successive lines with a 30-dash graphical rating scale (anchored by *not at all* and *very much*) to the right of each stimulus term. A constant random order was used for the stimuli within pairs.

### Results

In accordance with our modification of the Sande et al. (1988) technique, two scores were computed from each pair of associated ratings, AR (attribute richness defined as the sum of both ratings) and DC (decision conflict defined as the absolute difference between ratings). Across all subjects, stimulus items, and target persons, the overall correlation between AR and DC scores computed from the same ratings was rather low ( $r = -0.25$ ), suggesting that AR and DC were related but clearly separable aspects of rating behavior. Therefore, we report separate analyses of variance (ANOVAs) for

both scores as a function of target persons and language levels.

ANOVAs were computed with subjects as well as items as the unit of analysis. That is, we averaged each individual subject's ratings (within all three target persons and language levels) across all 10-item pairs to obtain a subject-based measure, or we computed an average measure per item pair across all subjects. Because items were considered to be a more representative sample of interpersonal language than the rather small subject sample could be considered to be representative of their subject population, we expected a higher statistical power for the item-based analysis than the subject-based analysis. In fact, the relevant  $F$  statistics obtained per item turned out to be higher (see Table 2), but the pattern of significant findings is largely the same for both methods of analysis. To generalize the findings over language and people, we provide a summary of both ANOVA styles. However, to simplify the presentation, we pooled the partner judgments over current and former partner, because preliminary analyses did not reveal a single significant difference between current and former partner on the AR and DC score for either method. Thus the target person factor has only two levels, self and partner, with the latter being an average of current and former partners. In the ANOVAs of Stimulus Set 1, both factors were treated as repeated measures, because all subjects judged self and partner at all language levels, and the ADJ, SV, and IAV pairs were matched for meaning. In the ANOVAs of Stimulus Set 2, the subsets of ADJs<sub>adj</sub>, SVs<sub>adj</sub>, and IAVs<sub>adj</sub> were not matched so that language level was not considered a repeated-measures factor in the item-based analysis.

The respective mean AR and DC scores are portrayed in Figures 2 and 3 as a function of experimental conditions. As a general rule, the AR values are invariantly higher for self (black bars) than for partner judgments (shaded bars), and this holds for all language levels and stimulus subsets. Conversely, the DC means are generally lower for self than partner judgments. The overwhelming effect, then, is a generalized tendency to simultaneously attribute more opposing attributes to the self than to one's partner but to make less one-sided attributions to the self than to the partner. However, this manifestation of the multifaceted self is obviously not confined to the most abstract level (ADJ for Subset 1 and ADJ<sub>adj</sub> for Subset 2). If anything, the graphical representation reveals that the differences between self-judgments and partner judgments are most pronounced at the least abstract language level (IAV and IAV<sub>adj</sub>). Finally, some base-rate differences between language levels are mainly due to the fact that the most abstract attributes (ADJ and ADJ<sub>adj</sub>) receive lower AR scores (i.e.,

less extreme judgments) in general than the less abstract attributes.

This pattern of findings is corroborated by the ANOVA results. As shown in Table 2, main effects for self-ratings versus partner ratings are obtained for both subsets and methods of analysis. However, it is also apparent that DC is a more sensitive index for Subset 1, whereas a more marked AR effect emerges for Subset 2. This suggests that DC effects are more readily obtained at the more concrete level of verbs in Subset 1, whereas AR effects are more reliable at the adjective level of Subset 2. Moreover, the  $F$  values in Table 2 show that the statistical power of the item-based analyses is indeed higher than the power of subject-based analyses. Apart from the target person main effect shown in Table 2, the only other significant outcomes were due to language level main effects for AR Subset 1, subject-based,  $F(2, 36) = 13.98, p < .001$ , and item-based,  $F(2, 18) = 5.35, p < .05$ , and for DC Subset 2, subject-based,  $F(2, 28) = 8.023, p < .01$ .

#### Discussion

This pattern of findings replicates the multifaceted self and extends the phenomenon to comparisons within close relationships, using attributes at various linguistic levels and comparison targets of differing likability. Importantly, however, the self/partner difference is no more pronounced at the ADJ level than at the other linguistic levels, suggesting that the multifaceted self cannot account for the restriction of the actor-observer bias to the ADJ level. If anything, the effect tends to be somewhat more pronounced for IAVs than SVs and ADJs. Also, it is evident that the higher AR scores and lower DC scores for self-ratings than partner ratings are even obtained for SV sentences that do not imply internal attributions at all. (Considering only SV attributes, the crucial target main effect is significant in some analyses at least.) These findings are inconsistent with the contention that the multifaceted self can explain the actor-observer bias in general and the reversal from ADJ to IAV in particular.

Unlike Stimulus Set 1, which ranges from verbs to adjectives, Stimulus Set 2 consists exclusively of adjectives that can be derived from IAV and SV stems or that constitute genuine ADJs not derivable from any verb. One might argue that these derived dispositional terms are more relevant to attribution processes than the verb sentences describing the raw behaviors. Thus, although the multifaceted self was not reduced for IAVs and SVs, a reduction could have shown up for the dispositional IAV<sub>adj</sub> and SV<sub>adj</sub> terms derived from IAVs and SVs. However, no support was received for this conjecture. Although Stimulus Sets 1 and 2 were differentially sensitive

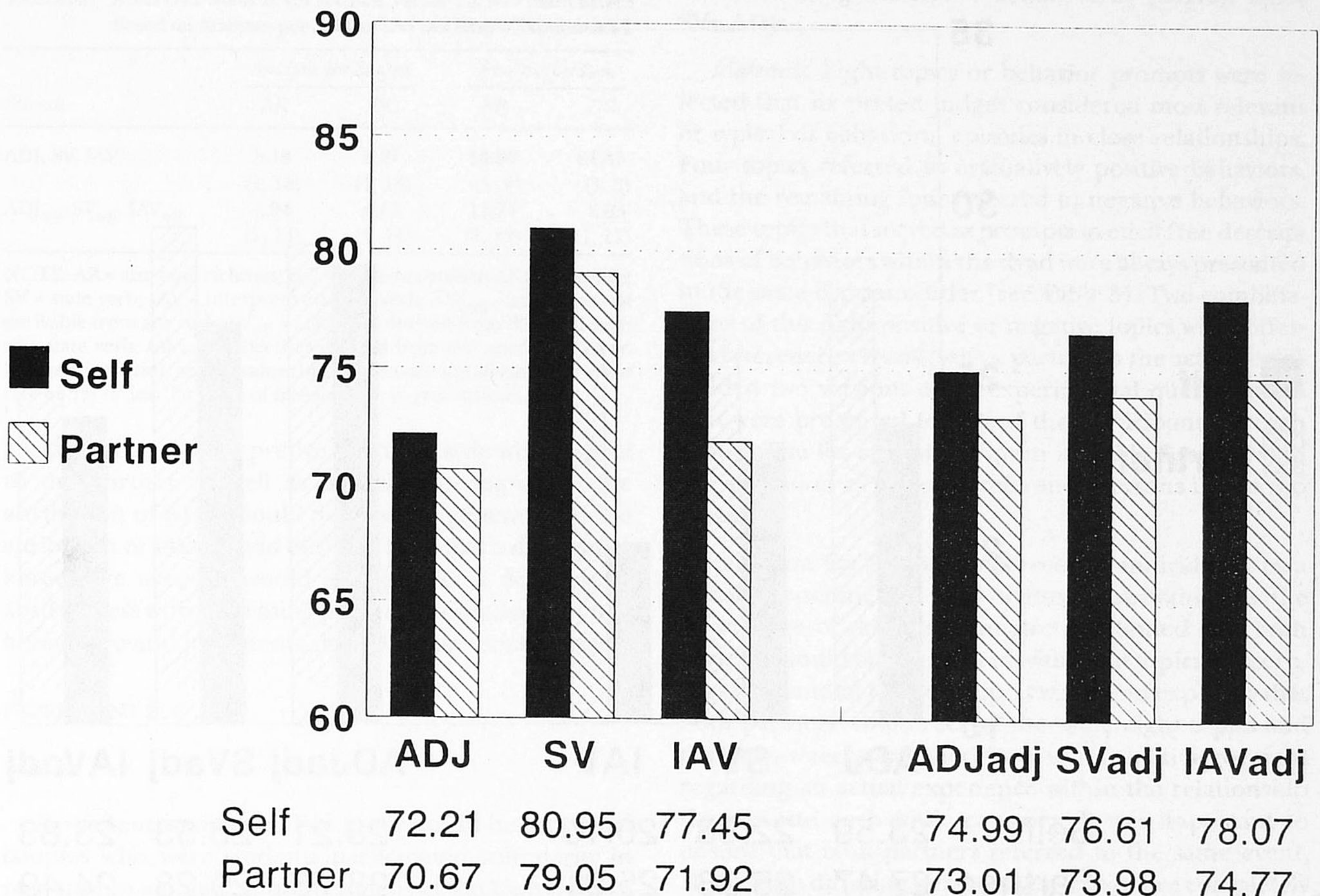


Figure 2 Mean attribute richness (AR) as a function of target person reference, language level, and stimulus set, Experiment 1.

NOTE: ADJ = adjective; SV = state verb; IAV = interpretive action verb; ADJ<sub>adj</sub> = adjectives not derivable from any verb; SV<sub>adj</sub> = adjectives derived from the word stem of a state verb; IAV<sub>adj</sub> = adjectives derived from the word stem of an interpretive action verb.

to AR and DC, they led to convergent findings (cf. Figures 2 and 3) and conclusions.

In general, then, these data do not support the self-knowledge account of the differential attribution tendencies at different language levels. Convergent results for the full range of language levels, on one hand, and, on the other, for the more subtle comparison of derived adjectives are inconsistent with the assumption that the multifaceted self is confined to ADJs and disappears for more concrete levels of attribution. Note further that SV sentences such as *I hate ambitious people* or *He [my partner] likes Marilyn Monroe* do not imply an internal attribution but rather suggest an external attribution to some property in the eliciting stimulus (i.e., ambitious people or Marilyn Monroe). Nevertheless, the Sande et al. (1988) effect is even obtained with SVs to roughly the same extent as with ADJs. This provides further evidence for the contention that the reluctance to make simplifying, one-sided attributions to the self is not confined to inferences of internal subject dispositions and is, there-

fore, too general a phenomenon to account for the actor-observer bias.

Furthermore, we found no support for the contention of Sande et al. (1988) that two-sided, nonsimplifying judgments originate in likability as a mediating factor. Judgments of current and former partners never differed from each other in terms of AR or DC, and differed similarly from self-judgments, although current partners can be assumed to be liked or loved more than former partners.

In summary, the results of the first study lend further support to the phenomenon of the multifaceted self, which seems to be more general and less restricted than expected. On one hand, the enhanced AR of the self and the greater reluctance (i.e., numerically lower DC scores) to make one-sided judgments about the self in contrast to other persons generalizes to attributions at the IAV and SV level and is not confined to trait ratings at the ADJ level. On the other hand, the finding is obtained not only for the comparison between the self



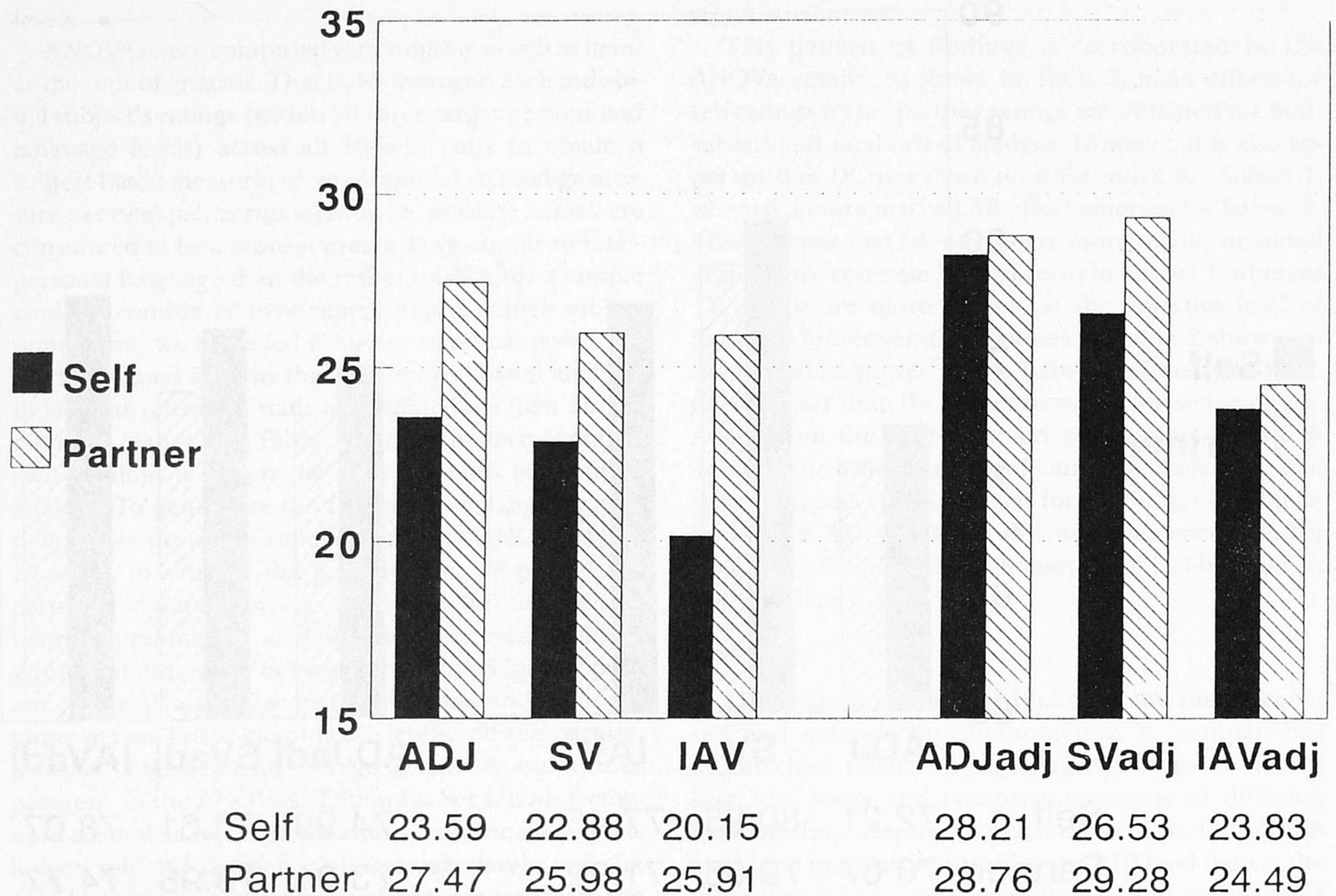


Figure 3 Mean decision conflict (DC) as a function of target person reference, language level, and stimulus set, Experiment 1.

NOTE: ADJ = adjective; SV = state verb; IAV = interpretive action verb; ADJ<sub>adj</sub> = adjectives not derivable from any verb; SV<sub>adj</sub> = adjectives derived from the word stem of a state verb; IAV<sub>adj</sub> = adjectives derived from the word stem of an interpretive action verb.

and unrelated or distant persons but also for partners in close relationships, irrespective of whether the comparison other is the current partner (presumably liked or loved) or the former partner (presumably liked no longer or not as much).

Most important, the effect described by Sande et al. (1988) can hardly account for the pattern of attribution biases obtained by Fiedler et al. (1991)—namely, an actor-observer bias (i.e., more internal attribution to the partner than to the self) at the ADJ level, but an egocentric bias (i.e., more attribution to the self than to the partner) at the IAV level. The absence of a similar reversal in the present study precludes an interpretation in terms of the multifaceted self. In fact, the latter phenomenon tends to be most pronounced at the IAV level, although no actor-observer bias was observed at this level. Moreover, the multifaceted self is also manifested at the SV level, which does not entail subject attributions at all. That is, although SVs such as *admire* or *abhors* suggest external attributions to factors outside the subject per-

son, the self receives, nevertheless, higher AR and lower DC ratings than the current or former partner.

All this suggests that attributional biases in free-format verbal protocols are hardly due to differential knowledge about the self and others. At the same time, however, the reversal from an actor-observer bias to an egocentric bias reflects a rather universal habit of language use—namely, to talk about the self in less abstract terms than about other people (cf. Fiedler & Semin, 1992; Fiedler et al., 1993a). The second study addresses this interpretation from a different vantage point. If the occurrence of attributional biases in free descriptions is actually due to rules of language use (i.e., not to use abstract interpretations in self-descriptions), then these biases should change when the rules of language use change as, for instance, with increasing duration of a close relationship. Among long-term couples, as opposed to short-term couples, the need to define and negotiate one's own and one's partner's role and identity (Swann, 1987) should decrease, and this should result in

**TABLE 2: ANOVA *F* Statistic for the Self Versus Partner Main Effect Based on Analyses per Subject and per Items, Experiment 1**

Stimuli	Analysis per Subject		Analysis per Item	
	AR	DC	AR	DC
ADJ, SV, IAV	3.19 (1, 18)	<b>9.71</b> (1, 18)	<b>16.80</b> (1, 9)	<b>81.43</b> (1, 9)
ADJ <sub>adj</sub> , SV <sub>adj</sub> , IAV <sub>adj</sub>	<b>4.94</b> (1, 14)	0.63 (1, 14)	<b>11.77</b> (1, 27)	2.83 (1, 27)

NOTE: AR = attribute richness; DC = decision conflict; ADJ = adjective; SV = state verb; IAV = interpretive action verb; ADJ<sub>adj</sub> = adjectives not derivable from any verb; SV<sub>adj</sub> = adjectives derived from the word stem of a state verb; IAV<sub>adj</sub> = adjectives derived from the word stem of an interpretive action verb. *F*-values in bold face are significant at an error rate of 5% or less. Degrees of freedom are in parentheses.

a less abstract or interpretive language style with respect to the partner as well as oneself. Consequently, the attribution of ADJs should decrease in general, and the attribution of IAVs should increase. Note that a differential-knowledge account would also predict a decrease in abstractness with increasing partner knowledge, but self-knowledge and judgments should remain unaffected.

## EXPERIMENT 2

### Method

*Participants and design.* Two groups of 12 heterosexual couples who were students participated voluntarily in response to a public announcement at the University of Giessen. One group consisted of long-term couples who were together for more than 6 months (mean duration = 4 years and 1 month; mean age = 26.6 for males and 25.4 for females). The other group consisted of short-term couples (mean duration = 3.81 months; mean age = 24.1 for males and 21.8 for females) who were together for less than 6 months. Because of a possible error in the data registration, the sample was reduced to 10 pairs per condition to exclude the questionable data, but this did not affect the pattern or significance of findings.

Apart from the between-subjects factor of relationship duration, the participants' gender (male vs. female), and the reference of descriptions (to self vs. partner), two other aspects were varied within each questionnaire: (a) whether a prompted behavior episode is positive or negative in valence and (b) whether the self or the partner is the actor in the prompted episode. However, this variation was not treated as an independent factor in the analysis but served only to balance the evaluative context of self-statements and partner statements. The dependent variable of interest is the actual proportion of positive and negative statements referring to the self and the partner at different levels of linguistic abstractness, with abstractness being coded within a four-level scheme (cf. Fiedler & Semin, 1992; Semin & Fiedler,

1989) covering descriptive action verbs (DAVs), IAVs, SVs, ADJs.

*Materials.* Eight topics or behavior prompts were selected that six pretest judges considered most relevant or typical of behavioral episodes in close relationships. Four topics referred to evaluatively positive behaviors, and the remaining four referred to negative behaviors. These topics that served as prompts to elicit free descriptions of behaviors within the dyad were always presented in the same constant order (see Table 3). Two combinations of the eight positive or negative topics with different reference persons (self vs. partner in the actor's role) yielded two versions of an experimental questionnaire that were presented to half of the participants in each group. The list of topics is given in Table 3, along with the allocation of topics to reference persons in the two versions.

*Procedure.* Each couple was received individually by a female experimenter. The written instruction on the cover page of the questionnaire mentioned that both partners would be confronted with eight topics concerning their mutual relationship. It was stated explicitly that both partners would receive the same eight topics and that it was necessary, therefore, to reach an agreement regarding an actual experience within the relationship that fit into each topic category. It was important to ensure that both partners referred to the same event, albeit from differing perspectives. They were completely free in selecting any authentic event, the only restriction being that the event had to have occurred within the last 2 weeks (to equate the temporal status of the reference events in long-term and short-term couples).

On the next four pages of the questionnaire, the eight topics were prompted, along with the minimal instruction to remember and to describe the respective event in which "you have <prompt>" or in which "your partner has <prompt>," inserting the appropriate person reference. One half page of space was offered for the free-format verbal response. The final page of the questionnaire served to assess demographic data (sex, age, possible profession, duration of the relationship, common lodging) and provided a 105-mm graphical rating of satisfaction with the relationship (anchored at *very happy* and *very unhappy*).

### Results

The free descriptions of the self and the partner were coded at the sentence level, using the same procedure as in previous research (e.g., Fiedler et al., 1989; Fiedler et al., 1993a; Semin & Fiedler, 1989). Thus each sentence was classified with regard to its subject reference (self, partner, or both), behavioral valence (positive, neutral, or negative), and the linguistic level of the sentence

**TABLE 3: Allocation of Topic Valence to Self/Partner Conditions in Two Versions of the Experimental Questionnaire, Experiment 2**

Topic	Valence	Version 1	Version 2
Injuring the partner	-	P	S
Giving a reason for jealousy	-	P	S
Giving pleasure to partner	+	S	P
Doing a service for partner	+	S	P
Making compliments	+	P	S
Being there at a critical moment	+	P	S
Not being very honest	-	S	P
Keeping the partner waiting	-	S	P

NOTE: S = self condition; P = partner condition.

predicate (DAV, IAV, SV, ADJ, or not classifiable). Coders were fully blind to experimental expectations. Inter-coder objectivities have been shown in previous research to be virtually perfect for subject reference, higher than  $r = .80$  for valence, and higher than kappa = 0.85 for language levels. Using a simple monotonic scoring rule (1 = DAV, 2 = IAV, 3 = SV, 4 = ADJ), a mean abstractness score was computed for each respondent, separately for all topics and reference persons (i.e., self and partner). However, because the verbal responses to most topic prompts were rather short (typically only one, two, or three sentences), we did not treat the partitioning of topics (i.e., Positive vs. Negative  $\times$  Self vs. Partner in the Actor's Role) as design factors but pooled all sentences across all topics to achieve more reliable data. Note that the actual person reference and valence of the coded sentences provided more direct measures than the experimentally intended reference and valence according to topic types.

The bars in Figure 4 represent the pooled mean abstractness scores (across all sentences and valence conditions) as a function of target reference, partnership duration, and respondent sex. A three-factorial ANOVA yields no effect involving respondent sex (all  $F_s < 1$ ), but significant differences for target reference,  $F(1, 18) = 71.61, p < .001$ ; partnership duration,  $F(1, 18) = 14.35, p < .01$ ; and Target Reference  $\times$  Duration interaction,  $F(1, 18) = 9.00, p < .01$ . These findings indicate that the partner is described in more abstract terms than the self, the degree of abstractness decreases from short-term to long-term couples, and this decrease is somewhat more pronounced for the partner than for the self. However, two-way ANOVAs show that the decrease in abstractness was significant for partner descriptions,  $F(1, 18) = 15.69, p < .01$ , as well as self-descriptions,  $F(1, 18) = 7.70, p < 0.05$ .

Separate ANOVAs were performed on the proportion of DAV, IAV, SV, and ADJ sentences produced by each respondent; because these proportions add to unity, they could not be included as a repeated-measures factor.

Inspection of these proportions and the corresponding ANOVA results (see Table 4) helps to elucidate the composition of the abstractness score. As expected, and in line with the earlier results, the self/partner difference is due to less ADJs and more IAVs attributed to the self than to the partner. The temporal decline in abstractness reflects significant main effects for ADJ use (reduction) and IAV use (increase). Moreover, a Target Reference  $\times$  Duration interaction for ADJ use indicates a greater decline for partner-referent than self-referent sentences. Importantly, however, the temporal decrease in ADJ use is significant for the partner,  $F(1, 18) = 27.29, p < .001$ , as well as the self,  $F(1, 18) = 9.41, p < .01$ , just as the increase in IAV use is significant for partner statements,  $F(1, 18) = 8.62, p < .01$ , as well as self-related statements,  $F(1, 18) = 10.78, p < .01$ . The only other effects (see Table 4) are due to a temporal increase of partner-related DAV sentences,  $F(1, 18) = 5.86, p < .05$ ; an increase of partner-related SV sentences,  $F(1, 18) = 11.20, p < .001$ ; an SV increase by female but not male subjects,  $F(1, 18) = 4.46, p < .05$ ; and a stronger ADJ decrease for partner than self-statements,  $F(1, 18) = 12.03, p < .001$ .

Additional analyses including only positive or negative sentences reveal that the overall pattern is largely due to differences within the positive-valence condition (see line graphs in Figure 4). Virtually no significant effects are obtained for negative sentences. In the ANOVA based on positive sentences only, the target reference and duration main effects are also obtained, suggesting that partner-related positive statements are more abstract than self-related positive statements,  $F(1, 18) = 9.63, p < .01$ , and descriptions become less abstract over time,  $F(1, 18) = 5.22, p < .05$ . In addition, there is a Duration  $\times$  Subject Sex interaction,  $F(1, 18) = 11.11, p < .01$ , indicating that females change toward attributing less positive dispositions to male partners, whereas males' self-attributions become less dispositionally positive. In other words, females and males agree in describing males more negatively over time. However, although the duration factor is obviously contaminated with a Valence  $\times$  Gender interaction, the general impact of partnership duration and target reference on abstractness holds for female as well as male subjects (cf. Figure 4).

Finally, it is interesting to consider the correlations between our format-free measures of self-attributions and partner attributions on one hand and satisfaction with the partnership on the other hand. For this purpose, we performed a multiple regression analysis on self-rated satisfaction, using the following predictor variables: (a) the abstractness of positive minus the abstractness of negative attributes ascribed to the self, (b) the same index for the partner, (c) the abstractness of all self-attributions, and (d) the abstractness of all partner

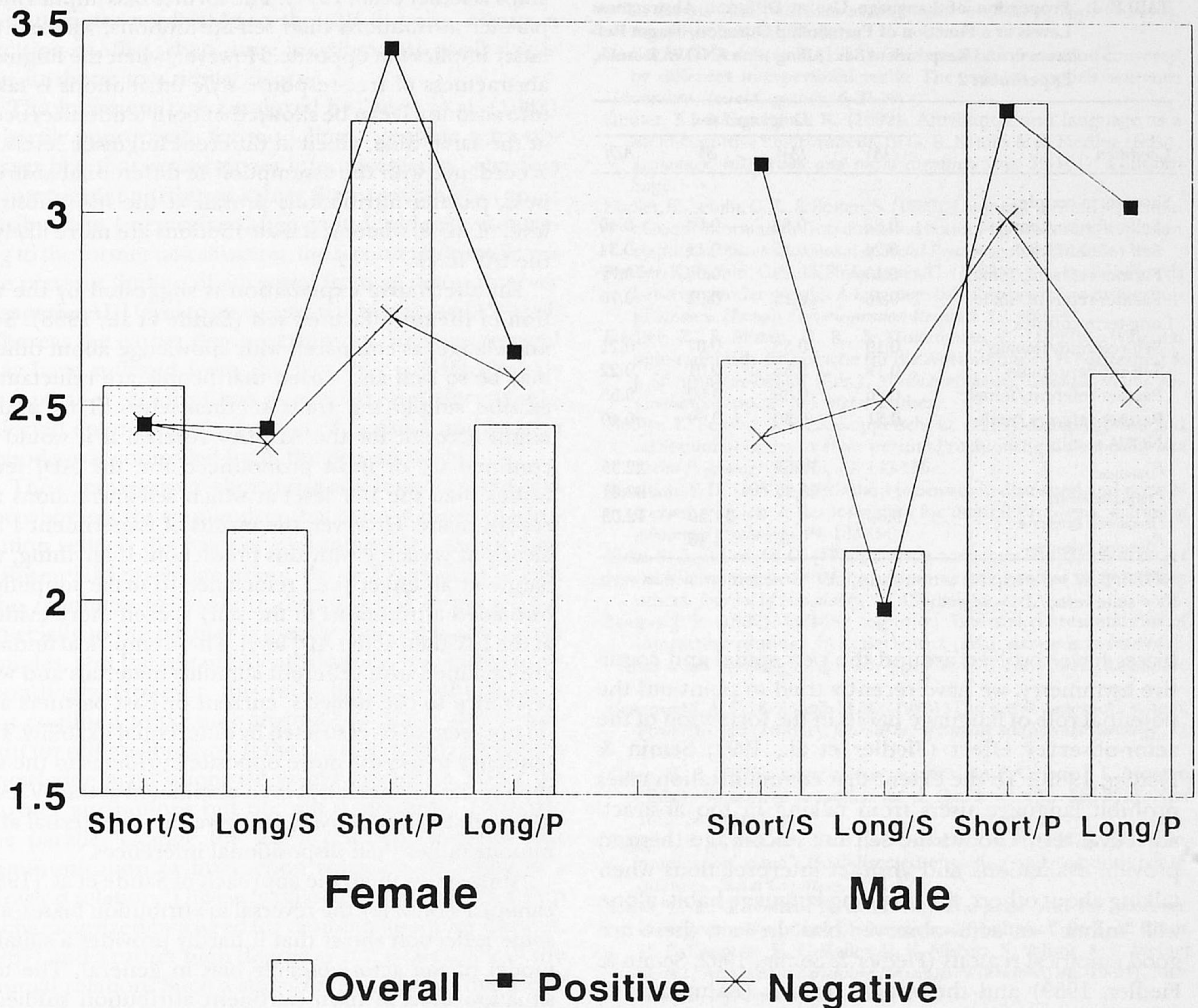


Figure 4 Abstractness of language use as a function of relationship duration, self (S) versus partner (P) reference, and respondent gender.

attributions. In fact, the multiple correlation ( $R = .46$ ),  $F(4, 36) = 3.29$ ,  $p < .05$ , is significant, indicating that satisfaction is moderately related to abstractness of attributions. Moreover, inspection of the individual  $\beta$  coefficients shows that the best predictors of satisfaction are generally low abstractness of partner ascriptions,  $r = -.40$ ,  $\beta = -.37$ ,  $t(36) = -2.11$ ,  $p < .05$ , and low abstractness of positive self-ascriptions,  $r = -.33$ ,  $\beta = -.22$ ,  $t(36) = -1.43$ ,  $ns$ . Such an attribution style is quite in line with previous research on attribution in close relationships (cf. Fincham, 1985), which also emphasizes the importance of nonglobal and non-self-serving attributions for satisfaction.

#### GENERAL DISCUSSION

There can be no doubt that Jones and Nisbett's (1972) actor-observer bias constitutes a strong and robust phenomenon that can be demonstrated with different tasks and methods and that cannot be reduced to the perceptual factors emphasized in some of the early studies (e.g., Storms, 1973). Rather, the discrepant roles of actors and observers are confounded with multiple differences, such as the perceptual perspective, differential memory or knowledge, and differential rules of conduct that limit the social presentation and communication styles. Although most previous research on perspective

**TABLE 4: Proportion of Language Use at Different Abstractness Levels as a Function of Partnership Duration, Target Reference, and Respondent Sex, Along With ANOVA Results, Experiment 2**

Condition	Language Level			
	DAV	IAV	SV	ADJ
Short-term couples				
Self-referent/female	0.23	0.33	0.04	0.40
Self-referent/male	0.24	0.32	0.11	0.34
Partner-referent/female	0.15	0.13	0.00	0.72
Partner-referent/male	0.16	0.13	0.01	0.70
Long-term couples				
Self-referent/female	0.19	0.53	0.07	0.21
Self-referent/male	0.19	0.58	0.01	0.22
Partner-referent/female	0.26	0.30	0.09	0.35
Partner-referent/male	0.21	0.30	0.09	0.40
ANOVA results				
$F_{\text{Duration}}$		12.65		22.35
$F_{\text{Target Reference}}$		53.37		99.41
$F_{\text{Duration} \times \text{Reference}}$	5.86		11.20	12.03
$F_{\text{Duration} \times \text{Gender}}$			4.46	

NOTE: DAV = descriptive action verbs; IAV = interpretive action verb; SV = state verb; ADJ = adjective.

biases have revolved around the perceptual and cognitive asymmetry, we have recently tried to point out the potential role of language habits in the formation of the actor-observer effect (Fiedler et al., 1991; Semin & Fiedler, 1989). To the extent that communication rules prohibit language users from talking in too abstract, adjectival terms about the self but encourage them to provide evaluations and abstract interpretations when talking about others, the resulting language habits alone will "mimic" an actor-observer bias. In fact, there are good empirical reasons (Fiedler & Semin, 1992; Semin & Fiedler, 1989) and theoretical reasons (Kahneman & Miller, 1986) to assume that dispositional terms or trait terms are more likely to be applied to other people than to the self. In addition to any perceptual or differential knowledge factors, then, the actor-observer bias is correlated to an unknown degree with language styles. Because language provides the medium of socialization and communication, an attributional style is wired into social knowledge acquisition regardless of any actual judgment process.

In our attempt to emphasize the so-far-neglected role of language in attribution, we have shown that the higher abstractness of other-related than self-related language is not confined to social explanations but also evident in nonexplanatory descriptions (Semin & Fiedler, 1989). Moreover, the notion of differential abstractness in language has been employed to account for intergroup biases (Maass & Arcuri, 1992; Maass, Salvi, Arcuri, & Semin, 1989) and the seeming contradiction of an actor-observer bias and an egocentric bias in close relation-

ships (Fiedler et al., 1991). The former bias implies more partner attributions than self-attributions, whereas the latter implies the opposite. However, when the linguistic abstractness of free-response style attributions is taken into account, it can be shown that both tendencies occur at the same time, albeit at different linguistic levels. In accordance with the assumption of differential abstractness, partner attributions prevail at the most abstract level of ADJs, whereas self-attributions are more likely at the IAV level.

An alternative explanation is suggested by the notion of the multifaceted self (Sande et al., 1988). Self-knowledge, as compared with knowledge about others, may be so rich and varied that people are reluctant to ascribe simplifying traits to themselves. This notion might account for the ADJ-IAV reversal if it would be confined to, or most pronounced for, the ADJ level, rather than the IAV level at which self-attributions are readily made. However, the results of Experiment 1 are clearly at variance with this prediction. If anything, the Sande et al. effect (i.e., reluctance to make simplified, one-sided attributions to the self) is even more evident at the IAV than at the ADJ level. These empirical findings are obtained with different stimulus materials and with reference to the subjects' current or past partners and do not seem to be restricted by differential likability. The tendency to ascribe more opposite attributes to the self than to the partner is not even eliminated at the SV level, although SVs (e.g., *abhor*, *like*) give rise to external attributions rather than dispositional inferences.

Apparently, then, the approach of Sande et al. (1988) cannot account for the reversal in attribution biases, and some reflection shows that it hardly provides a suitable model of the actor-observer bias in general. The task situation used in most pertinent attribution studies is one in which the attributor is confronted with a concrete behavior in a particular context and the attributor is asked to interpret the given behavior in terms of some more or less abstract attribute. The usual inference direction from behavior to attribute is reversed in the paradigm of Sande et al. in which subjects are prompted with a (trait) attribute and they have to recall some behavioral reference to verify or falsify the given attribute. It is no wonder that in this inference direction, more behavioral evidence is available to verify attributes of the self rather than other persons, simply because self-referent information has a memory advantage (see Ross & Sicoly, 1979). This advantage pertains to all language levels (IAV, SV, and ADJ) and, not surprisingly, it is most apparent at the IAV level at which the verification of an attribute (e.g., to insult somebody, to help someone) requires the retrieval of concrete behavior episodes. The similar effects we have obtained for the AR as well as the DC scores suggest that the enhanced recall

of self-related information not only renders many different attributes applicable to the self but also creates a decision conflict when there is evidence to verify opposite attributes to a similar degree.

The judgment task employed by Sande et al. (1988) is hardly appropriate for modeling a genuine actor-observer bias that characterizes inferences from behaviors to interpretive attributes, rather than a search from given attributes to (memorized) behavioral evidence. Returning to the former task situation, the second study replicates the previous finding of a reversal from an actor-observer bias at the ADJ level to an egocentric bias at the IAV level. Whereas the earlier demonstration of the same reversal may have suffered from the fact that self-descriptions and partner descriptions pertained to different self-selected episodes, the selection of negative and positive episodes was controlled for in the present study.

The comparison of short-term and long-term couples corroborates the contention that the language of attribution reflects the rules of communication rather than differential knowledge about the self and the partner. The readiness to attribute dispositional terms (ADJs) especially to the partner is greatly reduced in long-term couples, and the use of IAV attributions increases correspondingly. However, this reduction of abstractness is not confined to partner attributions but is also significant for self-attributions. If the change would result from knowledge acquisition, we would expect an effect for partner attributions but not self-attributions. However, the parallel change for self-attributions suggests that communication or interaction rules are changing in a growing relation. The early phase of a close relationship is characterized by a need for defining identities (Swann, 1987) and a rather high degree of uncertainty about the mutual relation. Such a situation encourages the use of dispositional terms to impose order and control on the social world (cf. Fiske & Cox, 1979; Valacher, Wegner, & Frederick, 1987; Wicklund & Braun, 1990). However, over time the identity negotiation is complete, and the need to communicate interpretations beyond objective information decreases. At the same time, the readiness to make dispositional attributions decreases in a manner that is independent of memorized knowledge or self/other differences. If, however, a shift in attribution reflects neither a changing perceptual perspective nor a change in knowledge, it can only reflect a change in what is worth being expressed and communicated in interpersonal encounters.

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