
A Mile in Moccasins: How Situational Experience Diminishes Dispositionism in Social Inference

Emily Balcetis

The Ohio University

David A. Dunning

Cornell University

In four studies, this article investigates the impact of situational experience on social inference. Participants without first-hand experience of a situation made more extreme and erroneous inferences about the personalities of people behaving in that situation than did participants with first-hand experience. First-hand experience, thus, appears to diminish dispositionism in social inference because it informs people about the situational constraints that guide behavior. Across all studies, participants also displayed holier-than-thou biases, overpredicting how generously they would act relative to predictions about their peers and also relative to how they actually acted when the situation came.

Keywords: *dispositionism; self-assessment; self-enhancement; correspondence bias*

One enduring focus in social psychology has been to delineate the process—in all its complexity—by which people make inferences about the character of their peers. People everyday hear some tidbit about another person’s behavior and often find themselves asking what this piece of information potentially says about that individual’s personality. Does a refusal to give blood mean he is selfish? Does ordering that second dry martini mean that she is sophisticated or a lush?

Across all the research devoted to this issue, scholars have made one crucial observation: People appear too quick to reach conclusions about what another individual’s actions say about his or her character. People overemphasize how much behavior reflects an individual’s enduring personality traits and underweight how much that behavior reflects, instead, the power of external

situational circumstances to shape a person’s actions. This pervasive inclination goes by various names such as *lay dispositionism* (Ross & Nisbett, 1991) and *correspondence bias* (Gilbert & Malone, 1995).

In this article, we explore one variable that may have a significant impact on the degree to which people make dispositional inferences from another person’s behavior. That variable is whether people have experienced for themselves the very situation to which the other individual is exposed. We propose that when people have not experienced the situation but can only anticipate how they would act, they tend to overemphasize the role played by personal dispositions and, thus, reach judgments about a person’s character that are extreme and erroneous. However, when people have lived through the situation for themselves and have a chance to educate themselves about the power of situational forces, they will reach muted conclusions about other people’s character that may prove more accurate. It is as though people fail to heed the old Native American adage that one should avoid judging others unless one has walked a mile in their moccasins—but once they

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have walked that mile they understand the wisdom of withholding judgment.

WHY EXPERIENCE WOULD MATTER IN SOCIAL INFERENCE

Emerging research suggests that people who have not personally experienced a situation in question are more likely to commit dispositionism. Nowhere is this mistaken belief more evident than in studies of the holier-than-thou phenomenon, in which people make unduly optimistic predictions about how they will react in situations that have moral overtones (for reviews, see Dunning, 2005; Dunning, Heath, & Suls, 2004). People, for example, overestimate the likelihood that they will vote, give to charity, volunteer for an onerous experiment so a young child will not have to, refuse unreasonable requests, maintain their current romantic relationship, confront a person making a sexist remark, and cooperate with other people in a laboratory game (Epley & Dunning, 2000, 2006; Greenwald, Carnot, Beach, & Young, 1987; Sherman, 1980; Swim & Hyers, 1999; Woodzicka & LaFrance, 2001).

In a sense, when people predict their reactions to events they have yet to experience, they commit dispositionism about themselves. By overestimating the degree to which they would act in a desirable fashion, people in essence state that their behavior will be the product of their own good intentions or the force of their personalities rather than the vicissitudes of situational circumstance (Epley & Dunning, 2000; Koehler & Poon, 2006). Furthermore, if they believe that their own behavior is an expression of their own traits and intentions, it gives them license to believe that the behavior of others is an expression of personal dispositions as well.

Experiencing a real event, however, should rid people of these illusory holier-than-thou self-impressions and their accompanying dispositionist tendencies. Once people have experienced a situation and seen what behavioral choices they made, they may gain an understanding of how their own behavior is shaped by situational forces and not by elements of character. If their own good intentions and positive dispositions do not produce desirable behavior, they may learn an object lesson about the power of the situation to shape behavior and may be increasingly reluctant to conclude that another person's behavior reveals much of his or her character as well. In a phrase, they will practice attributional charity in their inferences about the behavior of others (Ross & Nisbett, 1991).

RELATIONSHIP TO PAST WORK

Our analysis and hypothesis are reminiscent of classic work in social psychology, although our examination of

situational experience and social inference is quite different from this classic work in fundamental aspects and, thus, represents a novel investigation.

For example, Storms (1973) showed that making situational factors visually salient causes people to give those factors greater weight in their social inferences. However, Storms was specifically concerned with the impact of perceptual salience, manipulating visual attention by directing participants' gaze to the other person or the situation that person confronted. This is different from the circumstance examined here. Rather than manipulating the scope or direction of visual attention, we investigated whether the experience of living through a situation with all its nuanced complexity attenuates dispositionism.

Our work is also reminiscent of a few past attempts to see if asking participants to role play a situation prompts them to resist making dispositional inferences about others. Usually, such role-playing exercises have no effect (Bierbrauer, 1979; Jones & Harris, 1967; for one exception see Choi & Nisbett, 1998). However, role playing may not be sufficient to give people true insight into the power of situational and social dynamics to shape choices (e.g., Swim & Hyers, 1999; Van Boven, Loewenstein, & Dunning, 2005; Woodzicka & LaFrance, 2001; see Dunning, 2005, for a review). For example, Van Boven and colleagues (2005) asked participants if they would dance to a classic funk tune in front of a hundreds of their peers for \$5. Although 31% thought they would, only 8% actually did when presented with a real opportunity to do so. Students reported not anticipating just how much they would be concerned about potential embarrassment, suggesting that role playing a situation may not educate people about the true strength of real situational forces. As such, in our studies, we designed our paradigms to provide participants with the experience of an actual situation rather than just a simulation of one.

Other studies have exposed participants to the actual situation at hand, like compelling them to write an essay in support of a particular political opinion, before making judgments of others who have confronted that same situation. However, on close inspection, these experiments contain major flaws in execution that prevent them from directly assessing what impact that situational experience has on social judgment. For example, at times the situational constraints have been so weak that they failed to successfully guide participants' behavior (Snyder & Jones, 1974, Study 1). In addition, other studies never compared an experience group with a no-experience group. Instead, every participant experienced the situation. As such, the investigators never determined the inferences participants would have made without any experience nor provided a comparison of the inferences made by participants

with experience to those without (Miller, Jones, & Hinkle 1981; Snyder & Jones, 1974). In the studies that follow, we provide that comparison.

OVERVIEW OF THIS RESEARCH

The four studies described below assessed the impact of situational experience on the degree to which participants make extreme and erroneous inferences about their peers. In each study, roughly half of the participants acted as forecasters, and predicted how they would act in a hypothetical situation that involved moral overtones, such as donating to a charity. The other half of participants, experiencers, were actually exposed to the situation and later asked what their actual behavior had been. We expected, first, that participants' responses would replicate past errors found in self-inference, in that participants in the forecaster group would reveal a holier-than-thou phenomenon, saying that they were more likely to support a charity event than their peers would, and in the process they would overestimate the likelihood that they would support that event relative to their actual rate of support (Epley & Dunning, 2000, 2006).

Second, and more important, we expected the inferences that forecasters and experiencers made about other people would differ. In all studies, we asked participants to estimate the likelihood that other individuals who supported the charity event or not would behave generously in other situations. We predicted that forecasters, relative to experiencers, would make more extreme dispositional inferences and presume more generosity from supporters than they would from nonsupporters. Experiencers, in contrast, would make more muted inferences.

We also tested the accuracy of these inferences by asking participants to infer the political attitudes they thought supporters and nonsupporters would hold (Study 3). We expected forecasters to infer that someone who supported a charity would be more politically liberal than someone who did not, given the societal stereotypes associated with liberals and conservatives (Farwell & Weiner, 2000). Experiencers would not draw such inferences to such a degree. By comparing these inferences to the political attitudes of people who actually supported versus failed to support the charity event, we could assess which group proved to make more accurate inferences. We predicted that the extreme inferences made by forecasters would prove to be more inaccurate than those made by experiencers.

Finally, to test our notion that living through a situation enhances knowledge of the situational forces at play, in a final study we asked participants actually supporting versus not supporting a charity event to state

the causes for their choices, looking to see the extent to which they emphasized situational over dispositional causes. We then asked forecasters and experiencers what causal factors they thought governed the decision to support a charity event, and we looked to see the extent to which the causal reasoning of experiencers, relative to forecasters, better matched the (presumably situational) reasoning provided by people describing the causes for their self-behavior. We then examined whether this enhanced situationism by experiencers explained their reluctance to make further inferences about the personalities of others responding to the situation (Study 4).

STUDY 1

The first study explored whether forecasters and experiencers differed in the traits they inferred about people who did versus did not participate in a charity drive. Roughly half of the participants read a hypothetical description of a charity bake sale. The other half were approached after the bake sale had already taken place. Participants in each group were asked whether they would (or did) buy a baked good and what percentage of their peers would (or did) do the same. Replicating past work, we expected forecasters to overpredict the chance that they would buy a baked good. In addition, we expected forecasters to make more extreme inferences about another person than would experiencers.

Method

Participants. Seventy-eight students from a single large, lecture psychology class at Cornell University participated for extra credit.

Procedure. Half of the participants ($n = 39$) were randomly assigned to the forecaster group. These participants received a description of an upcoming campus bake sale, the proceeds from which would benefit a Tanzanian hospital. The description stated that volunteers would sell baked goods at a table in a courtyard just outside the classroom exit for 30 minutes before and after the lecture course for 1 week. Signs advertising the charity event and information about the hospital's needs would be posted. All items, sold for \$1, would be vegetarian and some suitable for vegans. Participants reported whether they might purchase a baked good and, if so, how many. Then they were asked what percentage of typical students at their university would purchase an item and how many items the average supporter would purchase.

Then, as a measure of dispositional inference, forecasters reported how likely it was that hypothetical target characters supporting versus not supporting the event would engage in generous behavior in other situations. Participants used a 7-point scale (higher numbers equal greater likelihood) to report how likely it was that the hypothetical buyer and nonbuyer would engage in 20 benevolent acts in which they could volunteer time, donate money, or intervene to help others. For instance, participants read that a character drove through the neighborhood on a Saturday afternoon and came upon a teenager fixing a flat tire. Participants indicated how likely a supporter and nonsupporter were to help the teenager.

Three to four weeks subsequent to these predictions, a bake sale was actually held in exactly the manner that was described in the description forecasters read.¹ Those in the experienter group ($n = 39$) were asked the week following the actual bake sale if they and the typical student purchased a baked good and, if so, how many they purchased. Additionally, the experienter group was invited to make the same behavioral inferences about hypothetical buyers and nonbuyers by completing the same questionnaire as the forecasters.

Results

Holier-than-thou self-impressions. As expected, those in the forecaster group overestimated the likelihood that they would make a purchase. Specifically, 100% ($n = 39$) expected they would purchase at least one item while only 5% ($n = 2$) actually did, $\chi^2(1) = 29.97$, $p < .001$. Although the forecaster group tended to overestimate their support, they did not transfer this tendency to predictions of peers' purchases. They estimated that only 24.8% of typical students would purchase at least one baked good; although it was a rate far lower than they predicted for themselves, paired $t(38) = 22.56$, $p < .001$, it was one much closer to reality.

Inferences about generosity. We expected those in the forecaster group would infer a greater discrepancy between the generosity of hypothetical buyers and nonbuyers in other situations but that experiencers would not make such strong inferences, if they did at all. A 2 (timing: forecaster or experienter) \times 2 (target: buyer or nonbuyer) mixed-model analysis of variance (ANOVA) on the behavioral inferences indicated this was the case. As expected, the main effect of target was significant, $F(1, 76) = 112.86$, $p < .001$, and was qualified by the expected interaction between timing and target, $F(1, 76) = 9.44$, $p = .003$. A simple effects test suggested that forecasters thought buyers would be more likely to act generously ($M = 4.9$) than would nonbuyers ($M = 3.5$), paired $t(76) = 13.73$, $p < .001$.

However, experiencers did not make as great a distinction, although they did differentiate between buyers' and nonbuyers' likely generosity ($M_s = 4.8$ and 4.0 for buyers and nonbuyers, respectively), simple effects paired $t(76) = 7.60$, $p < .001$. We should note that experiencers, relative to forecasters, were much more generous in their attributions of nonbuyers, simple effects $t(76) = 4.01$, $p < .001$, but were not any less charitable about buyers, $t < 1$.

STUDY 2

Study 2 addressed an alternative explanation. One could argue that the patterns of inferences we found were a result of issues in temporal construal (Trope & Liberman, 2000), as the amount of time separating forecasters from the upcoming event (3 to 4 weeks) was not equal to the amount of time separating experiencers from the event (1 to 2 weeks). It might be that events occurring 3 to 4 weeks in the future are represented more abstractly than a memory of actual behavior that is merely a week old, a variable that has recently been shown to influence dispositional inferences (Nussbaum, Trope, & Liberman, 2003). To control for this alternative explanation, Study 2 equated the temporal distance between participants and the relevant event.

Method

Participants. In total, 85 undergraduates at Cornell University received extra credit in their introductory psychology and human development classes for their participation.

Procedures. At either 1 or 2 weeks prior to a campus-wide sale of irises to benefit the Special Olympics, participants randomly assigned to the forecasting group ($n = 41$) read a description of the event. In particular, they learned that a coed fraternity on campus would sell freshly picked irises to benefit the Special Olympics' programs to help individuals with intellectual disabilities through sports training and competition. This description included the dates, times, locations, and duration of the sale. This description accurately reflected the actual event that experiencers encountered. Following this description, participants were asked if they thought they might purchase a flower to support the iris sale and, if so, how many. Then they were asked what percentage of typical students at their university would purchase at least one flower. Forecasters then inferred the generosity of hypothetical characters who either did or did not support the sale, using the same scales as Study 1.

Participants randomly assigned to the experienter group ($n = 44$) reported their actual behavior either 1 or 2 weeks after the charity drive ended. After a brief description of the iris sale meant to remind participants about the event; its purpose; and the date, time, location, and duration of the sale that had occurred, participants completed the same prediction questions for themselves and the typical student in addition to the same behavioral questions used in Study 1.

Results

Temporal distance. There were no differences in reports of predicted or actual purchases nor in inferences because of the scheduling of the experimental session 1 or 2 weeks before or after the event. That is, temporal distance from the event did not affect any of our results and is not a viable alternative. Thus, we collapsed across this variable in all analyses.

Holier-than-thou self-impressions. Forecasters overestimated the likelihood that they would purchase a flower. Specifically, 61% ($n = 25$) expected they would purchase at least one flower but only 5% ($n = 2$) actually did so, $\chi^2(1) = 31.18, p < .001$. Although forecasters tended to overestimate their support, they did not transfer this tendency to predictions of peers' purchases. Forecasters estimated that only 35% of typical students at their university would purchase at least one flower but, to reiterate, 61% of forecasters expected they would do so, paired $t(41) = 4.02, p < .001$.

Inferences about generosity. We expected that forecasters would infer a greater discrepancy between the generosity of buyers' and nonbuyers' future acts than would experiencers. A 2 (timing: forecaster vs. experienter) \times 2 (target: buyer or nonbuyer) mixed-model ANOVA indicated that this was the case. The main effect of target was significant, $F(1, 83) = 63.84, p < .001$. Although the pattern of behavioral predictions was the same as Study 1, the interaction between timing and target just missed conventional levels of statistical significance, $F(1, 83) = 3.60, p = .06$.

Forecasters indicated that buyers would be more likely to act generously in other domains ($M = 5.1$) than would nonbuyers ($M = 4.1$), simple effects paired $t(83) = 9.76, p < .001$. As expected, experiencers did not reach as extreme inferences although they did indicate that buyers were more likely act generously in future situations ($M = 5.1$) than were nonbuyers ($M = 4.4$), simple effects paired $t(83) = 5.97, p < .001$. The two groups did not differ in their inferences about buyers and nonbuyers separately, according to simple effects, $ts(83) = 1.60, p = .11$, and $t < 1$, respectively.

STUDY 3

These studies demonstrate that experiencing situations prompted people to become more reticent to judge the character of others who have faced the same choice. We propose this reticence arises because experience informs people about the power that situational circumstances assume in shaping behavior—in effect, an informational account. However, it could be the case that experiencers may have altered their willingness to make strong inferences because of a desire to maintain positive self-images (for reviews, see Balcetis & Dunning, 2005; Dunning, 1999, 2000, 2003). According to this self-esteem maintenance account, experiencing an event may cause people to temper their social inferences because it changes what category—charitable supporter or not—people now know they belong to. The impact of experience is simply the result of a distributional shift in participants' predicted and actual actions. Forecasters tend to believe they will act generously. As a consequence, they are motivated toward making extreme judgments of their peers. However, after experiencing an event, a significant percentage may recognize that they actually failed to act generously. The motivation then is to avoid making extreme judgments of both supporters and nonsupporters of the charity event.

In Study 3, we examined which account, informational or self-esteem maintenance, best describes why participants provided muted inferences after experiencing the situation. According to the informational view, experiencing the situation exposes participants to how their behavior is produced by external forces without regard to the implications of their judgments for self-esteem. This should lead participants to more muted inferences irrespective of whether they acted in an admirable or less admirable way. However, the self-esteem maintenance account predicts that making extreme inferences about others will depend on whether participants expect themselves to or actually do act generously (Dunning & Beauregard, 2000; Dunning & Cohen, 1992). Those acting generously themselves will continue to make extreme inferences about others—positive for supporters and negative for nonsupporters—whereas nonsupporters will be more tempered in their judgments. This pattern should arise whether participants are forecasters or experiencers.

The data from the first two studies prevented us from implementing this analysis because nearly all forecasters predicted they would support the charity event and very few experiencers actually did support it. In light of these distributions, in Study 3 we used a situation we were confident would produce diversity in the predicted and actual levels of support: a public charity drive known as Daffodil Days, in which campus fraternities sell flowers

to raise money for the American Cancer Society (see Epley & Dunning, 2000, Study 1).

Study 3 also allowed us to examine whether the inferences drawn by experiencers were also more accurate than those of forecasters. We do not know how supporters and nonsupporters would really act in the hypothetical situations we presented to participants in the previous two studies but we could ask them about their political attitudes—thus providing a benchmark against which the inferences of participants can be compared. In Study 3, experiencers reacted to a number of political issues so we could see the extent to which supporters and nonsupporters differed in their political attitudes in reality. We then compared the inferences about those attitudes furnished by forecasters and experiencers to see which group proved more accurate. We predicted that forecasters' attitude inferences would be too extreme given actual (if any) political differences between those who support a charity event and those who do not. Experiencers' attitude inferences would be more moderate and closer to the truth. We made this prediction because of a wealth of classic social psychological work showing that a person's behaviors often reflect his or her attitudes only modestly, if at all (Osberg & Shrauger, 1986; Wilson & La Fleur, 1995). Experiencers, through their more muted inferences, would reflect this reality more closely.

Method

Participants. In total, 156 undergraduates at Cornell University received extra credit in their introductory psychology and human development classes for their participation.

Procedure. Those in the forecasting group ($n = 93$) received a short description of an upcoming campus-wide charity event in 3 to 4 weeks' time called Daffodil Days, in which a local fraternity assisted the American Cancer Society in selling daffodils to raise funds for cancer research. The paragraph included a description of the dates, times, locations, and duration of the fundraising efforts. Participants were asked if they thought they would purchase a flower to support Daffodil Days and, if so, how many. Then they were asked what percentage of typical students at their university would purchase at least one flower. Following these questions, participants completed the same behavioral inference questions used before.

Forecasters also inferred the political attitudes of both hypothetical buyers and nonbuyers. We asked forecasters the degree to which targets would support eight politically divisive bills related to international involvement in humanitarian situations, capital punishment, and state-sponsored support for charity organizations such as

Habitat for Humanity. A wide range of political issues were selected to reflect the diversity of topics participants might consider. For instance, participants were asked how likely the hypothetical characters were to vote to support the proposal for a multiyear commitment to Africa for food and healthcare. On 7-point scales, participants indicated the likelihood that hypothetical targets would support such proposals and political concerns. All responses were coded such that higher scores indicated inferences that were more politically liberal.

Experiencers ($n = 63$) were recruited 1 to 2 weeks following Daffodil Days and completed measures similar to the forecasting group. After a brief description of Daffodil Days, participants reported the number of flowers they purchased during Daffodil Days and answered the same behavioral questions used before and the political attitude questions. They also reported their own political attitudes along the eight issues described.

Results

Holier-than-thou self-impressions. Forecasters once again overestimated the likelihood of their own generosity. Specifically, 83% ($n = 77$) expected they would purchase at least one flower while only 29% ($n = 18$) actually did so, $\chi^2(1) = 46.40$, $p < .001$. Although forecasters tended to overestimate their charitable giving, they did not transfer this tendency to predictions of peers' purchases. Forecasters estimated that only 44% of typical students at their university would purchase at least one flower, far lower than self-estimates, $t(92) = 9.76$, $p < .001$.

Inferences about generosity. Again, forecasters predicted a greater discrepancy between the generosity of buyer's and nonbuyers' future behaviors but experiencers did not reach as extreme conclusions. A 2 (timing: forecaster or experiencer) \times 2 (target: buyer or nonbuyer) mixed-model ANOVA supported this statement. The main effect of target was significant, $F(1, 154) = 69.44$, $p < .001$, but it is important that this was qualified by the expected interaction between timing and target, $F(1, 154) = 40.96$, $p < .001$. Forecasters indicated that buyers would be more likely to act generously in other domains ($M = 4.9$) than would nonbuyers ($M = 3.7$), simple effects paired $t(154) = 16.34$, $p < .001$. However, experiencers did not differentiate between buyers ($M = 4.2$) and nonbuyers ($M = 4.1$) when predicting the generosity of future acts, simple effects paired $t(154) = .67$, $p = .50$. Simple effects tests showed that experiencers and forecasters differed in both their views of buyers and nonbuyers, simple effects $t(154)s > 3.40$, $p < .001$.

Inferences about political attitudes. Forecasters' inferences of buyers' political attitudes were more generous

TABLE 1: Inferences as a Function of Experience, Participant Behavior, and Target Behavior

Condition and Self-Behavior	Generosity			Attitudes		
	Target			Target		
	Buyer	Nonbuyer	Difference	Buyer	Nonbuyer	Difference
Forecaster						
Gives	4.9	3.6	+1.3	4.7	3.6	+1.1
Does not give	4.7	4.0	+0.7	4.8	4.1	+0.7
Experiencer						
Gives	4.2	4.0	+0.2	3.9	4.0	-0.1
Does not give	4.2	4.1	+0.1	3.9	3.8	+0.1

NOTE: Actual political attitudes $M_s = 3.9$ and 3.8 for actual givers and nongivers, respectively.

than inferences of nonbuyers' attitudes, whereas experiencers did not distinguish between the two. A 2 (timing: forecaster or experiencer) \times 2 (target: buyer or nonbuyer) mixed-model ANOVA confirmed this. There was a significant main effect of target, $F(1, 154) = 57.36, p < .001$, but this main effect was qualified by a significant interaction, $F(1, 154) = 46.15, p < .001$. Forecasters estimated that buyers ($M = 4.8$) held more liberal political attitudes than did nonbuyers ($M = 3.7$), simple effects paired $t(154) = 15.96, p < .001$. However, experiencers did not differentiate between the attitudes of buyers ($M = 3.9$) and nonbuyers ($M = 3.9$), simple effects paired $t(154) = .64, p = .52$. Simple effects tests again showed that experiencers and forecasters made different inferences of buyers, $t(154) = 7.16, p < .001$, whereas inferences about nonbuyers did not differ, $t < 1$.

Accuracy of attitude inferences. These results beg the question of accuracy. We asked experiencers to provide their actual political attitudes in addition to inferring the attitudes held by others. As a result, we have an accurate measure of the political attitudes held by those who actually supported Daffodil Days and those who did not. The degree to which real supporters and non-supporters endorsed liberal views on the political attitudes we surveyed did not differ ($M_s = 3.9$ and 3.8 respectively), $t(58) = .62, p = .54$. We should note that this minimal spread almost exactly replicates the inferences about attitudes made by the experiencer group.

Informational versus self-esteem enhancement mechanisms. Another analysis explored which account, informational versus self-esteem maintenance, best explained why experiencers made more moderate inferences than their forecaster counterparts did. We divided participants into two groups: those who predicted they would purchase at least one flower or who actually did purchase

at least one (buyers) and those who predicted they would purchase no flowers or who actually did purchase none (nonbuyers).

Distinguishing the informational from the self-esteem account requires seeing how experience changes the patterns of inferences made by participants who were buyers versus nonbuyers. The informational account predicts that experiencers who are buyers and nonbuyers will make less extreme attributions than will forecaster participants who predict they will be buyers or nonbuyers. In other words, whether experiencers actually do or do not purchase a daffodil should have little impact on the inferences they make about both targets. The original Timing \times Target interaction should remain intact when we look at buyers and nonbuyers separately. The self-esteem account, however, predicts that the participant's own behavior will matter. The original Timing \times Target interaction will break down, with supporters making stronger inferences than nonsupporters regardless of timing.

As seen in Table 1, looking at buying and nonbuying participants separately provided results that supported the informational account. When focusing on inferences about generosity made by buyers and nonbuyers in separate Timing (forecaster or experiencer) \times Target (buyer or nonbuyer) repeated-measures ANOVAs, the Timing \times Target interaction remained intact, $F_s > 4.58, p_s < .04$. In addition, when focusing on political attitude inferences made by actual buyers and nonbuyers separately, the expected interaction still remains, $F_s = 4.86, p < .035$. Indeed, experiencers, whether buyers or not, failed to show any willingness to make inferences about the character of their peers, all $t_s < 1.68, p_s > .10$. This reluctance to make inferences was a far cry from the willingness participants showed in the forecasting group, regardless of the choice they said they would make themselves, all $t_s > 3.81, p < .001$.

In sum, these data suggest that experiencing a situation causes participants to be more reluctant to make inferences about other people who have faced the same situation, regardless of whether they ended up making the admirable or less admirable choice for themselves. In addition, the data ruled out a self-esteem interpretation in which participants, through experience learning they would make the less admirable choice, decided to obscure the evaluative implications of making that choice. Under this interpretation, those actually buying a daffodil in the experiencer group should have been enthusiastic about making inferences about others but the data showed they were not.

STUDY 4

Study 4 was designed with two goals in mind. The first goal was to test an alternative explanation. Given that forecasters predicted the future and experiencers reflected back on the past, it is possible that the pattern of inferences is the result of future- versus past-oriented thought styles rather than the result of experience with the situation. Indeed, the way people think about their actions depends, in part, on whether they are thinking to the past or the future (e.g. Karniol & Ross, 1996).

To address the alternative, participants thought ahead to a future event or thought back to an event that had already occurred. Crossed with this variable, we recruited two separate groups of participants who differed in their experience with the event in question. To form a true forecaster group, we recruited 1st-year students who were completely naïve about the charity event in question. To form a true experiencer group, we recruited experienced students who had been on campus for at least 2 years. In addition, we used a well-publicized charity event that garnered more support from the student body than any other so every experienced student should have heard about it and had the opportunity to participate previously. We expected that thinking about an upcoming event or a past event would not alter the pattern of attributions. Instead, participants who had not experienced the event, 1st-year students, would produce extreme inferences whereas experienced participants would produce more muted ones.

As a second goal, Study 4 also tested whether participants learn to be more situationist as they experience the situation first hand. We asked some of our participants to describe the actual causal factors that had led them to support or fail to support the relevant charity event in the past, predicting that their reasoning would emphasize situational factors over dispositional ones. We then asked experienced and inexperienced participants to explain the causes why others support or fail to support the charity

event. We anticipated that participants who had experienced the event first hand would apply this lesson about situational factors and thus would emphasize situational over dispositional factors in explaining other people's behaviors more than their inexperienced counterparts would. Because they would emphasize more situationist theories for a person's support versus nonsupport, experienced participants would, again, be less likely to make inferences about the generosity of supporters versus non-supporters in other situations.

Method

Participants. In total, 185 Ohio University undergraduate students received extra credit in their introductory psychology classes for their participation.

Procedures. Participants read a description of Relay for Life, the most publicized and supported community and campus-wide charity event that promotes cancer research. The group we termed *experienced participants* were students in at least their 2nd year of school and who had been on campus for last year's Relay for Life ($n = 79$). To ensure that we had a sample of participants who had not yet experienced Relay for Life and would not have any previous experiences with the event, we recruited 1st-year students ($n = 106$) at the university. We refer to this group as *inexperienced participants*.

To test the alternative that thinking to the future or the past in itself is sufficient to alter self and social judgments, experienced students were randomly assigned to either the prediction group ($n = 35$) or the reflection group ($n = 44$). Inexperienced students were randomly assigned to either a prediction group ($n = 44$) or an imagined reflection group ($n = 62$). The prediction groups replicated the forecasting groups of the previous studies such that predictors thought ahead to a Relay for Life that would occur in 3 months. The experienced reflection group replicated the experiencer group of previous studies such that participants reflected on the Relay for Life charity event that occurred 9 months ago. Inexperienced students assigned to the reflection group were asked to imagine what it would have been like had they been a student at this university at the time this event occurred in the previous year. This group answered a number of questions about what their experience would have been had they been able to attend the event.

Participants assigned to prediction groups read a description of a Relay for Life event that would occur in 3 months. In that event, teams keep members walking or running around a track for 24 hours. People can support the event in a number of ways including organizing a team, being a team member, assisting in the setup of the event, or donating money. This description included the dates, times, locations, and duration of the event

and accurately reflected the actual event encountered. Participants in the reflection and imagined reflection group read the same description of Relay for Life but written in the past tense to describe the event that occurred 9 months previously.

Following this description, participants were asked if they thought they might or if they actually did support Relay for Life in any ways listed. They then were asked what percentage of typical students at their university would or did support Relay for Life. In addition, participants indicated whether they would or did engage in each of these separate actions: serve as team captains, served as team members, volunteer time to organize the event, and donated money. Participants also estimated the percentage of typical students at this university that engaged in each of these separate actions.

As in past studies, to measure the inferences participants are willing to make about target supporters and nonsupporters, all participants responded to a number of scenarios about opportunities target supporters and nonsupporters had to engage in generous behaviors. To create this measure, we sampled from the scenarios used in our previous studies and used only those scenarios that pretesting and focus groups indicated were considered most relevant to Relay for Life. Opportunities to intervene and offer assistance were considered more relevant to this event than opportunities to donate money. Hence, participants estimated the likelihood that hypothetical characters would take notes for a fellow student who could not attend class, warn a man that he was about to step in a large puddle, help a student who dropped a stack of papers, and warn a student that his backpack was unzipped.

Unlike past studies, we asked participants to describe the importance of situational and dispositional factors in causing a decision to support or not support this charity drive. This allowed us to test whether participants who have experienced the event emphasize situational over dispositional causes for their decision, thereby indicating that experience had made salient the power of the situation. Thus, we asked participants in all conditions to offer their intuitions about the specific situational constraints underlying a target supporter's choice to participate in Relay for Life. Participants responded to a list of 17 specific causes why someone would support Relay for Life. Of these causal factors, 6 were dispositional (not tight-fisted, unselfish, not lazy, generous, civic-minded, is the kind of person who supports these events), 7 were situational (free time, extra money, no other time commitments, not too busy, in town, saw the advertising, no travel problems), and 4 were fillers. Participants used a 1- (*not at all likely*) to-7 (*very likely*) Likert-type scale to indicate the likelihood that each cause explained the target nonsupporter's choice.

A separate list of 17 causal factors were generated to explain why someone would not support Relay for Life. Six referenced the nonsupporter's disposition (tight-fisted, selfish, lazy, not generous, not civic-minded, kind of person that doesn't support the event), 7 referenced the situation (no free time, no money, too many time commitments, too busy, out of town, poor advertising, travel problems), and 4 were filler items. Participants responded to these items with the same 7-point Likert-type scales described above.

To provide a benchmark, we asked the experienced students in the reflection condition to complete an additional scale indicating the extent to which these specific situational and dispositional causes actually explained their choice to either support or not support last year's Relay for Life. Experienced students in the prediction condition were not asked so as to not contaminate their predictions of future behavior. Experienced participants in the reflection condition responded to the same set of 17 items as described above. These responses served as the standard of "accuracy" against which other participants' intuitions about the importance of situational versus dispositional features were compared.

Results

Holier-than-thou self-impressions. As reported by the local newspaper, 5% of students at this university (approximately 1,000) had participated as a team member in Relay for Life the previous year. In our sample, 6% of students reported being on a team, suggesting that participants accurately recalled their level of support.

As expected, inexperienced students overestimated the likelihood that they would support Relay for Life. Specifically, 86% ($n = 91$) of inexperienced students expected they would provide any type of support in the upcoming event but only 14% ($n = 6$) of experienced students in the reflection condition reported actually doing so, $\chi^2(1) = 46.55, p < .001$. This effect was not the result of thinking to the future rather than the past. Specifically, 85% ($n = 53$) of inexperienced students in the reflection group versus 86% ($n = 38$) in the prediction condition expected that they would have been or would be a supporter of the event—percentages that do not significantly differ, $\chi^2(1) = 0.02, ns$. Experienced students in the prediction condition were relatively more reticent to state they would support the event, but 54% ($n = 19$) still expected they would support Relay for Life—a significantly larger percentage than those who actually do, $\chi^2(1) = 14.89, p < .001$.

Although inexperienced students tended to overestimate their support, they did not transfer this tendency to predictions of peers' support. Inexperienced students

estimated that only 41% of typical students will or would have supported Relay for Life but, to reiterate, 86% of inexperienced students predicted they would be supporters, $F(1, 102) = 142.62, p < .001$. There was no effect of timing within the inexperienced sample, $F(1, 102) = .05, ns$.

Inferences about generosity. As in past studies, we expected that experienced students would make more muted inferences about how supporters and nonsupporters would act in other situations involving generosity, also looking to see if past- versus future-orientation would have an effect. Within a 2 (class: experienced vs. inexperienced students) \times 2 (timing: think to past vs. the future) \times 2 (target: supporter vs. nonsupporter) mixed-model ANOVA, the main effect of Target was significant, $F(1, 180) = 126.15, p < .001$. It is most important that the Class \times Target interaction was significant, $F(1, 180) = 7.00, p = .009$. No other main effects or interactions were significant.

Inexperienced students were more dispositional, inferring that supporters would be more likely to act generously in other domains ($M = 5.3$) than would nonsupporters ($M = 4.2$), simple effects paired $t(180) = 5.80, p < .01$. As expected, experienced students did not reach as extreme inferences, although they did indicate that supporters were more likely act generously in future situations ($M_s = 5.3$ and 4.6 for supporters and nonsupporters, respectively), simple effects paired $t(180) = 4.89, p < .01$. These patterns held regardless of whether inexperienced students and experienced students were thinking about the past or future. Simple effects tests revealed that experienced and inexperienced students differed in their inferences about nonsupporters, $t(180) = 2.20, p = .03$, but not about supporters, $t < 1$.

Use of specific situational and dispositional explanations. We next turned our attention to the relative reliance on situational over dispositional reasoning when explaining the causes for target supporters' and nonsupporters' choices. We averaged participants' endorsement of the seven situational explanations and the six dispositional ones separately for target supporters' and nonsupporters' choices. We then subtracted participants' endorsement of dispositional reasons from their endorsement of situational reasons when explaining these choices. Positive scores on this relative measure of situationism reflect greater endorsement of situational reasons and negative scores reflect greater endorsement of dispositional reasons.

Our analyses reveal that experienced students would be more likely to rely on situational explanations than inexperienced students would be. We conducted a 2

(class: experienced vs. inexperienced students) \times 2 (timing: think to past vs. think to future) \times 2 (target: supporter vs. nonsupporter) mixed-model ANOVA on this measure of situationism. In addition to a main effect of Target, $F(1, 178) = 39.63, p < .001$, there was the expected main effect of Class, $F(1, 178) = 15.11, p < .001$. In general, experienced students had higher scores ($M = 0.8$) than did inexperienced students ($M = 0.3$), suggesting that experienced students were more likely to rely on situational explanations over dispositional ones than were inexperienced students. No other main effects were significant. This main effect, however, was qualified by a Class \times Target interaction, $F(1, 178) = 3.86, p = .05$. Experienced students were significantly more situational when explaining a nonsupporter's choice ($M = 1.2$) than were inexperienced students ($M = 0.6$), $t(180) = 3.37, p < .001$. However, when considering supporters, the reasoning of experienced students just missed being more situational to a degree statistically significant from inexperienced students ($M_s = 0.3$ and 0.1), $t(180) = 1.94, p = .054$.² In sum, experienced students were more situational in their outlook than were inexperienced students but particularly when focused on the behavior of nonsupporters.

Learning how the situation constrains behavior. Does this enhanced situationism among experienced students better match the explanations of those accounting for their own past behavior? To assess this, we calculated the degree to which real supporters and real nonsupporters actually endorse situational reasons rather than dispositional ones when explaining their past behavior. In general, experienced students in the reflection condition explained their own past behavior by endorsing situational explanations for their actual decisions more than dispositional ones, $F(1, 42) = 21.63, p < .001$. However, this pattern was qualified by an interaction with participants' actual choices to support the event, $F(1, 42) = 7.73, p = .008$. Real supporters were marginally more likely to endorse situational ($M = 5.5$) rather than dispositional reasons for their decision ($M = 4.9$), paired $t(5) = 1.99, p = .10$. Real nonsupporters were more likely to endorse situational ($M = 4.6$) rather than dispositional ($M = 2.0$) reasons for their decision, paired $t(37) = 9.59, p < .001$.

Next, we subtracted real supporters' and real nonsupporters' endorsement of dispositional reasons from their endorsement of situational ones. Positive values reflect greater reliance on situational explanations and negative values reflect reliance on dispositional explanations. Real supporters, on average, had a score of 0.6 and real nonsupporters, on average, had a score of 2.7. These scores reflect the actual amount of situationism

TABLE 2: Endorsement of Specific Situational and Dispositional Reasons as a Function of Experience and Target Behavior

Participant or Target Behavior	Specific Reasons		
	Situational	Dispositional	Difference
First year			
Supports	5.4	5.3	0.1
Does not support	4.7	4.1	0.6
Experienced			
Supports	5.3	5.0	0.3
Does not support	4.9	3.6	1.2

NOTE: The actual difference score representing greater endorsement of situational explanations for real supporters = 0.6, real nonsupporters = 2.7.

experienced students use to explain their own prior choice. As can be seen in Table 2, when experienced participants made inferences about others, they matched these levels of situationism more closely when estimating the role of situational versus dispositional influences on behavior than did inexperienced inexperienced participants.

Taken together, these findings suggest that having lived through an event leads people to express more situationism about their choices regarding the event. Those judging the reasons for the behavior of other people also are more situationist. Although they fail to be as situationist as those describing their own behavior, they significantly move in a situationist direction.

Use of situational explanations as a mediator. If, in fact, experiencing the situation helps participants learn how the situation constrains choices to support or not support the event—prompting more situationism—then the situationism index we calculated above should mediate the relationship between experience and how extremely participants made dispositional inferences about the character of supporters versus nonsupporters in other situations. A mediational analysis using procedures outlined by Baron and Kenny (1986) tested this prediction.

First, from the scenario questionnaire we calculated a generosity inference score by subtracting the amount of inferred generosity made about the target nonsupporter from that made about the target supporter. The larger this inference score, the greater the generosity participants expected of supporters in comparison to nonsupporters in a variety of situations. Second, we took participants' situationism index, that is, the emphasis they placed on situational versus dispositional causes for why people had supported Relay for Life or not. Third, we dummy coded the experience variable such that the experienced students were coded as 2 and inexperienced students as 1.

As expected, experience significantly predicted inferences about generosity ($B = -.42$, $SE = .15$, $p = .007$). In addition, the situationism index predicted the spread in these inferences ($B = -.07$, $SE = .02$, $p = .001$). Finally, when both Class and Situationism were included in the same equation predicting inferences about generosity, the former dropped to marginal significance and the latter remained significant ($B = -.28$, $SE = .16$, $p = .08$, and $B = -.06$, $SE = .02$, $p = .007$, respectively). Results of the Sobel (1982) test confirmed the significance of this mediated relation, $Z = 2.29$, $p = .02$ —suggesting that experiencing the situation leads people to emphasize situational causes for behavior, thereby muting any following attributions about character. In other words, learning how the situation shapes choices to support the event leads to less extreme dispositional inferences about others.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

One enduring question in social psychological literature is what people do when they sit in judgment of one another. As has been documented in numerous studies conducted through many decades, people often fall prey to dispositionism—inferring too much about a person's character based on a sample of that person's behavior (e.g., Ross & Nisbett, 1991). Because people neglect the impact of situational circumstances on behavior, the inferences they reach are often too harsh, extreme, and often wrong.

In this article, we argue that people tend to hold mistaken beliefs about the power of their own personality, relative to the potential of situational circumstances, to shape their own behavior when they have yet to experience the situation in question. As a consequence, they tend to predict behaviors for themselves that are nobler than reality proves to be. Unfortunately, believing one's own behavior is the product of one's character gives license to assume that others' behaviors reveal their character as well (Beauregard & Dunning, 1998; Dunning & Cohen, 1992; Dunning & Hayes, 1996). However, once people have experienced a situation, they understand that behavior is not necessarily mandated by a person's character but is the result of situational forces as well. As a consequence, they make less extreme and more accurate inferences about others.

All four studies provided evidence of this analysis. Participants in all studies made less extreme inferences about the characters of others once they had experienced the situation firsthand. Study 3 showed that these more muted inferences were more accurate—participants made more accurate inferences about the political attitudes of supporters versus nonsupporters of a charity drive after they had lived through the charity drive themselves.

Other data bolster the notion that living through an event educates people about the relative importance of situational versus dispositional causes of behavior. In Study 4, participants who lived through an event emphasized situational over dispositional causes for their own behavior. This situationist stance was better matched by the causal reasoning of experienced participants relative to naïve ones. In short, participants through experience appeared to have learned that their own behavior was situationally driven and applied this reasoning to others, making them more reticent to draw inferences about the character of other people. Studies 3 and 4 ruled out alternative explanations for this impact of experience on social inference. Study 3 showed that pressures to maintain self-esteem played no role. Study 4 showed that the different inferences made by experienced versus inexperienced participants were not due to focusing on the past versus the future.

Questions for Future Research

These studies prompt many questions that future research could profitably address. First, will such inferential patterns generalize across domains? One might ask if experience influences other realms beyond charity events. For example, people think that they will be more of a risk taker and assertive in social situations, less fearful, and higher achievers than they actually are (Gilovich, Kerr, & Medvec, 1993; Swim & Hyers, 1999; Van Boven et al., 2005; Woodzicka & LaFrance, 2001). Are these also areas in which people are reticent to make inferences about others after they have experienced the situation?

Second, how long-lived is the effect of experience? We found that up to 9 months later experiencers were more reluctant to attribute a person's actions to his or her character because they have learned a lesson about the power of the situation. One, however, wonders if this lesson stays intact as time goes on. After all, people do forget the specifics of situations, which may lead them to neglect the power that those specifics had.

Third, given the pervasiveness of people's self-enhancing natures (for reviews, see Balcetis & Dunning, 2005; Dunning 2003, 2005), why did our experiencer groups refrain from this tendency? Certainly, this stands as a notable exception to what appears to be a general rule. Indeed, this result might indicate a potentially important boundary condition on the tendency for people to aggrandize themselves via the judgments they reach about others. Perhaps, people will not engage in self-serving judgments of others when they have direct experience with the situation in question.

Concluding Remarks

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina struck Gulf Coast cities in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama as a catastrophic Category 3 storm, leading to one of the most severe natural disasters in United States history. After the winds, the rains, and the horrific flood that covered 80% of the city of New Orleans, thousands of people risked illness and injury to assist in clean up and recovery, retrieving the bodies of the dead, so that the evacuees could return to a safe environment.

What was curious, and perhaps informative, was that members of these recovery crews articulated a common theme—that anyone in their position, with their resources or their abilities, would have done the same thing. In particular, Command Sergeant Major Brunk Conley offered that

when we get called and we know that these are Americans that need our help, and I would say that every soldier I talked to today as they came in, they are motivated to be here, they want to do their part. They know that these people need help, and they would do the same thing for us if we had issues in Oregon or anywhere else in the world. It's incredible. It's a very good feeling to be of help. (Lehrer, 2005)

It is customary when hearing words like these to think they say something about the person—that this self-effacing modesty is further proof of a person's heroic character. However, perhaps these modest individuals have it right. After walking in their moccasins, one sees just how the situation mandates how people will respond, whether the circumstances are as extreme as Hurricane Katrina or as small as those surrounding a bake sale.

NOTES

1. We conducted the bake sale and sent all proceeds to the Tanzanian hospital to assist in the purchase a new roof for the building.
2. We did not conduct simple effects tests, pooling variance across targets for individual comparisons in this case, because the variance associated with judgments of nonsupporters was significantly higher than it was for judgments of supporters, $F_{\max}(2, 182) = 2.51, p < .01$.

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