Actor/Observer Differences in the Attribution of Aggressive, Assertive, and Non-Assertive Communication Styles: A Motivational Bias?

by

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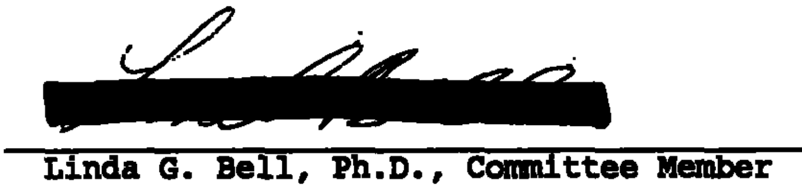

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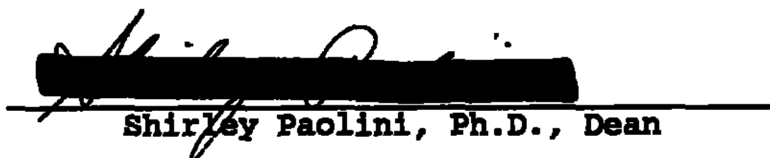

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ABSTRACT

ACTOR/OBSERVER DIFFERENCES IN THE ATTRIBUTION OF AGGRESSIVE, ASSERTIVE, AND NON-ASSERTIVE COMMUNICATION STYLES: A MOTIVATIONAL BIAS?

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Interpersonal communication researchers cite differences in the way aggressive, assertive, and non-assertive styles are evaluated by the target individual. In light of the Jones & Nisbett (1971) "divergent perspectives" hypothesis, it is proposed that asserter/assertee differences also exist. Furthermore, it is possible that desirability of behavior influences the type of attribution made. The actor/observer attributional paradigm was used to test Heider's (1958) theory of a motivational bias. Compelling evidence was found for the presence of a self-enhancing bias, as well as self-protective biases. Possible influences of historical and information processing cues are discussed, and a course for future research is charted.

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Researchers concerned with the dynamics of interpersonal communication have long realized that how we deliver a message is often as important as the message itself (Saltzer, 1949; Mischel, 1968; Bandura, 1969). Non-content cues such as pitch level, loudness, and fluency significantly affect the reception of response behaviors by the target individual (Rose & Tryon, 1979). Psychologists typically have categorized communicative behaviors as being aggressive, assertive, or non-assertive in content and style (Alberti & Emmons, 1974). Aggressive behavior evokes anger, hurt, and humiliation from recipients; non-assertive behavior is associated with feelings of pity, disgust, and irritation. Hull & Schroeder (1979) found that non-assertive actions elicited feelings of superiority in target individuals. Assertive behaviors are widely believed to promote respect, goal attainment, and maintenance of one's self-image (Alberti & Emmons, 1974). Rich & Schroeder (1976) define assertive behavior as a "skill to seek, maintain, or enhance reinforcement iln an interpersonal situation (p. 180)". It is fairly well accepted that an assertive response is superior to other forms of response behavior in terms of efficacy and efficiency

(Hollandsworth & Cooley, 1978).

Studies on the topic of assertiveness have focused primarily on the effects of assertive behavior on the target person. Typically, the relative verbal styles are compared in terms of social desirability and willingness of the perceiver to respond in a favorable manner (Hull & Schroeder, 1979). Other salient variables, such as the sex of the asserter, have been studied as well. Lao (1975) found that females responding assertively were viewed less favorably than assertive males. Apparently, behavior perceived as assertive in males is often perceived as aggressive in females.

A common element in virtually all assertiveness research is the focus on others' perceptions and feelings in response to various styles of communicative behavior. While consistent differences appear to exist regarding observers' reactions to specific behavioral sets, it is probable that differences also exist between an actor's perception and that of an observer of the same behavior. In other words, actors and observers view the event in a fundamentally different light. Such a discrepancy is predicted by empirical research within the domain of

attribution theory.

Attribution theorists are concerned with the manner in which we ascribe causality to our own behavior and the behavior of others. Heider (1958) suggests that we infer causation of behavior in terms of situational and dispositional factors. Situational determinants involve external constraints such as the social setting or environment in which the behavior occurs. Dispositional factors are internal, personal characteristics of the actor, such as attitude and temperament. Attribution theory holds an image of "man as an intuitive psychologist (p.74)", using observational data from a behavior, in the form of situational and dispositional cues, to formulate a causal explanation (Ross, 1977).

There appears to be a difference, however, in the manner in which these data are collected and subsequently used to make causal attributions. Many studies (e.g., Jones & Harris, 1967; Nisbett, Caputo, Legant, & Maracek, 1973; Regan & Totten, 1975; Gould & Sigall, 1976) show that actors tend to attribute their behavior to situational factors, while observers more readily infer dispositional causes for the same behavior. Jones and

Nisbett (1971) refer to this phenomenon as the "divergent perspectives" hypothesis. The presence of this frequently observed disparity is explained by several mediating factors. First, the actor has historical information about his behavior that is not available to the observer. The observer must assign cause without knowledge of the actor's past actions or feelings. Second, the actor may attend more to situational variables, while the observer finds the actor's behavior the most salient aspect of the situation. In effect, the actor and the observer process the same information differently as a function of physical perspective. Storms (1973) demonstrated that when the actor's perspective was reversed, making his own behavior a more prominent feature of the landscape, the actor tended to make more dispositional attributions. Jones and Nisbett (1971) also acknowledge the presence of motivational factors that may influence the process of attribution. This is especially true when the outcome or action is of consequence to the actor. Several studies have indicated that when an actor's behavior is regarded as highly desirable, the attributions made for that behavior change

(Gould & Sigall, 1976; Lowe & Hansen, 1976). Specifically, when a behavior is regarded as neutral, or undesirable, the divergent perspectives hypothesis holds true; actors make situational attributions while observers cite dispositional factors. However, when an action is regarded as desirable, this difference is attenuated - that is, actors tend to attribute more dispositional cause for the behavior (Lowe & Hansen, 1976). Many researchers attribute this shift of responsibility to the presence of a "self-serving bias" (Zuckerman, 1979). Heider (1958) suggests that actors may take more credit for desirable behavior in order to enhance self-esteem, whereas undesirable actions are linked to situational forces in order to protect self-regard.

The present study is an attempt to examine the self-serving bias as it relates to interpersonal communication. Empirical evidence suggests that attributional differences should occur as a function of observational set and desirability of communication. Specifically, actors should evaluate an aggressive style in situational terms, while observers should prefer

dispositional inferences. Non-assertive behavior should elicit similar reactions, though perhaps not as pronounced. Recall that non-assertive responses are evaluated somewhat more favorably than aggressive styles. Finally, according to the motivational bias perspective, if the assertive style is indeed highly desirable, the attributions made by actors and observers should reflect a reversal of the Jones and Nisbett (1971) hypothesis.

Method

Subjects

Forty-eight subjects, 31 female and 17 male, were voluntarily recruited from graduate and undergraduate classes at the University of Houston-Clear Lake. The median age of respondents was 31 years of age. Subjects were randomly assigned to two groups (actor or observer), and exposed to three treatment variables (aggressive, assertive, or non-assertive behavior). The result is a 2(set) X 3(treatment) factorial design with repeated measures.

Procedure

Upon arrival, subjects were escorted to a 10'X12' room containing a chair and table. Three standard

Wollensak 3M tape recorders were positioned on the table. After briefly illustrating the operation of the recorders, the experimenter presented the subject with a test packet containing one of the following two sets of instructions, which constitute the manipulation of observational set.

Observer

"The following scenario outlines a situation in which an individual must induce a change in the behavior of another person. After reading the passage, you will be asked to listen to three different ways in which this message may be conveyed. Your job is simply to listen to, and evaluate, the three messages, as well as the person delivering them".

Empathic Observer

"The following scenario outlines a situation in which an individual must induce a behavior change in another person. After reading the passage, you will be asked to listen to three different ways in which this message may be conveyed. Your job is simply to listen to, and evaluate, the three messages, as well as the person delivering them. In doing so, try to 'put

yourself in the shoes' of the person giving the imperative statement. Try to experience what he is feeling .... imagine yourself in the same situation. In effect, react to the situation as you feel the actor would".

Empathic observers have been shown to be functionally equivalent to actors in numerous attribution studies (e.g., Regan & Totten, 1975; Gould & Sigall, 1976; Brehm, 1977). In addition, the empathic observer paradigm offers the advantage of controlling for some of effects of differential information availability. The construction of the empathy instructions are based on Stotland's (1969) "imagine him" model. After reading the instructions, subjects examined the following hypothetical scenario:

"Steve is a recently employed paralegal with a small corporate law firm. He has been assigned to do background research on a national conglomerate that has filed for bankruptcy. Because of the size and complexity of the task, Steve has been paired with another recently hired paralegal to work jointly on the project. This is the first major assignment for both employees. A job

well done could benefit both individuals substantially in their career pursuits. Steve has been concerned lately with the performance, and apparent lack of motivation, of his partner. Missed appointments, ineffectual research efforts, and insignificant contributions on the part of his peer researcher have left the project in jeopardy. Because of the impending deadline for completion of the project, Steve realizes that time constraints prohibit him from requesting a replacement for his apathetic co-worker. Instead, he decides to confront the individual , hoping to convince him of the mutual importance of contributing equally to the effort".

A professional actor was recruited to perform on three audio-taped messages reflecting the three communication styles. The non-content components of each style were derived from paralinguistics research (Davitz & Davitz, 1955; Rose & Tryon, 1979). These studies suggest that aggressive responses are higher in pitch, louder, and faster in delivery than assertive speech. Assertive behavior is characterized by moderate pitch levels, a firm tone of voice, and an even delivery tempo.

Non-assertive responses are typically soft, monotone, and delivered in an unsteady, hesitant manner. Each version was structured in content to to include the characteristics of each respective style. As delineated by Charlesworth & Nathan (1984), aggressive speakers make frequent use of "you" statements, while assertive individuals' speech is characterized by the use of "I" statements. Non-assertive language includes the presence of qualifiers such as "I mean" and "well", or "you know". The following are scripted versions of each message:

Aggressive

"We need to talk about your participation in this so-called collaborative project. We've got a deadline coming up quickly, and I know we're not going to make it because of your inadequate performance so far. Your not going to jeopardize my stance in this company by missing your appointments and neglecting your research duties. If you start doing your work, we've still got a shot at this; if you want to goof off, fine. I'll see what the senior partners have to say about it".

Assertive

"Let's take some time to discuss our participation

on this project. I'm sure you realize that we're facing a deadline soon. Frankly, I'm concerned that our efforts will be futile unless we reach an understanding about the amount of work that will be required. I'm worried that you've been missing appointments and seem to have some difficulties initiating research. I'll be glad to help you with this, but you must help me as well. If you feel this is not possible, I suggest we go to the senior partners about working out a solution".

Non-Assertive

"I know your busy, but, I was wondering if I could talk to you about this project. Um, I know your're probably real stressed out, you know. . . working with a new partner and all, but. . . I kind of feel like I may be doing a little more work. I mean, you've missed some appointments, and, well you have'nt produced much research. I don't want to go to the senior partners about this, but we kind of need to do something before we miss the deadline, you know".

After reading the scenario, subjects were directed by the test packet instructions to activate the first tape machine. The messages were presented in a

counterbalanced fashion to account for order effects. Upon listening to each message, subjects were instructed to complete a brief questionnaire. A series of 7-point Likert scales, anchored at highly-7, and not at all-1, were used to measure respondents' conceptions of the message and the actor on several dimensions: effectiveness and social desirability of the message; and importance of dispositional (personality, character, temperament) and situational (time deadlines, the other person's actions) factors in determining the actor's behavior. To test the strength of treatment manipulation, subjects rated each message on aggressive, assertive, and non-assertive qualities using the same scaling system.

Results

Manipulation Check

The effect of treatment manipulation was assessed using a series of one way ANOVA's. Results indicate that the aggressive message (M=6.46) was seen as significantly more aggressive than the assertive (M=4.06) or non-assertive (M=2.21) styles, $F(2, 141)$=162.89, p<.05. The non-assertive message (M=5.31) was rated higher in non-

assertive quality than either the assertive (M=2.29) or aggressive (M=1.83) messages, $F(2, 141)$=125.38, p<.05. The assertive response (M=5.58) was perceived as more assertive than the non-assertive message (M=2.46), $F(2,141)$=133.52, p<.05, with no significant difference between assertive and aggressive (M=5.73) styles.

Desirability

Two-way analysis of variance revealed a significant main effect for treatment, $F(2, 138)$=81.51, p<.0001, but not for observational set $F(1, 138)$=1.479, ns. Post hoc comparisons using Tukey's HSD revealed a difference between the assertive message (M=5.38) and both the aggressive (M=2.10) and non-assertive (M=2.96) responses, p<.05. The non-assertive message was found more socially acceptable, $p \leq .05$, than the aggressive style.

Effectiveness

Two-way ANOVA procedures for the variable of effectiveness indicated a significant main effect for treatment, $F(2, 138)$=98.86, p<.0001. No significance for observational set was found, F(1, 138)=.438, ns. Tukey's post hoc testing showed a strong difference, p<.05, between assertive behavior (M=5.58) and both aggressive

(*M*=2.38) and non-assertive (*M*=2.54) behaviors.

A comparison between the variables effectiveness and desirability yielded a significant correlation coefficient, *r*=.53, p.<.05.

Situational Attributions

Subjects in both groups revealed no differences in situational attributions as a function of treatment, *F*(2, 138)=1.29, ns., however, a significant effect of observational set was found, *F*(2, 138)=43.71, *p*<.0001. Post hoc comparisons revealed different situational attributions between actors (*M*=6.25) and observers (*M*=4.83) for aggressive behavior, *p*<.05. Similar differences were observed in actors (*M*=6.04) and observers (*M*=4.25) perceptions of non-assertive behavior. Discrepant attributions for the assertive response were evident (actor *M*=5.71, observer *M*=4.92), however they were not shown to be statistically significant.

Dispositional Attributions

Neither observational set, *F*(1, 138)=.59, ns, nor treatment, *F*(2, 138)=2.25, ns, as independent factors significantly impacted dispositional attributions. A significant interaction effect, *F*(2, 138)=4.90, *p*<.01,

was obtained for set X treatment. Subsequent post hoc testing revealed a significant difference between actors (M=6.21) and observers (M=5.33) in the attribution of assertive behavior, $p<.05$.

Discussion

As predicted by communication researchers, assertive behavior was strongly favored over aggressive or non-assertive responses. The predicted difference in evaluation of the latter two responses was also obtained; the non-assertive message, while seen as ineffectual, was rated more socially acceptable than the aggressive response. Interestingly, results of the manipulation check confirmed a previous finding by Hull and Schroeder (1979) that aggressive behavior is also perceived as highly assertive. Hull and Schroeder attribute this similarity to an inability among lay persons to distinguish the components characterized by professionals as being indicative of each respective behavior. If this were true, however, it would seem that assertive behavior would also be rated fairly high on the aggressive dimension. The results of the present study do not support this proposal, nor do the Hull and Schroeder

(1979) data. While there are problems in discriminating between the two responses, it is probably not a reciprocal misunderstanding. A more complete explanation is therefore presented. If the qualitative strength of the components characterizing each style of speech were represented on a continuum, it is clear that non-assertive behavior is substantially distanced from the other styles. The distance between assertive and aggressive speech is arguably shorter. Furthermore, since features such as tone of voice differences between the styles are really a question of magnitude, perceptions of aggressiveness might well be seen as "hyper" assertiveness. For example, many individuals would correctly identify a firm tone of voice as assertive, and not aggressive. Amplify the tone, and these individuals would accurately describe a loud voice as being aggressive. However, it retains the quality of assertion at a gross level.

The results of the present study clearly suggest some marked differences between actors and observers in the interpretation of specific behavioral sets. Both groups were consistently similar in their perceptions of

the desirability and effectiveness of aggressive, assertive, and non-assertive responses; attributions of responsibility, however, were significantly different. Heider (1958) proposed that a self-serving, motivational bias might lead actors to take more personal responsibility for desirable behavior than would be accorded by observers. This hypothesis received considerable support. Conversely, Heider (1958) speculates that actors take less responsibility than ascribed by observers for undesirable behavior. The data did not support this conclusion. For both aggressive and non-assertive response sets, actors and observers attributed roughly the same dispositional attributions. However, a clear difference emerged when situational attributions were examined. Actors showed a strong preference for situational factors when ascertaining the cause of undesirable responses. This result could reasonably be explained, in motivational terms, as a protective shield effect. Actors remained objective in their assessment of the probable success and undesirable nature of the negative response sets. It might, therefore, be difficult to completely minimize the impact

of personal style. However, by inflating situational attributions, it is possible to obscure the importance of personal determinants. Data from a study of the motivational hypothesis conducted by Lowe and Hansen (1976) give results contrary to those found in the present experiment. Using observers only, they asked subjects to rate desirable and undesirable behaviors in a self/other context. Disparities were found for dispositional, but not situational, attributions of causality. They tentatively offer the speculation that motivational concerns create an unwillingness for actors to ascribe personal cause for undesirable behavior. By their own admission, Lowe and Hansen (1976) concede that two factors related to their methodology limit this conclusion. One, due to limited instructions, observer/actors may not have taken a true role playing perspective. Second, very little information was given regarding the situational context in which the behavior occurred. Clearly these two factors were substantively addressed in the present design procedures. It is likely that validity can be found in motivational terms for both studies. Given a lack of situational fodder to ingest,

subjects in the Lowe and Hansen study (1976) were inclined to lower personal responsibility. In the present study, personal responsibility was buffered by extreme situational attributions due to access of contextual information. In either case, a heightened sense of personal causation among actors, for desirable behavior, was obtained. The fact that methodological issues can influence the direction of attributions is well known. Interestingly, if each study had employed a single polar scale to measure differences, it is possible that both researchers would have obtained similar results.

The importance of measuring situational and dispositional attributions separately and reporting them as separate measures should be emphasized. Much of the early work in attribution theory relied on single, dichotomous scales. In a comprehensive review of the literature, Solomon (1978) points out that situational and dispositional factors are, in many instances, not inversely related. Numerous instances are cited where situational attributions changed while dispositional variables did not, and vice versa. The detection of such

differences would potentially be obscured by using a single measure for both attributions.

The present study has couched the existence of attributional differences between actors and observers in motivational terms. Desirable behavior leads an actor to elevate personal perceptions of cause, while shielding the effects of undesirable behavior behind high situational attributions. In effect, two self-presentational influences are proposed as mediating factors: (1) the desire to enhance self-esteem by inferring personal responsibility for positive behavior; and (2) the need to protect self-regard by alluding to situational determinants as the primary cause of negative behavior. Given the current findings, the proposed explanation seems highly tenable in light of past research. However, this proposal should be tempered by at least two potentially confounding factors.

First, the empathic observer paradigm employed in the present study presumes to mute the effects of historical and informational differences. However, there is obviously room for speculation on this contention. It seems likely that empathic observers would draw, at

least somewhat, on their own personal experiences as a referent point for evaluation. Thus, while it is tempting to believe empathic observers are attributing causality based on a single observation, access to their own personal data remains a possible hidden influence.

Second, while it is clear that the present experimental design offered identical information to each subject, there may, in fact, be informational proccessing differences involved. Specifically, even with physical vantage point held constant, actors may assimilate situational elements more readily, with the opposite effect for observers (Gould & Sigall, 1977). Modest support for this effect was obtained, although it was not statistically significant. Mean situational attributions for assertive behavior were slightly higher for actors compared with observer ratings. If significant, such a result would have lent credence to a systematic bias for situational attributions in actors' ratings. It would not, however, account for the high dispositional actor ratings for assertive behavior, which is a key finding in support of Heider's (1958) theory. It might have served to influence the high situational marks given by

actors' for undesirable behavior.

Several aspects of the present study are of practical import for psychologists. First, while neither situational nor dispositional attributions are necessarily more veridical (Monson & Snyder, 1977), the value of empathy-inducing techniques as a means of revealing "both sides of the coin" should be underscored. Such methods would seem to be of value, particularly to service providers. The present results would seem to confirm assertiveness trainers' contention of assertive behavior as a means of obtaining reinforcment in the form of self-esteem and perceived control. In addition, the data seem to suggest the existence of attributional mechanisms employed by actors to maximize situational explanations of undesirable behavior. The removal of such barriers, or providing insight as to their existence, would certainly facilitate effective interpersonal training. Finally, a word regarding future research on the divergent perspectives phenomenon. To the author's knowledge, there remains to date no indisputable means to fully control for historical, informational, and motivational effects. Perhaps the

energy expended on doing so might be better spent examining the structure of divergent attributions and the context in which they occur. By establishing a substantial body of literature delineating these patterns, there exists a possibilty of discovering recurrent themes. Investigation of these themes and the attributional dynamics involved may well lead to insight as to the origin of specific attributional differences. Until then, any hypothesis regarding the underlying cause of the divergent perspectives of actors and observers must account for extraneous influences.

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MEAN ACTOR/OBSERVER DIFFERENCES

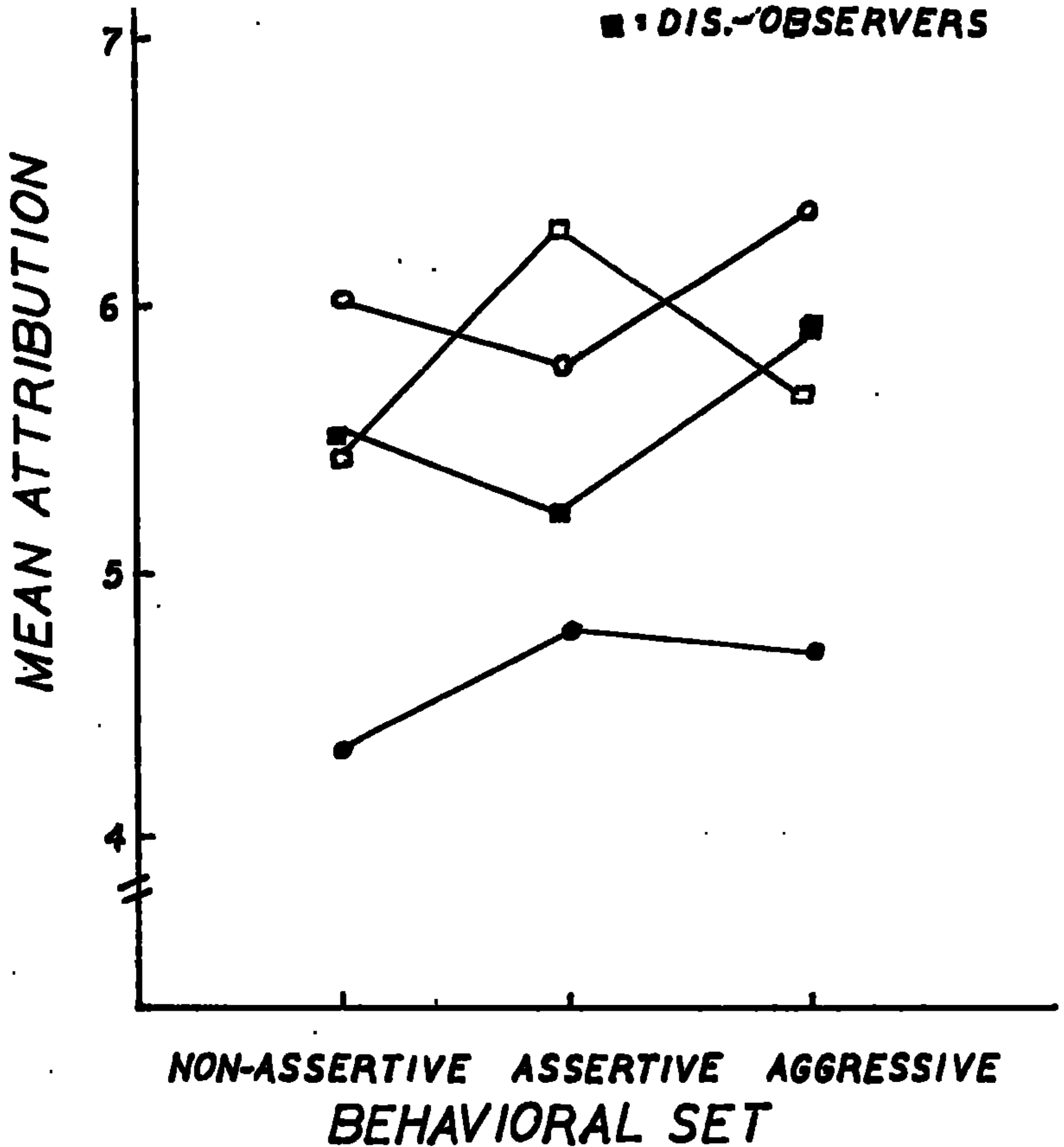
SITUATIONAL ATTRIBUTIONS

non-assertive	assertive	aggressive
6.0/4.3*	5.7/4.8	6.3/4.7*

DISPOSITIONAL ATTRIBUTIONS

non-assertive	assertive	aggressive
5.4/5.5	6.2/5.2*	5.5/5.9

Note: Asterisk (*) denotes pairs significant at the .05 alpha level.


LEGEND
o= SIT.-ACTORS
●= SIT.-OBSERVERS
□= DIS.-ACTORS
■= DIS.-OBSERVERS
MEAN ATTRIBUTION
7
6
5
4
NON-ASSERTIVE
ASSERTIVE
AGGRESSIVE
BEHAVIORAL SET