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# ASSOCIATION FOR CONSUMER RESEARCH

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## **Correspondent Inferences and Consumer Decision Making**

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We measure individual differences in the tendency to make correspondent inference, i.e., to infer stable dispositions from the behavior of others, and show their impact on blame and guilt attributions, performance evaluations, and investment decisions. Higher accessibility of situational information helps debiasing correspondent inferences.

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# Correspondent Inferences and Consumer Decision Making

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

People tend to make *correspondent inferences* when observing others. They infer stable personality characteristics from the behavior of others, even when the presence of external factors severely constrains the range of possible behaviors other persons might have exhibited. This general tendency leads observers to over-attribute behavior of actors to their enduring dispositions and under-weight the influence of situational factors, committing a *correspondence bias* (Ross, 1977; Gilbert & Malone, 1995; Jones, 1979; 1990; Jones & Harris, 1967). Correspondent inferences are prevalent and consequential. Correspondence bias is exhibited by a majority of American adults and generalizes across demographic characteristics (Bauman & Skitka, 2010). These biased attributions affect a wide variety of social judgments such as performance that are relevant for consumer behavior, such as performance evaluations (e.g., Moore, Swift, Sharek, & Gino, 2010), blame and guilt judgments (e.g., Kassin & Sukel, 1997), impression formation in social interactions (e.g., Gilbert, 1998; Ross, Amabile, & Steinmetz, 1977), and judgments of moral character (Bierbrauer, 1979; Miller, Gillen, Schenker, & Radlove, 1974).

In this paper we adopt a psychometric approach to the analysis of the propensity to make correspondent inferences. To examine whether the propensity to make correspondent inferences is a unique construct and a stable individual difference, we developed and validated an instrument, the *Neglect of External Demands* (i.e., NED<sup>1</sup>) scale, which combines the four paradigms most commonly used to assess correspondence bias, taking into account different types of dispositions—attitudes, abilities, emotionality, and morality (Gawronski, 2004). Our first three studies (1A, 1B, and 2) develop a new individual-difference measure designed to assess the extent to which a person makes correspondent inferences across varied judgmental tasks and targets, evaluate the reliability and the dimensionality of the instrument, and perform a verification of its factorial structure and discriminant validity. In Study 1A, we generated and tested numerous scale items drawn and cloned from existing items in the literature, which then underwent a purification process resulting in a 10-item scale with sound psychometric properties. In Study 1B, we verified the factorial structure of the scale. In Study 2 we tested its discriminant validity in relation to several established scales measuring potentially related psychological constructs such as intelligence, cognitive ability, preference for cognitive processing, preference for control, and attributional style.

In Studies 3, 4, and 5, we then tested the extent to which the propensity to make correspondent inferences predicted consequential, conceptually related, but different judgments and behaviors. In Study 3, we examined the relationship between the propensity to make correspondent inferences and attributions of blame to actors for having accidentally caused harm. Participants characterized by a high propensity to make correspondent inferences were more likely to make dispositional attributions to actors for harmful events when the harm

was due to the negligence of the agent. Moreover, this relationship was even stronger when no harm was intended and the outcome was accidental—when participants should have discounted more for situational factors that contributed to harm having been caused.

In Study 4, we investigated whether propensity to make correspondent inferences is associated to a higher neglect of job difficulty when evaluating the performance of employees for promotion. The results show that propensity to make correspondent inferences affects the extent to which people incorporate information on job or task difficulty when evaluating the performance of others. Participants characterized by high NED scores were more likely to evaluate to anchor their assessments on unadjusted performance, favoring candidates who benefited from an easier situation.

In Study 5, we examined whether high propensity to make correspondent inferences induces consumers to neglect market forces when evaluating fund manager performances in both performance judgments and incentive-compatible investment decisions. The results suggest that participants more prone to make correspondent inferences were more likely to make dispositional attributions for good and bad absolute performances and ignore the comparative value of those performances (a positive gain that was lower than the rise of the market and a loss that was less than the fall of the market) than participants less prone to make correspondent inferences. The consistency of this pattern across performance evaluations, preferences, and incentive-compatible choices made by participants provides further evidence of the predictive validity of the NED and of the pervasive effect of correspondent inferences not only on judgments, but also on behavior.

Finally, in Study 6 we examined a possible debiasing intervention to correct correspondent inferences, and show that making situational information easier to access helps people more prone to make correspondent inferences making reduce the impact of dispositional attributions on their decisions.

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1 The scale is named after Edward E. "Ned" Jones, who first found evidence for this tendency.

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