

Judgeability Concerns: The Interplay of Information, Applicability, and Accountability in the Overattribution Bias

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In 3 studies, the authors examined the impact of judgeability concerns in the overattribution bias (OAB; G. A. Quattrone, 1982) by manipulating the presence–absence of a constrained essay, the participants' accountability, and the applicability of the available information. A constrained essay was neither necessary nor sufficient to anchor a judgment. When no essay was circulated, no OAB occurred in the cases of accountability or of inapplicability (Studies 1 and 2). When the essay was provided, however, both accountability and inapplicability were needed to eliminate the OAB (Studies 2 and 3). These findings did not result from conversational rules or demand characteristics. They illustrate that people control the expression of a judgment made under uncertainty; people express the judgment to the extent they feel entitled to do so. The results are discussed in the wider context of current multistage models of the dispositional inference process.

Three centuries ago, La Rochefoucauld pointed at a striking contradiction. Ironically, the French moralist noticed that “every-one complains about his memory, but no one complains about his judgment” (1665/1987, p. 58). Far from being limited to La Rochefoucauld's contemporaries, this aphorism anticipated one of the most documented observations of social cognition: people's inclination to bias information processing. An alternative reading of the aphorism may suggest another track for the comprehension of human judgments: People do not complain about their judgment because they judge only to the extent they feel entitled to do so. Said otherwise, judgments are often elaborated on questionable grounds, but they are expressed only to the extent they are deemed adequate by those who hold them. After all, it is precisely because biased judgments are assumed to be right that they are fallacious, and people are never more wrong than when they sincerely think they are right.

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The present article deals with one of the most famous biases in social perception, called *fundamental error* (Ross, 1977), *correspondence bias* (Gilbert, 1998; Gilbert & Malone, 1995), or *overattribution bias* (OAB; Quattrone, 1982). More precisely, we examined how the feeling that one is in a position to make a correct judgment is influenced by the richness of the information, the applicability of the information, and the accountability of the participants.

The best known explanation of the OAB is the anchoring-insufficient adjustment heuristic (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). Already in 1979, Jones suggested that perceivers spontaneously draw dispositional inferences consistent with the writer's behavior but do not complete the adjustment when needed, that is, when the writer's behavior is influenced by the situation (see also Quattrone, 1982). Jones did not feel totally at ease with this explanation of the OAB. As he noted, “In this appeal to insufficient adjustment, I realize I have called on one error as an explanation for another” (Jones, 1979, p. 115). Subsequent research on the OAB set out to explain the lack of sufficient adjustment. Although authors vary in their specific explanations, all current models share the view that the correction of the dispositional inference is more demanding than the initial characterization of the target (Gilbert, 1989, 1998; Gilbert & Malone, 1995; Gilbert, Pelham, & Krull, 1988; Kruglanski, 1990; Trope, 1986).

So far, however, the literature has been much more explicit about the adjustment than about the anchoring stage. Many studies have dealt with factors that influence the correction stage (e.g., d'Agostino & Fincher-Kiefer, 1992; Gilbert et al., 1988; Gilbert & Silvera, 1996; Exp. 2c; Krull, 1993; Tetlock, 1985; Webster, 1993; Yost & Weary, 1996), but much less research has been devoted to those factors that influence the perceivers' propensity to use polarized dispositional anchors. This state of affairs is not surprising.

Because of its spontaneity, the anchoring stage is generally considered to be beyond the experimenter's control. As a consequence, researchers often choose to focus on the later steps of the process. Two notable exceptions are Quattrone's and Trope's work.

Quattrone (1982) induced a situational anchor (and, as a consequence, a situational OAB) when people formed an impression about the situation instead of about the actor (see also Krull, 1993; Krull & Erickson, 1995; Webster, 1993). Trope (1986; Trope & Alfieri, 1997; Trope, Cohen, & Alfieri, 1991; Trope, Cohen, & Maoz, 1988) showed that situational cues may be processed in such a way as to increase the OAB in the case of ambiguous behavior. Situational information may indeed contribute to the identification of the behavior and have a stronger impact at this early stage than when it contributes to the correction of the dispositional inference.

Quattrone's and Trope's studies greatly improved our understanding of the anchoring stage. However, the various factors leading to the polarization of the dispositional anchor remain largely unspecified; this is particularly the case when people form an impression about the constrained author of an unambiguous behavior. We hypothesized that polarized dispositional anchors are selected when the participants' feeling of judgeability about the target is high. Conversely, low dispositional anchors, or no judgments at all, are expected in situations that convey a limited feeling of judgeability about the target. *Social judgeability theory* (Leyens, Yzerbyt, & Schadrin, 1992, 1994; Yzerbyt, Schadrin, Leyens, & Rocher, 1994) refers notably to the fact that people rely on a series of culturally shared rules before expressing a judgment (e.g., Yzerbyt, Leyens, & Schadrin, 1997) and that this judgment must have an explanatory value for the situation at hand (for a review, see Yzerbyt, Dardenne, & Leyens, 1998).

Unlike classical anchoring-adjustment research on numerical estimations (Jacowitz & Kahneman, 1995), participants in OAB studies are in a state of great uncertainty about where to anchor their initial estimations. Such uncertainty is ideal to test social judgeability by manipulating three variables: richness of information, applicability of the information, and accountability of the participants.

Richness of Information, Applicability, and Accountability

A first explanation of the OAB pointed at the presence of a high-quality essay in the context of judgment (Jones & Harris, 1967, p. 13). In theory, only convinced writers should be able to elaborate adequate arguments. Later research has shown that high quality of the essay is not a necessary factor of the OAB (e.g., Snyder & Jones, 1974) although it certainly contributes to it (e.g., Jones, Worchel, Goethals, & Grumet, 1971; Miller, Ashton, & Mishal, 1990; Miller & Rorer, 1982; Miller, Schmidt, Meyer, & Colella, 1984). It is interesting that a noninformative description (i.e., a bogus personality profile) of the writer was sufficient to provoke an OAB in the absence of an essay (Ajzen, Dalto, & Blyth, 1979). Conversely, Fein, Hilton, and Miller (1990) circulated a convincing essay but led their participants to believe that the essay might have been so written for ingratiating reasons: This suspicion of ulterior motive prevented any OAB (see also Fein, 1996; J. L. Hilton, Fein, & Miller, 1993). Finally, Leyens, Yzerbyt,

and Corneille (1996) obtained an OAB in the absence of an essay and of any information concerning the writer. These different sets of data suggest that information about an actor is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for attributing an attitude corresponding to an actor's constrained behavior.

Leyens et al. (1996) accounted for their results by referring to the concepts of priming and applicability (Higgins, 1996). They noted that OAB studies were generally presented to participants as dealing with some kind of personality perception or clinical intuition. They also confirmed that the traditional controversial issues (e.g., abortion, euthanasia) that had been used in these studies were explainable in terms of personality: When asked what factor could explain the fact that people were, for instance, in favor of (or against) euthanasia, the vast majority of the participants listed personality as the prime candidate (Leyens et al., 1996, Study 1). The authors reasoned that the general instructions played the role of a prime. When the prime was applicable to the ambiguous subsequent information, that is, writing an essay on a specific topic under no choice, a judgment would ensue; when the prime was inapplicable, no judgment would follow.

In Study 2, Leyens et al.'s (1996) participants learned about a target who had been obliged to write an essay in favor of (vs. against) euthanasia. The essay was never given to the participants, nor was any additional information concerning its author. Depending on the conditions, psychological or educational concepts were primed. Given the essay topic used (i.e., euthanasia), psychological concepts were applicable but educational concepts were inapplicable. As expected, a bias emerged only when psychological (applicable) concepts were activated. A follow-up study (Leyens et al., 1996, Study 3) confirmed that applicable concepts gave rise to an OAB not because of their specific content, but because of their match in adequacy with the essay topic. This time, the closing of coal mines in the United Kingdom was used as an essay topic, and either psychological (inapplicable) or sociological (applicable) concepts were activated. In line with the prediction, an OAB occurred only when sociological concepts were activated prior to the judgment task.

Another, and not incompatible, explanation for these results consists in constructive memory effects. When dealing with an uncertain context of judgment, people are known to have a hard time not using the concepts activated in the judgmental situation to form their impression about a target (see Fiedler, 1993; Fiedler, Armbruster, Nickel, Walther, & Asbeck, 1996). Given the uncertainty of the experimental setting in Leyens et al.'s (1996) studies, the activated concepts were likely to shape the impression that the participants formed about the author. If consistent with the observed behavior, this impression probably led the participants to feel minimally informed about the essay author. For instance, participants may have spontaneously evoked a left-wing or unemployed writer when primed with sociological concepts in the context of an essay opposing the closing of coal mines. This process would have led them to be more prone to behavior-correspondent inferences.

The results discussed in this section have so far concerned the presence of an essay and the activation of applicable concepts. The feeling of judgeability may also vary as a function of participants' accountability. Like the "fear of invalidity" (Kruglanski & Mayseless, 1988) or the "sufficiency threshold" (Maheswaran & Chaiken, 1991), accountability should increase the judgeability

threshold among participants. Indeed, participants who are made accountable for their judgments should be especially likely to question the legitimacy of their inferences (Tetlock, 1992). If the evidence for forming the judgment is scarce, accountable participants should quickly realize that their feeling is based on inappropriate evidence. Weak evidence may come from an absence of information about the target of the judgment or from the absence of freedom when having to take a stand on the controversial issue (Tetlock, 1985). If the evidence is strong, however, accountability should not necessarily reduce the bias. Strong evidence may help accountable participants support their viewpoint (see Tetlock & Boettger, 1989).

The Present Studies

Although a constrained essay is one of the richest pieces of information contributing to create a feeling of judgeability about an actor, it is neither necessary nor sufficient to provoke an OAB. The present set of studies attempts to test this general idea. More specifically, we want to show that, when no essay is circulated among participants, the OAB occurs only when both applicable concepts are activated and perceivers are not accountable. Thus, for the OAB to be eliminated when no essay is provided, all that is needed is either that the activated concepts are not applicable or that the perceivers are accountable. In contrast, when an essay is circulated, the OAB occurs when either the information is applicable or the perceivers are not accountable. Thus, for the OAB to be eliminated when an essay is provided, the information must be inapplicable and the perceivers must be accountable.

Study 1

In Study 1, no essay was provided to the participants and we manipulated applicability and accountability. We varied the nature of the topic (either psychological or sociological), the nature of the activated concept (either psychological or sociological), and participants' accountability (participants did or did not expect to justify their judgment to a research director). We used two kinds of topics so that each concept was potentially applicable or not depending on the topic (psychological concepts were applicable to the psychological topic but not to the sociological topic; sociological concepts were applicable to the sociological topic but not to the psychological topic).

In this study, no informational cues were provided about the author of the essay. Because of this absence of information, participants should be reluctant to characterize the target. The activation of inapplicable concepts should not change anything. By definition, these inapplicable concepts cannot be linked to the target's behavior and should play no role in the inference process. The situation is different when applicable concepts are activated. Specifically, activation of applicable concepts evokes a feeling of judgeability in the participants that can lead to a characterization of the target. However, this characterization should occur only among nonaccountable participants. Because of their enhanced judgeability concerns, accountable participants may want to ensure that their feeling of judgeability is based on appropriate evidence. Realizing that the information about the target is merely suggested and not really provided, these participants should be more likely to con-

sider a judgment inadequate. They should thus refrain from judging the target.

Method

Participants and Design

Louvain-la-Neuve undergraduate students ($n = 80$) were recruited on a voluntary basis and participated in a 2 (accountability vs. no accountability) \times 2 (topic related to personality vs. sociology) \times 2 (activation of a psychological vs. sociological concept) between-subjects design. We used only no-choice conditions that allowed us to measure the OAB. Because our previous studies revealed symmetrical effects for pro and anti conditions (Leyens et al., 1996), we decided to use only conditions in which the author of the essay opposed a particular topic (see Webster, 1993).

Procedure

On their arrival at the laboratory, participants were told that they were about to take part in an impression formation study and that they would have to answer some questions about the author of an essay. Participants then randomly received a booklet associated with one of eight experimental conditions. The booklet informed the participants about a student who had allegedly been asked, in a previous research study, to write an essay against a specific topic. It was made very clear that the stance of the essay was imposed on the author. Depending on the condition, the essay topic was related to psychology or to sociology. The instructions activated either psychological or sociological concepts, and participants either were or were not made accountable for judgments they would make about the essay author. Participants received no further information about the author of the essay, nor were they given a copy of the essay. As soon as they had finished reading the instructions along with the information about the study and the essay's topic, they were asked to fill out a questionnaire that included the dependent variables. When they finished, they were debriefed and dismissed.

Independent Variables

Essay topic. In the first study of Leyens et al. (1996), participants were asked to rate the extent to which three different theories—personality, formal education, social background—explained different positions taken from a list of 15 controversial issues. On the basis of these results, euthanasia was selected as the psychological topic because it was rated as explainable by psychological factors and not by sociological factors. The closing of coal mines was selected as the sociological topic because it was explainable by sociological and not by psychological factors.

Concept applicability. In all the conditions, participants were told about a previous study where a student had to write an essay against a specific topic (euthanasia or the closing of coal mines in the United Kingdom). The context of this research varied with the specific concept we wanted to activate, either sociological or psychological. Specifically, in applicability conditions, euthanasia was linked to psychology and personality whereas the closing of coal mines was linked to sociology and socioeconomical factors. In inapplicable conditions, the links were reversed. For instance, in the euthanasia inapplicable condition, the experimenter told the participants:

Last year, a person whose identity we cannot reveal for ethical reasons wrote an essay against euthanasia. This person was taking part in a sociology experiment in which a researcher aimed at looking at the extent to which socioeconomical characteristics influence the way people defend a given position on a given controversial issue. The experiment took place in the following way. First, the participant had to answer a series of socioeconomical questionnaires. You will find an example of such a questionnaire on the next page of the booklet. This

allowed the sociologist to know the participant's socioeconomic characteristics. Then, the sociologist asked the same participant to write a short essay opposing euthanasia. Thus, the participant's task was to argue against euthanasia. In that experiment, asking to write against euthanasia allowed the sociologist to make comparisons with previous studies.

The questionnaire contained a series of questions dealing either with sociology (e.g., "What is your income, on a monthly basis") or with personality (e.g., "When I have a problem, it helps me to share it with other people"), but no answers were provided.

Accountability. The instructions appearing at the very beginning of the booklet allowed manipulation of the participants' judgeability concerns. In the no-accountability conditions, participants believed that their answers would remain anonymous ("Once you have finished answering the questions, please put your questionnaire in the urn intended for this purpose; this procedure ensures the confidentiality of your answers"). In contrast, accountable participants were led to believe that they would have to justify their judgments to a research director. They were told the following:

You will be taken to another laboratory. There, you will be asked to account for your answers to a research director. You will have to account orally and individually for your answers during an interview between you and this research director. This interview will be recorded for further analysis.¹

Dependent Variables

Participants answered three questions using 13-point rating scales. They first rated the extent to which they considered that the essay supported the topic (1 = *totally against*; 13 = *totally in favor*). This measure was taken to ensure that participants noticed that the essay was written against the topic. Participants then evaluated the author's true attitudes toward the topic (1 = *totally against*; 13 = *totally in favor*). They were explicitly told that they could circle the midpoint of the scale if they felt they could not answer the question. We used such an answer format in order to avoid conversational effects. Indeed, asking participants to evaluate the author's opinion might imply that such a task is both feasible and desirable (see Wright & Wells, 1988). On the third scale, the participants reported their confidence concerning their rating of the author's true opinion (1 = *not at all confident*; 13 = *totally confident*).

Results

Essay Rating

The ratings of the essay were submitted to a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ analysis of variance (ANOVA) using essay topic, activated concept, and accountability as between-subjects variables. No significant effect emerged, confirming the fact that the participants in all conditions were equally aware that the essay opposed the particular topic (overall $M = 3.5$).

Author's Attitude

Participants' evaluations of the author's attitude provided information concerning their willingness to characterize the author of the essay. The main effect of accountability was significant, $F(1, 72) = 4.81, p < .05$. Nonaccountable participants made more polarized judgments than their accountable counterparts ($M = 4.55$ vs. $M = 5.6$, respectively). As predicted, the interaction between the essay topic and the activated concept was also significant, $F(1, 72) = 6.80, p < .05$. This interaction reveals the effect of concept applicability: Conditions in which there was a match between the

Table 1

Estimated Attitudes of the Author as a Function of Activated Concept, Accountability, and Topic of the Essay

Accountability and topic	Activated concept	
	Psychology	Sociology
Absent		
Euthanasia	3.3	6.4
Closing of mines	4.9	3.6
Present		
Euthanasia	6.0	5.9
Closing of mines	5.6	4.9

Note. Lower ratings indicate a higher overattribution bias. The scale ranges from 1 (*totally against*) to 13 (*totally in favor*).

essay topic and the activated concept led to more polarized correspondent inferences than conditions in which the activated concept was not applicable to the essay topic ($M_s = 4.45$ vs. 5.7 , respectively).

Our main hypothesis concerning a three-way interaction also came out significant, $F(1, 72) = 3.94, p < .05$. Applicability interacted with accountability. In line with our predictions, the two-way interaction between the essay topic and the activated concept (revealing the impact of concept applicability) was highly significant in the no-accountability conditions, $F(1, 36) = 14.54, p < .001$, but this was not the case in the accountability conditions, $F(1, 36) < 1, ns$. More specifically, nonaccountable participants made more extreme judgments about the author when the psychological concept was associated with a psychological rather than a sociological topic ($M = 3.3$ vs. $M = 4.9$), $t(18) = 1.85, p < .05$, one-tailed. Similarly, nonaccountable participants made more polarized correspondent inference when the sociological concept was associated with the sociological rather than with the psychological topic ($M = 3.6$ vs. $M = 6.4$), $t(18) = 3.66, p < .01$, one-tailed. In contrast, accountable participants generally refrained from judging, even when the activated concept and the essay topic matched in adequacy. Said otherwise, and fully supporting our predictions, applicability conditions (psychological and sociological) led to more polarized correspondent inferences, but only for nonaccountable participants (see Table 1).

Judgment Versus No Judgment

We explicitly instructed participants to circle the midpoint of the scale if they could not judge the author's opinion. We predicted that participants would feel entitled to make correspondent inferences only when they were not accountable and when the activated concept matched the essay topic. We thus expected the "no-

¹ To avoid confusions with the applicability manipulation, we took precautions to manipulate this factor in line with the concept activation. Thus, in psychological applicability conditions (psychological topic and psychological concept), the research director was presented as an expert in psychology. In sociological applicability conditions (sociological topic and sociological concept), the director was presented as an expert in sociology. Finally, the director was presented as an expert in communication in the inapplicability conditions (psychological topic and sociological concept, or the reverse).

judgment” answers to be less prevalent in these particular conditions than in the other ones. To examine this prediction, we performed a Logit analysis using the proportion of judgments (vs. no judgment) as the dependent variable; essay topic, activated concept, and accountability were the independent variables. Not surprisingly, we found a main effect of accountability, $\chi^2(1, N = 80) = 4.1, p < .05$, showing that accountable participants felt less entitled to make a judgment than nonaccountable participants. A significant interaction between the activated concept and the essay topic, $\chi^2(1, N = 80) = 6.4, p < .05$, also confirmed the impact of applicability on participants’ willingness to make a dispositional attribution. More importantly, the three-way interaction came out significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 80) = 6.4, p < .05$, indicating that participants refrained less from judging the author of the essay in the applicability and no-accountability conditions than in the other ones (see Table 2).

Confidence Ratings

A comparable and moderate level of confidence (overall $M = 6.87$) was obtained in all experimental conditions.

Discussion

These results clearly support our social judgeability analysis of the OAB. Given the lack of information about the (constrained) essay author, participants in the inapplicable conditions had no reason to feel entitled to judge the target. Thus they opted not to make a judgment. When applicable concepts were activated, they had no informational value with regard to the inferential task. Nevertheless, these concepts framed the general impression of the target among nonaccountable participants. Because accountable students expected that they had to explain their judgment, they paid special attention to the available information and realized that it was scant except for the fact that the behavior was constrained; as a result, they refrained from judging the target.

It is hard to believe that the present results proceeded from conversational rules (Grice, 1975; see also D. J. Hilton, 1995; Wright & Wells, 1988). There was no experimental pressure to judge the target: The participants were explicitly told that they could choose not to evaluate the author, and many of them took the opportunity to do so. These various aspects of our procedure very much prevented the emergence of conversational effects. In summary, the OAB appeared in the applicable nonaccountability con-

ditions even though the participants lacked concrete information and were fully aware that they could avoid judging the author.

Study 2

In this second study, we did or did not provide nonaccountable participants with an essay after priming them with applicable or nonapplicable concepts. When rich information about the target (i.e., the essay) is available, the participant’s feeling of uncertainty should be alleviated and one should not expect any effect of the primed concept. This hypothesis is in line with literature on priming (e.g., Higgins & Brendl, 1995) and on constructive memory (Fiedler et al., 1996). Indeed, both lines of research share the view that concept activation is more likely to influence people’s judgments under conditions of uncertainty. The situation is quite different when no information about the essay’s author is provided. In this case, we should replicate the results obtained in Study 1. An OAB should be obtained in the applicability condition but not in the nonapplicability condition. Finally, because the grounds for characterizing the target are more scant in the no-essay applicability condition than when the essay is provided, irrespective of applicability, the OAB in the former condition should be less pronounced than in either of the latter two conditions.

In this second study, we also varied the induction of applicability and used a procedure typical to priming research. In all conditions, the essay concerned euthanasia, that is, an issue explainable in terms of personality. However, not every dimension of personality is applicable to euthanasia. Depending on the conditions, we manipulated personality dimensions that were or were not applicable to the issue of euthanasia.

Method

Participants and Design

Louvain-la-Neuve undergraduate students ($n = 73$) were recruited on a voluntary basis and participated in a 2 (information absent vs. present) \times 2 (activation of applicable vs. inapplicable concepts) between-subjects design. We used only those conditions in which the author had to write an essay opposing euthanasia.

Procedure

Participants were asked to take part in a study on impression formation. They were told about a student who had been obliged to write an essay opposing euthanasia in a previous research. Depending on the conditions, the instructions activated either applicable or inapplicable concepts with regards to the judgment task. Half the participants received the essay they were told about, whereas the others did not. After they read the instructions, participants were asked to answer various questions. When they finished, they were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

Independent Variables

Concept applicability. In their fourth study, Leyens et al. (1996) aimed at activating psychological concepts that were either applicable or inapplicable to a specific issue. On the occasion of a pretest, emotional stability–instability and assertiveness–reserve were considered as (respectively) predictive and not predictive of people’s position about euthanasia. Consequently, the authors expected these concepts to be applicable or not applicable in the specific context of an essay written on euthanasia. In the present experiment, and in line with Leyens et al.’s (1996) Study 4,

Table 2
Percentages of “Do Not Know” Answers as a Function of Activated Concept, Accountability, and Topic of the Essay

Accountability and topic	Activated concept	
	Psychology	Sociology
Absent		
Euthanasia	10	80
Closing of mines	40	10
Present		
Euthanasia	60	50
Closing of mines	60	50

participants were either primed with emotional stability–instability or with assertiveness–reserve concepts. The concept activation was done with a procedure very similar to the one used in Study 1. Specifically, participants were told about a previous research study in which a psychologist was interested in the impact of personality dimensions on a series of position endorsements. This researcher allegedly tested participants for a specific personality dimension and, in order to make comparisons, asked them to write an essay opposing euthanasia. In applicability (inapplicability) conditions, participants were led to believe that the psychologist had tested the author for his emotional stability–instability (or for his assertiveness–reserve). Participants were briefly told about the meaning of these dimensions and received a blank questionnaire dealing with emotional stability–instability (or assertiveness–reserve), allegedly to have a better idea about the context in which the essay was written.

Presence of information. An essay clearly opposing euthanasia (about 200 words) was provided to half of the participants. Unlike Leyens et al.'s (1996) Study 4, participants were not led to believe that the essay arguments had been imposed on the author. Also, the arguments developed in the essay were stronger than in Leyens et al. These changes aimed at ensuring the subjective diagnosticity of the essay.

Dependent Variables

Participants answered three questions using 13-point rating scales. They first rated the extent to which they considered that the essay supported the topic (1 = *totally against*; 13 = *totally in favor*). This measure was taken to make sure that participants were aware that the experimenter asked the author to write an essay against the topic. Participants then evaluated the author's attitude toward the topic (1 = *totally against*; 13 = *totally in favor*). On the third scale, they reported their confidence concerning their rating of the author's true opinion (1 = *not at all confident*; 13 = *totally confident*).

Results

Essay Rating

Ratings of the essay were submitted to a 2×2 ANOVA using essay topic and activated concept as between-subjects variables. A main effect of information emerged, $F(1, 69) = 43, p < .001$. Although the essay was considered as radically opposing euthanasia in all conditions, this was more the case when it was provided to the participants ($M = 1.5$) than when it was not ($M = 3.0$).

Author's Attitude Toward Euthanasia

A main effect of information was obtained, $F(1, 69) = 134, p < .001$; correspondent inferences were significantly more polarized when the essay was provided than when it was not ($M = 2.0$ vs. $M = 5.6$). Concept applicability also influenced participant's judgment, $F(1, 69) = 11.2, p < .001$. The author was evaluated more as opposing euthanasia when the activated concepts were applicable than when they were not ($M = 3.3$ vs. $M = 4.3$). These two factors interacted, $F(1, 69) = 11.1, p < .001$. In line with our predictions, applicable concepts led to more polarized characterizations of the author than inapplicable concepts when the essay was absent ($M = 4.6$ vs. $M = 6.7$), $t(35) = 4.7, p < .001$, but not when the essay was provided ($M = 2.0$ vs. $M = 2$), $t(35) = 0, ns$.

More specifically, we predicted an absence of bias in the no-information–inapplicability condition, a moderately polarized bias in the no-information–applicability condition, and a strongly po-

larized bias in both information conditions. This hypothesis was tested using a contrast analysis that turned out highly significant, $F(1, 69) = 155, p < .001$; residual $F(2, 69) < 1, ns$; univariate ANOVA, $F(3, 69) = 51.7, p < .001$. The results are presented in Table 3.

Confidence

No effect emerged on the confidence variable. Confidence was moderate in all conditions ($M = 9.4$).

Discussion

The results of this second study strongly support our predictions. First, participants polarized their characterization of the author more when an essay was provided than when it was not. Second, the activation of applicable explanatory concepts influenced the participant's judgments in uncertain conditions only. Finally, the amplitude of the bias in the no information–applicability condition was higher than in the no-information–inapplicability condition and lower than in the two information conditions. These results agree with our social judgeability analysis. When the essay was not provided and inapplicable concepts were activated, participants had no reason to feel entitled to judge. As a consequence, they refrained from characterizing the target. When the essay was not provided but applicable concepts were activated, participants felt that they had been informed about the target. As a result, they expressed a judgment (albeit a moderate one). Finally, when an essay was provided, participants had the opportunity to rely on concrete pieces of information to justify their impression about the essay's author; they did not hesitate to polarize their characterization of the target.

The strength of the essay is worth noticing. Participants who received the essay rated it as being extremely opposed to euthanasia ($M = 1.5$ for a possible maximum of 1 on a 13-point scale). Such a radical view went well beyond what was imagined by participants who did not receive the essay ($M = 3.0$). Because the essay was constrained, it should not necessarily be diagnostic. However, its perceived strength led participants to feel well informed about the author and made concept activation unnecessary. Such a conclusion is in complete agreement with data collected by Miller et al. (1990) and by Reeder, Fletcher, and Furman (1989). Indeed, these authors found that people entertain naive theories that strong essays can only be written by individuals who believe

Table 3
Estimated Attitudes of the Author as a Function of Concept Applicability and Information

Essay provided	Concept applicability			
	Applicable		Not applicable	
	<i>M</i> rating	Weight	<i>M</i> rating	Weight
No	4.6	–1	6.7	–3
Yes	2.0	+2	2.0	+2

Note. Lower ratings indicate a higher overattribution bias. The scale ranges from 1 (*totally against*) to 13 (*totally in favor*). The weights were used in the contrast analysis.

what they write or whose freedom to take a particular stand is not completely absent.

Study 3

Studies 1 and 2 showed that, in the absence of concrete information about the actor, an OAB emerges only when the context renders the expression of a judgment adequate (i.e., in applicability conditions) for perceivers who do not fear any evaluation of their judgment (i.e., in nonaccountability conditions). Study 2 also seems to imply that no restrictions apply when the concrete information appears very rich. If the presence of rich, although objectively nondiagnostic (i.e., constrained) information were always sufficient to produce an OAB, it would strongly undermine the impact of applicability rules. Is it true that strong arguments suffice to persuade, independently of their theoretical adequacy (i.e., their applicability)?

Although the information coming from the essay may be very rich, it remains a questionable piece of evidence. Indeed, it had been obtained under pressure. If perceivers are induced to scrutinize the available information, for instance, by making them accountable of their judgment, they should process it differently depending on applicability conditions and this should influence the judgeability. If the essay is constrained and inapplicable, accountability of the perceivers should lead to cautious judgments. Indeed, the three variables contribute to weaken the feeling of judgeability. In contrast, scrutinizing applicable information would be less likely to have such a dampening effect (Tetlock & Boettger, 1989). In this case, there is no reason to be cautious because the information seems adequate to express a judgment, even though its diagnosticity may be dubious. Finally, when participants are not accountable, there is no reason for them to be cautious and not to produce an OAB, independently of the applicability of the information (see Study 2). We therefore predicted that a polarized OAB would emerge in all conditions except for accountable participants in the inapplicable condition.

We also implemented a third operationalization of applicability. The essay always concerned euthanasia, explainable in terms of personality. In the applicable conditions, the instructions stressed that the essay had been written for a psychology seminar and contained defense mechanisms to be discovered by the participants. In the inapplicable conditions, the participants were informed that the essay had been written during a linguistics seminar and that figures of speech had to be discovered.

Method

Participants and Design

Undergraduate students ($n = 40$) at the Catholic University of Louvain at Louvain-la-Neuve were recruited on a voluntary basis and participated in a 2 (accountable vs. nonaccountable) \times 2 (essay adequate vs. inadequate) between-subjects design. As in Study 2, we used only no-choice and against conditions.

Procedure

On their arrival at the laboratory, participants randomly received a booklet associated with one of the four conditions. As in Studies 1 and 2, they were told that the experiment dealt with impression formation. They

were instructed that they would receive some information about the author of an essay and that they would later be questioned about this person. Depending on the conditions, participants did or did not expect to account for their answers to a research director. The booklet informed participants about someone who had been obliged to write an essay against euthanasia. The alleged context of the writing varied in order to make the essay subjectively diagnostic (or not) of the author's attitude. When the participants had finished reading the essay, they were asked to fill in the questionnaire, including the dependent variables. When they finished, they were debriefed and dismissed.

Independent Variables

Accountability. We manipulated accountability by telling the participants (or not telling them) that they would have to explain their judgments to a research director. As in Study 1, this instruction was made at the very beginning of the experiment.

Applicability of the essay. Depending on the conditions, participants were led to believe that the essay had been written during a previous psychology (or linguistics) training seminar. Specifically, our participants learned that the person in charge of the seminar asked students to write an essay against euthanasia that would include four defense mechanisms (four figures of speech), supposedly to evaluate their knowledge about psychology (linguistics). These defense mechanisms (figures of speech) were transference, projection, displacement, and denial (litotes, chiasm, metaphor, and metonymy). Our participants received a definition and an example of each of these defense mechanisms (figures of speech), and an essay allegedly written by one of the students. To enhance the manipulation, participants were asked to find three of the four defense mechanisms (figures of speech) in the essay. They all received the same essay that included both the four defense mechanisms and the four figures of speech. The psychodynamic approach of the psychological essay (euthanasia) represented the applicability conditions. Conversely, the linguistic perspective represented the inapplicability conditions.

Dependent Variables

Participants answered five questions using 9-point rating scales. First, they had to report the difficulty they experienced to find the defense mechanisms (figures of speech). This measure was taken to ensure that the psychology and the linguistics conditions required similar levels of cognitive effort and induced similar feelings of competence in the participants (1 = *very difficult* to 9 = *very easy*). The second questions concerned the evaluation of the author's knowledge about psychology (linguistics) and aimed at checking if the author's competence was deemed similar across different conditions (1 = *very poor knowledge* to 9 = *very good knowledge*). The third scale concerned the position advocated in the essay (1 = *completely against* to 9 = *not at all against*).² The fourth scale concerned the essay author's attitude toward euthanasia (1 = *completely against* to 9 = *not at all against*). The fifth question tapped participants' confidence in the previous judgment (1 = *not at all certain* to 9 = *completely certain*).

Results

Difficulty

No difference emerged in the evaluation of the difficulty of the task. All four conditions gave rise to a moderate evaluation of the task difficulty (overall $M = 4.8$).

² This scale and the following one were actually anchored in the opposite direction when presented to the participants (1 = *not at all against*; 9 = *completely against*). In the text, these scales and their means are reversed to be consistent with Studies 1 and 2 (lower ratings indicate a higher bias).

Author's Knowledge

The ratings of the author's knowledge were similar across all conditions. The author was evaluated as moderately knowledgeable either in psychology or in linguistics (overall $M = 6.3$).

Essay Rating

Again, no difference emerged for the essay position. In all four conditions, participants evaluated the essay to be strongly against euthanasia (overall $M = 2.15$).

Author's Attitude Toward Euthanasia

The effect of applicability was significant: Correspondent inferences about the author were more polarized in the applicability ($M = 2.5$) than in the inapplicability conditions ($M = 3.3$), $F(1, 36) = 8.95$, $p < .005$. This main effect of applicability was qualified by the predicted interaction with accountability, $F(1, 36) = 4.5$, $p < .039$. It was only when participants were accountable that the applicability of the essay made the difference. Another way of approaching the above interaction reveals that accountability influenced the participants' judgment only in the inapplicability conditions. When the essay was inapplicable, accountable participants made less polarized characterizations of the author than nonaccountable participants ($M = 3.9$ vs. $M = 2.7$), $t(18) < 2.11$, $p < .05$. In sharp contrast, accountability had no impact on participants' judgments when the essay was applicable ($M = 2.4$ vs. $M = 2.1$ for nonaccountable and accountable participants, respectively), $t(18) < 1$, *ns*. Stated otherwise, and in line with our predictions, the OAB was polarized in all the conditions, but less so in the inapplicability-accountability condition than in the three other ones: $F(1, 36) = 13.7$, $p < .001$; residual $F(2, 36) = 1.8$, *ns*; one-way ANOVA, $F(3, 36) = 5$, $p < .005$ (see Table 4).

Confidence

No difference emerged concerning the level of confidence in the author's opinion evaluation. Participants reported a moderate level of confidence (overall $M = 5.7$).

Discussion

The presence of an essay does not necessarily lead to a polarized judgment. This result is in line with other findings. When Fein et

al. (1990) induced among their participants the belief that the authors could have been cheating in their arguments because of ulterior motives, they did not find an OAB (see also Trope & Alfieri, 1997). The lack of relevance of the information prevented the expression of a correspondent inference. One may thus conclude that richness of information is undoubtedly a major determinant of judgeability but that it does not constitute a sufficient condition.

That accountability did not decrease the OAB in applicability conditions supports the proposition we made in Study 1. This factor influences participants' judgeability concerns. Accountability leads participants to rely on the contents of the essay in order to judge the target when the essay is applicable, whereas it induces them to pay special attention to the situational information when the essay is inapplicable. This reasoning is further supported by correlational analyses. When participants were made accountable, the correlation between the rating of the essay and the rating of the author's attitude was significant in the concept applicability condition ($r = .72$, $p < .005$) but not in the concept inapplicability condition ($r = -.19$, *ns*).

General Discussion

In this article, we argued that people's characterizations of a constrained target depend on the extent to which they feel adequately informed. Using the anchoring-adjustment metaphor, we suggested that the perceiver's feeling of judgeability determines the polarization of the anchor. We operationalized social judgeability through richness of the information concerning the essay's author, accountability of the perceivers, and explanatory applicability of the setting. We now briefly discuss each point of the reasoning in the light of the results obtained in the present set of studies.

Three Manipulations of Judgeability

Correspondent inferences about the actor of a behavior should only be made when people have adequate information about the actor. The trick in the OAB research is that the available information is not necessarily diagnostic but that participants think it is (e.g., Miller et al., 1990). Previous research has shown that this information, in the form of a constrained essay, is neither necessary (e.g., Leyens et al., 1996) nor sufficient (e.g., Fein et al., 1990) for an OAB to emerge. In the present set of studies, we attempted to isolate the sufficient and necessary factors. When no essay was circulated, the OAB occurred only when both the information was applicable and perceivers were not accountable; thus, to eliminate the OAB in the case of no essay, it was sufficient that the information was inapplicable or that the perceivers were accountable (Studies 1 and 2). In contrast, when an essay was available, the OAB occurred when either the information was applicable or the perceivers were not accountable; thus to eliminate the OAB in the presence of an essay, the information must be inapplicable and the perceivers accountable (Studies 2 and 3).

In the present studies, we suggested that accountability would affect participants' judgeability concerns. Following Tetlock (1992; see also Tetlock & Boettger, 1989), we predicted that the influence of this factor would be sensitive to the judgmental context, decreasing the bias only in the case of weak evidence. The

Table 4

Estimated Attitudes of the Author as a Function of Information Applicability and Accountability

	Information applicability			
	Applicable		Not applicable	
Accountability	<i>M</i> rating	Weight	<i>M</i> rating	Weight
Absent	2.4	+1	2.7	+1
Present	2.1	+1	3.9	-3

Note. Lower ratings indicate a higher overattribution bias. The scale ranges from 1 (*completely against*) to 9 (*not at all against*) (see Footnote 2). The weights were used in the contrast analysis.

results we found are consistent with this suggestion. Indeed, accountability always reduced the bias except when rich and applicable information was available in the context of judgment (Study 3).

The concept of explanatory applicability may need further elaboration. Priming research reveals that an activated concept (e.g., aggression) influences the judgment of specific targets (e.g., men who perform ambiguous behaviors vaguely related to aggression), but it does not influence the judgment of other targets (e.g., women who perform the same ambiguous behaviors). In the former case, aggressive behaviors are said to be applicable to the social category of men. In the latter case, they are inapplicable to the social category of women. Banaji, Hardin, and Rothman (1993) referred to *social category applicability* for the example that we mentioned. In the participants' mind, it is coherent that men behave aggressively whereas women show dependence.

Similarly, in our research, the diagnostically ambiguous essay is explainable by some concepts and not others. When applicable concepts are activated before the essay, they contribute to the target's judgeability because they allow causal explanatory links between the two sets of information (Higgins, 1996). No (polarized) judgment is expected when the concepts are inapplicable. To show that the effect was not due to a specific technique, we implemented three different ways to induce applicability. Compatible with this priming mechanism, the effects of explanatory applicability may also be explained by constructive memory (Fiedler, 1993). The task was very difficult for the participants (and we sometimes wondered why they agreed to it); given its difficulty, they may have resorted to recently activated concepts to disambiguate their impression of the target (Fiedler et al., 1996).

The three factors reviewed above contribute to social judgeability (Leyens et al., 1992, 1994; Yzerbyt, Leyens, & Corneille, 1998; Yzerbyt, Leyens, & Schadronek, 1997; Yzerbyt et al., 1994). They indicate when it is deemed appropriate to express a judgment about a target. Because the effect of each of these three factors can be explained in isolation, one may question the necessity of concepts such as social judgeability. Actually, we view the three factors as different operationalizations of the concept, to the same extent that need for closure (Kruglanski, 1996), for instance, is operationalized by time pressure, evaluation apprehension, and individual differences. We admit that the present set of studies approached social judgeability by manipulating factors likely to affect it rather than by assessing the mediating mechanisms involved in its influence on judgment. Said otherwise, our contribution sheds light on factors affecting the perceiver's feeling of judgeability (and its consequence on judgment), and further research is needed on how this feeling turns into a concrete judgment. Note, however, that the stability of the confidence ratings across experimental conditions is quite consistent with the line of reasoning we chose to adopt here. If, as suggested, participants characterized the target to the extent they felt entitled to do so, it makes sense that they reported similar levels of confidence irrespective of whether their judgment was polarized, moderate, or absent (see also Devine, 1989; Leyens et al., 1996). Of course, one can find polarized judgments expressed with low confidence in the OAB literature. In these cases, however, judgments are likely to reflect experimental pressures rather than a true impression about the target (see Miller et al., 1984, for a similar argument).

Trait Activation and Social Judgment

Social judgeability has much in common with another concept proposed by Higgins (1996; see also Croizet & Fiske, 1998): judged usability. According to Higgins (1996, p. 152, italics in the original), "Judged usability, such as the perception of relevance and appropriateness . . . , involves a controlled process in which people judge whether activated knowledge is relevant or appropriate to use in responding to a stimulus. Judged usability occurs *after* knowledge activation but *before* knowledge use." This is not the place to discuss the relation between social judgeability and judged usability. However, Higgins's remark about the timing of the process helps us to reexamine the anchoring stage in light of our analysis.

As mentioned in the introduction, participants in classical OAB studies, unlike those taking part in numeric estimation tasks, are in the greatest uncertainty about where to anchor their judgment. In these conditions, it is reasonable to think that they rely on spontaneous processes to determine the anchor. Participants' feeling of judgeability may play a role at that level. Specifically, we think that participants become more likely to use a polarized anchor when they feel more adequately informed about the target. This analysis does not oppose the view that the observation of a behavior spontaneously activates dispositional traits. However, we do believe that the spontaneous activation of a trait is not equivalent to the judgment of a target according to this trait (see also Bassili, 1989; Bassili & Smith, 1986; and Newman & Uleman, 1993, for a similar argument).

In our view, the activation of a trait becomes a social judgment to the extent people deem the judgment adequate. The extent to which a judgment is deemed adequate depends on the evaluation of the information available. Consistent with Higgins's (1996) concept of judged usability, we think that this evaluation is likely to occur after a trait has been activated but before it turns into a concrete judgment. It is worth noting that a similar reasoning has recently been advocated in the domain of numeric estimations, too. Thus, Strack and Mussweiler (1997, p. 444) have defended the idea that the "effects of an anchoring . . . cannot be sufficiently understood when one focuses merely on the numerical value of the anchor." They showed that participants "try to construct a mental model that includes information that is maximally consistent with the anchor value." They also indicated that "to be used, activated information must be applicable or relevant to the judgment at hand." The conditions suggested by Strack and Mussweiler are not far from our notion of judgeability concerns.

Finally, the present approach of the bias has obvious links with Kruglanski (1990) and Trope and Liberman's (1993, 1996) views on the dispositional inference process. According to these authors, the OAB is the consequence of a confirmatory strategy in hypothesis testing. First, individuals generate a dispositional hypothesis regarding the target's behavior. The plausibility (subjective explanatory value) of this hypothesis then depends on the way competing hypotheses are processed. Our perspective fully agrees with this view. What we are suggesting here is that the plausibility of an initial hypothesis does not only depend on the processing of alternative hypotheses but also on the evidence supporting the initial hypothesis. Using Trope and Liberman's terminology, it is likely that the feeling of being informed about a target's charac-

teristics increases the pseudodiagnosticity of a spontaneous dispositional hypothesis.

Going back to La Rochefoucauld's aphorism, the present analysis suggests that there are at least two ways to influence people's judgment. The first and most classical way proposes to increase the perceiver's capacity or motivation to process extensively the information provided. A second possibility, the one we chose to adopt here, lies in the control of the perceivers' judgeability concerns and in the control of the informativity of the context of judgment. In our view, these alternatives are by no means incompatible; rather, they may concern different aspects of the inferential process. So far, scholars in social cognition have generally chosen to focus on the factors that impact the perceivers' propensity to adjust an initial characterization. However, it is not unreasonable to think that the perceivers' final judgment also depends on the extent to which the initial characterization of the target is polarized (see also Fein, 1996; Trope, 1986; Trope & Alfieri, 1997; Trope et al., 1991, for a related argument). Our wish is to have added to the understanding of this latter process.

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