
Group Entitativity and Social Attribution: On Translating Situational Constraints Into Stereotypes

Vincent Y. Yzerbyt

Anouk Rogier

Catholic University of Louvain at Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium

Susan T. Fiske

University of Massachusetts–Amherst

The research investigates the impact of group entitativity on social attribution. Perceivers confronted with a group high in entitativity more readily call on an underlying essence to explain people's behavior. We adapted Ross, Amabile, and Steinmetz's overattribution paradigm to a group setting. Participants were randomly selected to join a group of questioners, answerers, or observers in a quiz game. Unknown to the contestants, their group was presented to the observers as an entity or as an aggregate. As predicted, group entitativity promoted the use of dispositional attributions for the behavior of group members. These findings suggest that the explanation of group members' behavior is more likely to remain situation insensitive whenever perceivers share the naïve theory that underlying features characterize the group. The discussion focuses on the impact of social attribution in the emergence of stereotypes and examines the role of subjective essentialism in social categorization and rationalization.

Given the impact of stereotypes on everyday life, it is hardly surprising that a better understanding of the emergence of stereotypic beliefs stands as a key preoccupation for social psychologists. In fact, the current literature suggests a variety of ways to look at stereotypes (Fiske, 1993b; Hamilton & Sherman, 1994; Hilton & von Hippel, 1996; Leyens, Yzerbyt, & Schadron, 1994; Macrae, Stangor, & Hewstone, 1996; Oakes, Haslam, & Turner, 1994). As a case in point, our subjective essentialistic perspective (Yzerbyt, Rocher, & Schadron, 1997) suggests that stereotypes are best seen as dispositional characteristics attributed to groups. In other words, perceivers may sometimes explain the uniformity in the behaviors of the members of a given group by postulating the presence of shared enduring features. In the present article, we extend the work on the overattribution bias from the individual level to the group level. We

propose that observers tend to overlook the situational constraints impinging on the members of a group whenever their group comes across as being a coherent whole or an entity (Campbell, 1958). By demonstrating the combined impact of social attribution and group entitativity on the emergence of stereotypic beliefs, we hope to emphasize the rationalization function of stereotypes.

From Person Attribution to Social Attribution

Researchers in person perception have long shown that, when people explain behaviors, they largely underestimate the impact of situational factors and, in contrast, overestimate the weight of person characteristics (Jones & Harris, 1967; for reviews, see Gilbert & Malone, 1995; Jones, 1990; Ross, 1977; Ross & Nisbett, 1991). Ross, Amabile, and Steinmetz (1977) offered a deceptively simple illustration of this overattribution bias or

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fundamental attribution error. Randomly designated questioners, answerers, and observers all took part in a quiz game. As predicted, both answerers and observers later rated the questioner to be more knowledgeable than the answerer, despite the fact that role assignment was explicitly random (Sande, Ellard, & Ross, 1986).

One very interesting aspect of the overattribution bias is that perceivers come to refer to an underlying property of the target person to account for the observed behavior. For example, there is an unmistakable tendency of social perceivers to call on the trait of honesty to account for a person's bringing a lost wallet to the police station. In other words, the essentialistic assumption—that some dispositional property of the actor or some essential feature lies at the heart of an event—can be seen as a central aspect of social perception. Although most of the attribution research focused on the distinction between person characteristics and environmental factors, it should be acknowledged that Heider (1958) considered perceivers' search for meaning as a quest for any invariance that could account for the observed behavior. This means that group membership may very well meet the requirements of a valid invariant factor. In other words, we propose that social categories may constitute stable causal factors in the explanation of other people's behavior (see also Pettigrew, 1979). Despite the intuitive appeal of such a claim, the evidence showing that blaming the group membership of the actor could be as much an internal attribution as referring to the personality characteristics of the actor remains scarce (for an exception, see Deschamps, 1973-1974).

Most explicit in linking social categorization with attribution, social identity theorists have argued that group membership is not merely a kind of background factor but, instead, stands as an important dispositional aspect of the person (Oakes, 1987). Oakes, Turner, and Haslam (1991), adapting the who-said-what paradigm (Taylor, Fiske, Etcoff, & Ruderman, 1978), presented participants with six students, three from arts and three from science. The six target students expressed their views about social life on campus and hard work according to several prearranged conditions. In two conflict conditions, the three arts students expressed views opposite to those expressed by the science students, either consistent with respective ambient stereotypes or opposite to participants' stereotypic expectations. In two deviance conditions, one art student held views different from all five others. Whereas for half of the participants the deviant was the only one to match the stereotype of arts students, the remaining participants heard the deviant express counterstereotypic views. Although very high internal attributions were observed in both the conflict-stereotypic and the deviant-counterstereotypic conditions, there was also a sharp difference between these

two conditions. Indeed, whereas the deviant-counterstereotypic combination led to strong personal attribution, the conflict-stereotypic combination led to strong group membership attribution.

As we see them, Oakes et al.'s (1991) findings suggest that social categories may be appraised as a valid internal locus of attribution, but they leave the question of the emergence of stereotypes unanswered. Participants obviously relied on preexisting stereotypic expectations to make sense of the students' behaviors. When the actor was the sole member of the group to claim counterstereotypic views, participants made personal attributions. When the same target person happened to be in line with the group stereotype in a group-conflict situation, participants credit group membership. In short, although we agree with Oakes et al. that group membership can be seen as a legitimate internal attribution, we think that a more convincing case needs to be made. What needs to be shown is that shared group membership stands as a tempting causal factor independent of prior knowledge about the specific groups.

In the following section, we argue that perceivers deal with meaningful social entities very much like they handle information about individual targets. Extending the notion of the essence of an individual actor in the overattribution bias, we would thus like to show that essentialism is involved in group perception as well. Specifically, when members of a group take a particular line of action and that group is perceived to be a coherent social entity, perceivers may well underestimate the causal role of the environment and credit instead some underlying disposition of the group members. We thus propose that the way people explain other people's behavior, that is, their attributional work, is directly affected by the extent to which the actors are perceived to be members of an entitative group. As such, social attribution, that is, the process of explaining other people's behavior in terms of their shared group characteristics, may well be the process by which a group acquires a specific essence, thereby playing a crucial role in the emergence of stereotypic beliefs.

Entitativity in Individuals and Groups

Daily encounters provide evidence aplenty that people treat other individuals as entities. As the work on impression formation and attribution demonstrates, social perceivers expect to find coherence and unity in others' behaviors. People's basic aim of coherence explains why they so easily and so quickly form unified impressions of other individuals (Anderson & Sedikides, 1991; Asch, 1946; Park, DeKay, & Kraus, 1994). Similarly, attribution theorists celebrate the status of individuals as meaningful entities when they posit that perceivers aim at uncovering the dispositional characteristics of people

to account for their behaviors (Jones & Davis, 1965; Kelley, 1967; see Gilbert, 1997, for a review). Observers orient the attributional process to preserve the perceived consistency of both others and themselves (Kulik, 1983; Kulik & Mahler, 1986; Kulik, Sledge, & Mahler, 1986; Ross & Nisbett, 1991; Weisz & Jones, 1993). The assumptions underlying the consistency theories also illustrate researchers' faith in the existence of a basic motivation for coherence (Festinger, 1957; Heider, 1958; but see Cialdini, Trost, & Newsom, 1995). Most dramatically, the enormous amount of work that personality psychologists devoted and continue to devote to the scientific study of psychological traits provides the best evidence of the current theoretical status of the self-contained nature of human beings (Pervin, 1990; see also, Sampson, 1981).

In comparison with the undisputed assumption that individual people possess a high degree of coherence, the idea that groups may display the same entity-like qualities has been much less popular. As far as we know, Cattell (1948) is the only psychologist who examined group-based differences in a manner that closely parallels the study of individual differences. He used the concept of syntality to refer to the portion of personality that people share with other members of their social groups. To the extent that Cattell suggested that national groups may truly and significantly differ from one another in terms of certain dispositions, this line of research closely resembles the current interest in the accuracy of stereotypes (Lee, Jussim, & McCauley, 1995).

Recently, a number of person perception researchers started considering the possibility that perceivers sometimes treat groups as if they were entities (Allison & Messick, 1985; Brewer & Harasty, 1996; Hamilton, 1991; Hamilton & Sherman, 1996; Yzerbyt et al., 1997; for a similar argument in decision making and game theory, see Allison, Beggan, Midgley, & Wallace, 1995; Insko & Schopler, 1987). The majority of these research efforts are rooted in the work of Campbell (1958). Indeed, some 40 years ago, Campbell defined the concept of entitativity as "the degree of having the nature of an entity, of having real existence" (p. 17). The basic idea is that, whereas some groups seem to display a high degree of groupness, others show little coherence. Campbell built on Gestalt principles to suggest that a series of perceptual factors, namely proximity, similarity, organization, and common fate, may contribute to increasing the perceived unity of a group of visual stimuli. He argued that similar principles may be at work in the social world. In other words, people perceived as being close and similar to each other, organized, and sharing a common fate are likely to be appraised as forming a real group (McGarty, Haslam, Hutchinson, & Grace, 1995).

At the heart of Campbell's (1958) thoughtful intuition is the idea that the confrontation with entity-like groups will lead to different social phenomena than encounters with less coherent aggregates of people. Recent research confirms this conjecture in a number of different ways.

In a study looking at the impact of group homogeneity on in-group bias, Vanbeselaere (1991) divided the participants of the study into two groups on a minimal basis and showed them that their group was either homogeneous or heterogeneous. Ratings on an intermediate task revealed the presence of more in-group bias when the out-group was presented as homogeneous rather than heterogeneous. This kind of empirical work relied on (alleged) objective differences in similarity. It would seem more interesting to appreciate the contribution of the mere belief in entitativity without having to capitalize on objective similarity or any other related factor. In other words, it may be desirable that identical information be given in both the group and the aggregate conditions. A number of studies can in fact be seen as meeting exactly that criterion and reveal quite a few interesting results.

In one of the earliest studies dealing with the groupness of social groups, Wilder (1981, 1986) showed that participants confronted with either an aggregate or a meaningful group expected more similarity among members of a meaningful group than among members of an aggregate. It is worth noting that participants received no objective information about the individuals and only inferred what that information could be (for related findings, see Schadron & Yzerbyt, 1993). Turning to the person memory literature (Hastie & Kumar, 1979; Srull, 1981; for a review, see Stangor & McMillan, 1992), Srull (1981) observed that people who received consistent and inconsistent information about a target recalled the inconsistent information better when they were told that the target was a coherent group than when they thought the target was an aggregate of unrelated individuals. Moreover, the results were no different whether the target was presented as a meaningful group or as a unique person (Srull, Lichtenstein, & Rothbart, 1985; Stern, Marr, Millar, & Cole, 1984; see also Hamilton & Sherman, 1996). Again, the reason why inconsistent information is better recalled for individual people and entitative groups is that these targets are expected to be more consistent and coherent than an aggregate. To the extent that superior memory for inconsistent information may well go hand in hand with a limited impact on the final impression, this means that disconfirming information has little influence on the a priori views when the targets are members of an entitative group. In a related vein, Hilton and von Hippel (1990, Experiment 2) examined the perception of ambiguous behaviors

performed by more or less internally consistent targets (people who had the same first letter of their name vs. members of the same family vs. an individual). Whereas low entitativity (low internal consistency) led ambiguous behaviors to be contrasted, high entitativity (high internal consistency) resulted in an assimilation effect. In sum, research suggests that the perception of a group as entitative obscures the perception of disconfirmation (Vonk & van Knippenberg, 1995).

A recent experiment by Brewer, Weber, and Carini (1995, Experiment 3) addressed the issue of entitativity by looking at the spontaneous representation of information at the group or at the individual level. Using the who-said-what paradigm (Taylor, Fiske, Etcoff, & Ruderman, 1978), these authors showed that the number of intracategory confusions was much larger when the target category was believed to be a minority rather than a majority. If one assumes that minorities are indeed thought to have more entity-like qualities, this finding suggests that undifferentiated category representation of group members may be one important consequence of the perception of entitativity. Relying on yet another paradigm, Coovert and Reeder (1990) asked their participants to form an impression about an individual, a meaningful group, or an aggregate on the basis of two behaviors. Building on the schematic model of social perception (Reeder, 1985; Reeder & Brewer, 1979), they predicted that negative information would receive greater weight in impression formation than would positive information (Skowronski & Carlston, 1987, 1989; Yzerbyt & Leyens, 1991). As expected, participants' judgments revealed a stronger impact of negative information and were thus consistent with the schematic model when the target was an individual or a meaningful group (i.e., an entity) but not when the target was an aggregate.

In sum, people seem to process social information very differently when a group is perceived as having some real existence compared to when a group is seen as a simple aggregate (for a review, see Hamilton & Sherman, 1996). When a group is perceived as being an entity rather than a loosely knit set of people, its members are expected to behave in a more consistent manner, they are thought to be more similar to one another, they are categorized in a more undifferentiated way at the group level, and the discrepant members are assimilated to rather than contrasted from the prototype of the group. Observers also feel more confident about their judgments, requiring less information to make a decision about a member of an entity than about a member of an aggregate (Schadron & Yzerbyt, 1993). One fascinating aspect of the impact that entitativity exerts on social perception is that a number of parallels can be drawn between the perception of an individual and the

perception of entitative groups. Most important in our view, the assumption of entitativity entails the idea that group members can be seen as sharing some underlying essence. It is that essence that is thought to account for the observed behavior.

Essentialism and the Perception of Groups

Subjective essentialism can be defined as the tendency to explain surface features of a category in terms of some unique underlying characteristics (Medin, 1989; Rothbart & Taylor, 1992; Yzerbyt et al., 1997). Clear signs of interest in the idea of essentialism in the stereotyping area can be traced back to Lippmann (1922), the father of the concept of stereotypes, to Sherif (1936), the prominent advocate of the sociofunctional perspective in intergroup relations, and even to Allport (1954), the author of the earliest cognitive analysis of prejudice. Borrowing from the work of Medin (1989; Medin, Goldstone, & Gentner, 1993), Rothbart and Taylor (1992) (see also Anderson & Sedikides, 1991) revived the notion of essentialism in social psychology. These authors argue that, in the case of human artifacts (such as furniture, car, etc.), category membership is based on the possession of a set of arbitrary defining characteristics. In sharp contrast, natural kind categories (such as mammal, gold, etc.) are thought to be organized around underlying essences. Rothbart and Taylor (1992) consider social categories to act more like natural kind than human artifact categories. Social groups may easily be perceived as natural categories when they can be identified on the basis of physical features such as sex, color of the skin, age, and so forth. Supposedly, surface characteristics echo deeper, essential features, which is why category membership is seen as reflecting the members' true identity or their real nature.

Building on these insights, Yzerbyt et al. (1997) presented a subjective essentialistic account of stereotypes. These authors suggest that stereotypes comprise the list of attributes that help describe a particular target group as well as, and perhaps most important, the underlying explanation that links these attributes together (Wittenbrink, Gist, & Hilton, 1994; Yzerbyt & Schadron, 1994). More specifically, stereotypes enable perceivers to understand why the members of a category are what they are and, thus, justify their being treated the way they are. The first idea, what it is that makes the group a group, links group membership to some deep underlying nature of the group members (Medin 1989; Medin et al., 1993; Rothbart & Taylor, 1992). The second idea, how to account for what happens to the group, ties into the work on social attribution (Deschamps, 1973-1974; Oakes et al., 1991; Tajfel, 1969) and refers to the rationalization function of stereotypes (Fiske, 1993a, 1997; Hoffman &

Hurst, 1990; Jost & Banaji, 1994; Tajfel, 1981). In other words, people would justify their stereotypes by referring to an essence being shared by all group members and accounting for their characteristics.

The present research aims to support Yzerbyt et al.'s (1997) argument by showing that the overattribution bias uncovered at the interpersonal level may well have its equivalent at the intergroup level. In other words, we intend to demonstrate that a group may stand as a meaningful causal factor in the context of judgment and allow perceivers to account for the behavior of group members. To the extent that such social attribution takes place, group members will be perceived in a way that helps perceivers rationalize their situation. It is our contention that social attribution will be facilitated by the belief that the group is entitative. Said otherwise, entitativity will lead people to call on an essence that would explain and even reinforce the observed similarities. This process of social attribution should thus facilitate the emergence of stereotypes.

Overview of the Study and Predictions

Participants came to the laboratory in groups and were randomly selected to be members of a questioner group, an answerer group, or an observer group in a quiz game. Each 3-person questioner group and each 3-person answerer group was presented to observers as being either an entitative group or an aggregate. The questioner group first had to compose general knowledge questions to be answered by the answerer group. After the quiz game, observers provided ratings of the 6 contestants as well as of the 2 groups.

We expected to see social attributions and thus a more pronounced fundamental attribution error when the group had a meaningful essence, because this provides a powerful explanation for the behavior of group members. In other words, perceivers who were asked to explain the performance (or the lack of performance) of group members should make an attribution in terms of internal characteristics more easily (or maybe only) when the group is entitative, that is, meaningful and coherent. Because we manipulated the entitativity of both the answerers and the questioners, support for the above hypothesis hinges on the presence of two main effects. Specifically, we expected observers to rate the individual questioners and the group of questioners as a whole as being more knowledgeable when observers faced an entitative group rather than an aggregate. Also, we hoped that observers would rate the individual answerers and the group of answerers as a whole as being less knowledgeable when they were confronted with an entitative answerer group rather than with an aggregate.

METHOD

Participants

Taking part in the experiment were 324 first-year students at the University of Massachusetts. To avoid the intrusion of gender stereotypes regarding knowledge about the topics involved (sports and entertainment), only female students took part in the study. Also, the use of first-year students reduced the likelihood that the participants knew the other participants in the same session, which would spoil the credibility of the deception (see below). We did not want participants to suspect that they came from the same university. Therefore, all participants were recruited over the phone. To further enhance the credibility of the deception, participants were then individually asked, "You come from UMass, right?" This question was intended to make clear that the experimenter knew which university they were coming from and that the other participants of the session could belong to one of several other institutions. Participants played the role of questioner, answerer, or observer. The reported data only concern those 131 participants who were assigned the role of observer.¹ Because each session was composed of 6 participants in addition to the observer(s), some observers happened to know the other participants enough to be aware that they did not actually come from the alleged school. Also, some of the observers did not believe that the role assignment was random. In total, 108 observers proved to be nonsuspicious about our manipulations.

Procedure

Participants arrived at the lab in groups of 7 to 12 students and were greeted by two experimenters. One of the experimenters checked the participants' names on the basis of a sign-up list and informed them that they were going to take part in a quiz game. To that end, the participants were divided into three different groups. The random nature of this process was made clear to the participants: The names were picked out of a bowl. Three participants were assigned the role of questioner, 3 were assigned the role of answerer, and the remaining participants received the role of observer. The 3 questioners were seated next to each other on one side of the room, and the 3 answerers were seated next to each other on the other side of the room. The observers, also seated together, faced the contestants. The observers were requested to watch carefully what was happening without making any comments. Within each group, including the observers, all participants were separated from one another by dividers.

The second experimenter, who was blind to the manipulations, next explained that the students taking part

in the study came from all five colleges of the Amherst area because of the difficulty of finding volunteers. It was also emphasized that students coming from different schools were different but that this diversity was a good thing for the experiment. Then she explained the procedure for the quiz game. The 3 questioners first had to generate questions. They were free to think of any question within the topics of sports and entertainment. Following Ross et al.'s (1977) instructions, they were requested to come up with difficult and challenging questions, although not unfair ones. Importantly, these instructions were given in the presence of all participants. Questioners took a few minutes to prepare their questions individually without talking, whereas the other participants were given college newspapers to help pass the time.

In the meantime, the first experimenter prepared table tents (folded name labels) to put in front of each participant (questioners, answerers, and observers). These table tents had two sides. One side, which was seen by everybody in the room, indicated only the person's first name. The other side, which was facing the participant, included information about the 6 contestants: their first names and the school they each allegedly came from (this information was manipulated; see below) and could be seen by that person only. This allowed participants to read which school the contestants came from and constituted our manipulation of the entitativity of the groups. Depending on the specific condition, the questioner group and/or the answerer group were presented as an entitative group or an aggregate. If all 3 questioners came from the same school, the group of questioners was entitative. If the 3 questioners came from different schools, the group was an aggregate. The same held for the group of answerers. When one group was entitative, the 3 students could (allegedly) come from University of Massachusetts or from another school (Amherst College). The design was thus a 2 (aggregate vs. entitative questioners) \times 2 (aggregate vs. entitative answerers) between-subjects design. After the first experimenter finished taping the table tents in front of each participant, the second experimenter, who was blind to the manipulation of entitativity, read aloud only the names of the 6 contestants while the participants followed along on the list.

The quiz game then began. A questioner, one at a time, asked a question to an answerer, both being picked in turn by the experimenter. The answerers could help each other by handing the respondent a slip of paper with the answer if they knew it. The questioners could also help each other by sharing the questions they prepared. If nobody could answer, the questioner gave the right answer after 10 seconds. At the end of the game, the experimenter summarized for participants how

many correct answers each answerer had provided. All participants were then asked to fill out a questionnaire. In this questionnaire, they had to evaluate the contestants' performance. Finally, participants were debriefed, given their credits, and thanked.

Dependent Measures

Knowledge ratings. We expected entitativity of the target group to moderate the extent to which observers made dispositional inferences about the individual group members as well as about the group as a whole. Therefore, observers evaluated each questioner, the group of questioners as a whole, each answerer, and the group of answerers as a whole. Following Ross et al. (1977), they rated both general knowledge and ability (to ask or answer questions) on a scale ranging from 1 (*much worse than average*) to 7 (*much better than average*).

Manipulation check. Participants were asked to indicate which school each contestant came from, how the questioners and answerers were selected, and who provided the questions for the quiz game. Finally, the participants were asked a series of questions evaluating their degree of suspicion. We excluded participants from the analyses if they expressed doubts on any of these items.

RESULTS

Manipulation Checks

Examination of the manipulation checks revealed that 96% of the observers correctly remembered that the questioners' group was either an entitative group or an aggregate (depending on the condition). Similarly, 94.1% correctly remembered that the answerers' group was either an entitative group or an aggregate. Also, 92% of people correctly indicated that the questioners composed the questions, and 96% remembered the random nature of people's assignment to groups. The analyses with or without the people who did not remember correctly led to identical results. Therefore, the data presented below include all 108 observers.

Knowledge Ratings

The evaluations of the 6 individual contestants allowed us to check for the presence of overattribution bias at the individual level. In addition, the perception of the groups provided crucial information as far as stereotyping is concerned. Therefore, the results for the individual members and for the groups of questioners and answerers in general are examined in turn.

Ratings of the individual members. Because the measures of general knowledge and ability to ask (or answer) questions correlated significantly, we created a global knowledge index by computing their mean. Also, the

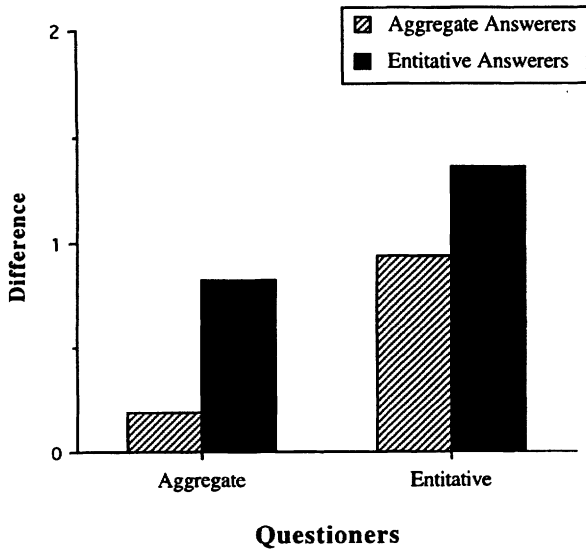


Figure 1 Difference in evaluation between questioners and answerers as a function of the entitativity of questioners and the entitativity of answerers.

ratings for the 3 questioners on one hand and the ratings for the 3 answerers on the other hand were averaged.

First, we examined the difference between the index ratings of the questioners and the index ratings of the answerers. As expected and replicating the well-known fundamental attribution error, this difference proved to be significantly different from zero, $t(107) = 8.23, p < .01$. Globally, the questioners were thought to be more knowledgeable than the answerers (see Figure 1). To subsequently test the specific contrast in which we were interested, the difference was first analyzed using an ANOVA with the entitativity of questioners and the entitativity of answerers as between-subjects variables. The presence of two significant main effects confirmed our hypotheses. Indeed, the difference between questioners and answerers was larger when the group of questioners was an entitative group as opposed to an aggregate, $F(1, 104) = 7.38, p < .01$. Similarly, the difference between questioners and answerers was larger when observers were confronted with an entitative group of answerers rather than an aggregate, $F(1, 104) = 5.11, p < .03$.

We expected to find a larger difference when both groups were entitative than when both groups were aggregates, with the two other conditions falling in between. To test this prediction in a more focused way, we computed a planned contrast opposing participants confronted with two entitative groups and those confronted with two aggregates (contrast weights: -1, 0, 0, +1). This contrast came out highly significant, $F(1, 104) = 9.49, p < .003$, residual $F(2, 104) < 1, ns$. The pattern of means

TABLE 1: Perception of the Individual Questioners as a Function of the Entitativity of the Group of Answerers and the Group of Questioners

Questioners	Answerers	
	Aggregate	Entitative
Aggregate ^a	4.76	4.67
Entitative	5.04	4.95

a. Mean evaluation ranges from 1 (*much worse than average*) to 7 (*much better than average*).

was totally consistent with our predictions. The difference in the evaluations of both groups was smallest, $M = .19$, and nonsignificant when the group of answerers and the group of questioners were aggregates, $t(12) = .77, p > .45$. In contrast, the difference in the evaluations of both groups was largest, $M = 1.36$, and highly significant when both groups were entitative, $t(27) = 5.07, p < .01$. When one of the two groups was entitative and the other was an aggregate, the difference was moderate, $M = .83, t(35) = 4.69, p < .01$, and $M = .94, t(30) = 5.32, p < .01$.

Were the questioners perceived as being particularly knowledgeable when they came from an entitative group, or were the answerers especially underestimated when they came from an entitative group? Alternatively, did both of these phenomena occur at the same time? We examined these possibilities by looking at the ratings for the questioners and the answerers separately. First, we analyzed the observers' ratings of the questioners by way of a 2×2 factorial ANOVA using entitativity of the questioners (entitative group vs. aggregate) and entitativity of the answerers (entitative group vs. aggregate) as the two between-subjects factors. Our prediction was that the questioners would be perceived to be more knowledgeable when the group of questioners was meaningful than when the group of questioners was an aggregate. Although the main effect of questioners' entitativity was only marginally significant, $F(1, 104) = 3.16, p < .08$, the means confirmed that the entitative group of questioners, $M = 5.00$,² was indeed rated to be more knowledgeable than the aggregates of questioners, $M = 4.69$ (see Table 1).

We then performed a similar 2×2 ANOVA using the observers' ratings of the answerers as the dependent variable. Our prediction was that the observers would rate the answerers as being less knowledgeable when the answerers were members of an entitative group as opposed to an aggregate. This prediction was borne out. Indeed, a significant main effect of answerers' entitativity, $F(1, 104) = 9.62, p < .01$, revealed that the members of an entitative group of answerers, $M = 3.71$, were evaluated less positively than the members of an aggregate of answerers, $M = 4.33$ (see Table 2). We also found

TABLE 2: Perception of the Individual Answerers as a Function of the Entitativity of the Group of Answerers and the Group of Questioners

Questioners	Answerers	
	Aggregate	Entitative
Aggregate ^a	4.56	3.83
Entitative	4.10	3.59

a. Mean evaluation ranges from 1 (*much worse than average*) to 7 (*much better than average*).

a marginally significant main effect of questioners' entitativity, $F(1, 104) = 3.18$, $p < .08$, revealing that answerers were evaluated more negatively when confronted with an entitative group of questioners, $M = 3.84$, than with an aggregate of questioners, $M = 4.20$.

Ratings of the groups. As for the individual ratings, we first looked at the difference between the group of questioners and the group of answerers. Again, this difference was significantly different from zero, $t(107) = 7.81$, $p < .01$. In line with the fundamental attribution error, the questioners were thus more positively evaluated than the answerers. Also consistent with previous analyses, an ANOVA with the entitativity of questioners and the entitativity of answerers as between-subjects variables revealed two significant main effects. First, as predicted, the difference between questioners and answerers was larger when the group of questioners was an entity instead of an aggregate, $F(1, 104) = 8.22$, $p < .005$. Second, also as predicted, the difference between questioners and answerers was larger when observers were confronted with an entitative group of answerers rather than an aggregate of answerers, $F(1, 104) = 4.65$, $p < .04$.

Again, the a priori contrast opposing participants confronted with two entitative groups and those confronted with two aggregates (contrast weights: $-1, 0, 0, 1$) was highly significant, $F(1, 104) = 9.67$, $p < .003$, residual $F(2, 104) < 1$, *ns*. The differences between the ratings of the group of questioners and the group of answerers displayed the expected pattern. Specifically, the difference in the evaluations of both groups was smallest, $M = .12$, and nonsignificant when the answerer group and the questioner group were aggregates, $t(12) = .36$, $p > .72$. In contrast, the difference in the evaluations of both groups was largest, $M = 1.54$, and highly significant when both groups were entitative, $t(27) = 5.36$, $p < .01$. When one of the two group was entitative and the other was an aggregate, the difference was moderate, $M = .94$, $t(35) = 4.65$, $p < .01$ and $M = 1.15$, $t(30) = 4.41$, $p < .01$.

The perception of the group of questioners was examined by way of a 2×2 factorial ANOVA using entitativity of the questioners (entitative group vs. aggregate) and

entitativity of the answerers (entitative group vs. aggregate) as the two between-subjects factors. This time, the perception of the questioners was not significantly affected by the entitativity of the group, $F(1, 104) = 1.23$, $p > .26$. In contrast and consistent with predictions, the ANOVA on the perception of answerers revealed that the answerers indeed were rated less positively when their group was entitative, $M = 3.94$, than when it was an aggregate, $M = 4.71$, $F(1, 104) = 9.97$, $p < .01$. Moreover, a significant main effect of questioners' entitativity, $F(1, 104) = 6.22$, $p < .02$, indicated that answerers were judged more negatively when confronted with an entitative group of questioners, $M = 4.02$, than with an aggregate of questioners, $M = 4.63$.

The Impact of Group Membership

Depending on the specific condition, the observers were led to believe that the questioners were issued from their own university, from another school, or were an aggregate of students coming from various schools. In each of these situations, the corresponding group of answerers was presented either as an aggregate or as an entitative group. An interesting feature of this design is that it allowed us to examine the impact of group membership on the observers' evaluations of the questioners both as a group and individually. A similar analysis could be performed for the perception of the answerers. Indeed, our observers were informed that the answerers came from their own university, from another school, or were an aggregate of students coming from various schools. In each of these situations, the corresponding group of questioners was presented either as an aggregate or as an entitative group.

Ratings of the individual members. First, we analyzed the average perception of the three questioners in a 3×2 factorial ANOVA using the origin of the group of questioners (own school vs. other school vs. various schools) and the entitativity of the answerers (entitative group vs. aggregate) as the two between-subjects factors. The origin of the group of questioners only marginally affected observers' perceptions, $F(2, 102) = 2.66$, $p < .08$. Post hoc comparisons using Tukey's HSD revealed that the observers rated questioners coming from their own university significantly higher, $M = 5.12$, than questioners coming from various schools, $M = 4.71$, with their perception of the questioners from another school, $M = 4.84$, falling in between.

We also submitted the average perception of the three answerers to a 3×2 factorial ANOVA using origin of the group of answerers (own school vs. other school vs. various schools) and entitativity of the questioners (entitative group vs. aggregate) as the two between-subjects factors. As predicted, the origin of the group of answerers significantly affected the ratings made by the ob-

servers, $F(2, 102) = 7.43, p < .01$. Not surprisingly, the observers gave the lowest evaluations to the answerers coming from another school, $M = 3.46$. Post hoc comparisons using Tukey's HSD indicated that the ratings of the answerers coming from various schools were significantly less unfavorable, $M = 4.23$. The perception of the answerers coming from the same university as the observers fell in between, $M = 4.00$. More interestingly, a planned contrast opposing the perception of the answerers coming from various schools to the perception of the answerers in the two other conditions was highly significant, $t(102) = 3.04, p < .003$, indicating that answerers were judged to be less incompetent when they were members of an aggregate rather than members of an entitative group.

An alternative way to look at observers' ratings of the individual questioners and answerers provides useful information regarding the joint impact of group membership and entitativity of the target group on observers' perceptions. Indeed, we examined the ratings of the questioners and answerers when they allegedly came from the observers' university, from another school, or when they were said to be members of aggregates. In other words, the ratings were analyzed by way of a 3×2 ANOVA using role (questioners vs. answerers) and target of judgment (own university vs. other school vs. various schools).³ The presence of a significant target of judgment effect, $F(2, 76) = 5.65, p < .006$, confirmed the impact of group membership on observers' evaluations. Post hoc comparisons using Tukey HSD indicated that the students allegedly belonging to the other school were judged less favorably, $M = 3.92$, than those who attended either the same university as the observers, $M = 4.62$, or various schools, $M = 4.66$; the two latter groups were judged similarly. Also, a highly significant role main effect, $F(1, 76) = 20.20, p < .0001$, revealed that the questioners were perceived to be more competent, $M = 4.85$, than the answerers, $M = 3.95$. More important, these two effects were qualified by the predicted interaction between role and target of judgment, $F(2, 76) = 3.08, p < .06$. As can be seen on Figure 2, a series of planned contrasts revealed that the role of the contestants had no consequence for observers' ratings when the groups comprised members from various schools, $t = .54, ns$. Quite a different picture emerged when both the group of questioners and the group of answerers were composed of members from the same school. Questioners were rated more favorably than answerers both when they were allegedly members of the same university, $t(76) = 3.65, p < .001$, and when they were said to be members of another school, $t(76) = 3.65, p < .001$.

Ratings of the groups. As for the individual ratings, we first examined the perception of the group of questioners in a 3×2 factorial ANOVA using the origin of the

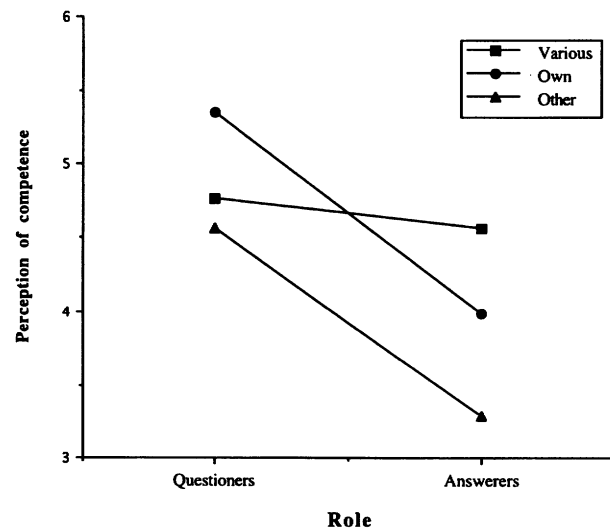


Figure 2 Perceptions of competence as a function of role and target of judgment.

group of questioners (own school vs. other school vs. various schools) and the entitativity of the answerers (entitative group vs. aggregate) as the two between-subjects factors. The interaction between the origin of the group of questioners and the entitativity of the answerers came out significant, $F(2, 102) = 3.54, p < .04$. Interestingly, test of simple effects confirmed that the origin of the group of questioners influenced observers' ratings when the group of answerers was entitative, $F(2, 61) = 4.81, p < .02$, but not when the group of answerers was presented as an aggregate, $F(2, 61) < 1, ns$. Post hoc comparisons using Tukey's HSD indicated that the observers confronted with an entitative group of answerers rated questioners coming from their own university significantly higher, $M = 5.69$, than questioners from either another, $M = 4.79$, or various schools, $M = 5.06$. The latter ratings were not significantly different from each other.

Next, we submitted the average perception of the group of answerers to a 3×2 factorial ANOVA using origin of the group of answerers (own school vs. other school vs. various schools) and entitativity of the questioners (entitative group vs. aggregate) as the two between-subjects factors. In line with predictions, the origin of the group of answerers significantly affected the ratings made by the observers, $F(2, 102) = 10.45, p < .0001$. As before, the observers gave the lowest ratings to the answerers coming from another school, $M = 3.51$. Post hoc comparisons using Tukey's HSD further indicated that the ratings of the group of answerers coming from the observers' own school, $M = 4.43$, or from various

schools, $M = 4.71$, were significantly less unfavorable. Again, a planned contrast comparing the perception of the aggregate group of answerers to the perception of the group of answerers in the two other conditions emerged as significant, $t(102) = 3.15$, $p < .003$, confirming that the groups of answerers appeared to be less incompetent when they were presented as aggregates rather than as entitative groups.

Again, we analyzed observers' ratings of the groups of questioners and answerers to evaluate the joint impact of group membership and entitativity of the target group on observers' perceptions. Specifically, we examined the ratings of the questioners and answerers when they allegedly came from the observers' university, from another school, or when they were said to be members of aggregates. In other words, the ratings were analyzed by way of a 3×2 ANOVA using role (questioners vs. answerers) and target of judgment (own university vs. other school vs. various schools). The results of this analysis entirely confirmed the findings obtained using the mean ratings of the individual members as our dependent variable. First, the presence of a significant target of judgment effect, $F(2, 76) = 10.99$, $p < .001$, confirmed the impact of group membership on observers' evaluations. Post hoc comparisons using Tukey's HSD indicated that the students allegedly belonging to the other school were judged less favorably, $M = 4.04$, than those who attended either the same university as the observers, $M = 5.05$, or various schools, $M = 5.21$. No difference was observed between the two latter groups. Second, we found a highly significant role main effect, $F(1, 76) = 18.82$, $p < .0001$. The means unambiguously show that the questioners came across as being more competent, $M = 5.25$, than the answerers, $M = 4.28$. More crucially, these two main effects were qualified by the predicted interaction between role and target of judgment, $F(2, 76) = 3.68$, $p < .03$. A series of planned contrasts confirmed that the role of the contestants had no impact on observers' ratings when the groups comprised members from various schools, that is, aggregates, $t = .29$, *ns*. Things were radically different when the groups of questioners and answerers were both described to comprise members of the same school, that is, entitative groups. Questioners were rated more favorably than answerers both when they were said to be members of the same university, $t(76) = 3.33$, $p < .001$, and when they were allegedly members of another school, $t(76) = 3.95$, $p < .001$.

DISCUSSION

In a quiz game, observers were confronted with questioners and answerers. Unknown to the contestants, the observers were led to believe that the questioners and the answerers were members of either entitative groups or aggregates. Our hypothesis was that the perceived

entitativity of the group would lead observers to fall prey to the overattribution bias. In line with our predictions, results indicate that the observers rated the abilities of the answerers to be lower when the contestants belonged to an entitative group as opposed to an aggregate. Conversely, they evaluated the abilities of the entitative questioners to be higher than the abilities of the aggregated questioners. The data further revealed that the difference between the two groups was strongest when both groups were entitative and totally absent when both groups were aggregates. In other words, we replicated the classic fundamental attribution error reported by Ross et al. (1977) when the contestants were members of an entitative group. In contrast, the fundamental attribution error was not observed when the questioners and answerers were both members of aggregates. It thus seems that a significant bias will emerge only when people are confronted with a meaningful entity, whether it is a group entity (as in the present study) or an individual entity (as in Ross et al.'s study). The attributional bias is significantly weaker if not totally absent when perceivers face a loosely knit set of people. Globally, our results suggest that the group an individual belongs to may provide an explanation for the individual's performance. Group members who are in an easy or favorable role are perceived as even more knowledgeable to the extent that they come from a meaningful and coherent group. Conversely, group members who find themselves in a less favorable role are perceived as even less knowledgeable when they belong to a meaningful group.

The finding that participants displayed no bias when they were confronted with an aggregate deserves attention in its own right. According to Kelley's (1967) attributional model, the presence of behavioral consensus minimizes the viability of an attribution to the person and favors instead an interpretation of the behavior in terms of the situation or the stimulus. Interestingly, our data suggest that this specific impact of consensus is limited to those settings in which the observed people are considered to be individual members of an aggregate and not when they are perceived to be members of an entitative group. When perceivers see the targets as belonging to a meaningful and coherent social category, they may well fail to build on the targets' consensual reactions to make an attribution to the stimulus or to the situation. In contrast, membership to an entitative group may encourage observers to explain consensual behavior in terms of a deep underlying characteristic common to all group members. Our findings thus suggest that the entitativity of a group directly influences people's attributional work. The consensual nature of behavior may prevent dispositional attributions only insofar as it

is observed at the corresponding level of entity—individual or group.

Our data reveal the impact of group membership on perceptions in that observers were more complimentary about questioners coming from their own rather than from another institution. Similarly, observers reported less negative evaluations about answerers belonging to their university than to another school. Importantly, however, the existence of what appears to be a group-serving pattern of evaluations did not prevent entitativity of the groups to play a role. Indeed, whereas observers confronted with aggregates did not make a difference between questioners and answerers, observers facing entitative groups rated the questioners more favorably than the answerers. This difference emerged whether or not the target group was composed of students belonging to the same university as the observers. Clearly, the present pattern suggests that entitativity and group membership combine to shape the observers' perception.

Our study offers the first demonstration that the perception of group entitativity leads perceivers to remain insensitive to the situation. Instead, confrontation with a closely knit set of people encourages perceivers to overestimate the impact of shared group characteristics on behavior. The present data add to a growing body of evidence showing that the fundamental attribution error may be involved in the emergence of stereotypes. For instance, Allison and colleagues (Allison & Messick, 1985; Allison, Mackie, & Messick, 1996) conducted numerous studies revealing the existence of what they call a group attribution error, that is, a tendency to assume that group decisions and outcomes reflect group members' attitudes. According to these authors, the assumption of decision-attitude correspondence may often be erroneous because group outcomes are determined not only by group members' attitudes but also by a series of external constraints that could influence the outcome (Allison & Kerr, 1994).

Other strands of research also suggest that overattribution biases shape the content of stereotypic expectations. Eagly's (1987) social roles theory suggests that males' and females' differential representations in agentic versus communal social roles contribute to gender stereotypes. Role-correspondent qualities are attributed to men and women despite the fact that people are often consigned to roles rather than are free to choose them (Eagly & Steffen, 1984). In a related vein, Humphrey (1985) tested the idea that people who are located high in the organizational hierarchy and who perform high-skill level tasks are perceived more favorably than others of equal ability (see also Sande, Ellard, & Ross, 1986). Our own results complement these various research efforts in that they additionally stress the role of entitativity on social attribution. Indeed, the spontaneous ex-

planation of other people's performance takes on a more essentialistic tone provided that people face what they believe to be an entitative group.

The impact of entitativity on social attribution evidenced in the present study may be related to the individual-group discontinuity phenomenon discussed by Insko and colleagues (Insko, Hoyle, Pinkley, & Hong, 1988; Insko, Pinkley, Hoyle, & Dalton, 1987; for a review, see Insko & Schopler, 1987) in the context of the prisoner's dilemma game. These authors claim that intergroup compared to interindividual interactions results in less cooperative behavior. From our perspective, the aspect of their work that is most relevant is their identification of a series of conditions that turn a one-on-one interaction into a group-on-group interaction. For instance, Insko et al. (1988) had sets of three individuals interact with sets of three other individuals during 10 versions of a PDG matrix. The study comprised a total of five experimental conditions. A first outcome-interdependence condition had the individuals interact with individuals and only share their earnings. In a second condition, called contact condition, the members of the same group were moved in one room and shared earnings. In the discussion condition, the members of the same group were in one room and were asked to discuss their PDG choices. A fourth condition, consensus, had participants reach consensus concerning their choices. Finally, in a group-all condition, all three members of the groups were involved at the same time in a center-room interaction. In line with predictions, the participants in the consensus and the group-all conditions were significantly less cooperative than the participants in the three other conditions and, in fact, "behaved in fundamentally different ways" (Insko et al., 1988, p. 516).

Another finding of our study is that to provide an account of their behavior, our participants tended to incriminate the nature of group members more when the observers were evaluating the answerers rather than the questioners. This phenomenon is reminiscent of the finding that people tend to derogate others who are victims of negative events (Lerner, 1980). This pattern of results is totally consistent with a recent series of experiments (Schadron, Morchain, & Yzerbyt, 1996; Yzerbyt, Schadron, & Morchain, 1994), in which people also erroneously used group membership as an explanation of the situation of group members. Participants had to form an impression of six people described either as an entitative group or as an aggregate of randomly selected people. These people happened to have either a positive or a negative fate (something good or bad was about to happen to them). Results showed that the negative-fate people were judged less positively than their lucky counterparts, but consistent with the present perspective, this happened only if they were seen to be

members of an entitative group. It is the idea that you deserve what you get and even what you are that is most reassuring. Such a rationalization or justification function is an important point for present purposes. Indeed, it seems crucial for people to consider that things happening in the world have an explanation (Jost & Banaji, 1994).

Hoffman and Hurst (1990) also referred to the justification hypothesis to explain the origin of gender stereotypes. These authors disagree with the kernel-of-truth hypothesis stating that gender stereotypes would reflect, albeit in exaggerated forms, observed differences between males and females. Instead, they suggest that gender stereotypes arise to justify the differences in social roles (men are more likely to be breadwinners and women homemakers). This hypothesis was supported in two experiments that provided participants with descriptions of members of two fictional categories, one consisting of a majority of city workers and a minority of child raisers and vice-versa. Importantly, participants formed role-based category stereotypes, even though the members of the two groups did not differ in personality traits. The effects were especially strong when the categories were biologically defined and when the participants had to think of an explanation for the category-role correlation. This study perfectly shows the rationalization function of stereotypes. These explain and help maintain the current state: Why should people change if females and males are particularly well suited for their jobs? In this view, it helps to consider these differences as being biological in nature. Once again, the link with essentialism seems obvious.

Although the idea that an individual or, as we argued here, a group possesses an essence has generally been manipulated situationally, it can also be considered as an individual difference. According to Dweck and colleagues (see, for instance, Dweck, Hong, & Chiu, 1993; Erdley & Dweck, 1993), people vary in the degree to which they view individuals' characteristics as based on a rigid essence. Specifically, these authors suggest that some individuals (entity theorists) hold the implicit theory of personality that traits are fixed, core dispositions, whereas others (incremental theorists) believe that traits are malleable. Such a distinction is clearly linked to the idea of subjective essentialism. Entity theorists have higher degrees of essentialistic perception than do incremental theorists. For instance, Chiu, Hong, and Dweck (1997) recently showed that entity theorists drew strong, often global dispositional inferences, even in the face of limited or contradictory evidence, which is a tendency known as lay dispositionalism (Ross & Nisbett, 1991). In contrast, the dispositional inferences of the incremental theorists were less frequent and of a different nature,

namely more specific and context dependent. This line of research provides important convergent evidence that essentialistic (or entity) perception has an influence on the attribution process.

Another lesson to be learned from the present study is that people often favor explanations that refer to deep characteristics of people or groups (Eberhardt & Randall, 1997; Fiske, 1997; Rothbart & Taylor, 1992; Yzerbyt et al., 1997; Yzerbyt, Rogier, & Rocher, in press). Even when other factors would objectively be more relevant to explain people's behavior, they do not seem as important or as essential factors—especially when the behavior is consequential. A fascinating illustration of this phenomenon can be found in a study by Steinberg (1974). This author examined the relation between religious background and the selection of university field in the United States. He found that Protestants outnumber other religious groups in traditional scientific fields (such as agriculture, technical schools, chemistry, geography, etc.), that Catholics are more numerous in the humanities (such as art, philosophy, foreign languages, history, etc.), and that Jews are relatively more present in medical schools and behavioral sciences (such as law, economics, sociology, psychology, etc.). Building on a long tradition in sociology linking the choice of curricula and religious background (cf. Weber, 1964), Steinberg (1974) suggests that the cultural values stressed in the various religious groups easily account for this state of affairs. Interesting as it may seem, this interpretation has not gone unchallenged. Friedman (1983) showed that a combination of the collective mobility of Protestants, Catholics, and Jews in North American society and the successive waves of expansion within the academic world, two phenomena that prove to be largely independent, provides an excellent account for the observed data. According to Friedman, it is when positions in behavioral sciences were made available that young generations of Jews accessed higher education. Again, people seem quite reluctant to explain important facts of group life by referring to irrelevant—not to say meaningless—variables. Deep features of the groups seem the only acceptable way to account for critical phenomena. Because the choice of a scientific field clearly stands as a consequential behavior, it ought to be grounded in factors that truly and significantly differentiate between the three religious groups. This happens despite the fact that a conjunction of random factors may together contribute to generate the observed pattern.

CONCLUSION

The present study offers solid evidence that membership in an entitative group provides an explanation for the performance of individual members. As a conse-

quence, the situational determinants are less taken into account, despite their objective impact. Our findings thus extend earlier work on the fundamental attribution error (Ross et al., 1977) and suggest that perceivers attribute the behavior of group members to shared dispositional characteristics. People are thus likely to be evaluated as unintelligent, incompetent, and the like when the circumstances induce bad performance. When, in contrast, the situation causes behavior to look positive, people are thought to possess the correspondent qualities. Moreover, such social attribution is more likely to take place when the target people belong to an entitative group. The extent to which perceivers end up relying on such group dispositions to justify discrimination, exclusion, and racist behaviors is difficult if not impossible to evaluate. Nevertheless, we are convinced that many stereotypic beliefs find their origin in the simple but powerful mechanism of social attribution.

NOTES

1. Of course, it would be interesting to see how the manipulation of entitativity influences the perception of the questioners and the answerers by the contestants themselves. Regarding this issue, it is important to note that the experiment was not aimed at collecting these data in a neat way. Specifically, the design was far from being complete from the point of view of the questioner and answerer participants, all of whom were University of Massachusetts students, simply because we could not pretend that their own group was from, say, Amherst College. These difficulties put aside, we still had several hypotheses concerning the data of the contestants. Our first prediction was that the perception of one's own group would not be very strongly influenced by the manipulation. There are a number of reasons for this prediction, one being that people not only tend to avoid making an overattribution bias for themselves but that the group setting also makes salient the fact that the others can equally fail to answer or to ask neat questions. As far as the perception of the other group is concerned, we only expected an effect to emerge for the answerers. This is in line with Ross et al.'s (1977) findings that questioners do not fall prey to the fundamental attribution error. In line with this prediction and consistent with our main argument regarding the role of entitativity, we found that answerers overevaluated the questioners only when the latter were part of an entitative group.

2. Because different numbers of participants ended up in the various cells of the design, all means involving more than one cell are least square means.

3. This analysis rests on the perceptions provided by those observers who found themselves in the appropriate conditions. Also, we relied on a factorial design even though each observer provided us with more than one judgment. This approach is not only more conservative, it also simplifies matters.

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