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DOI

[10.1002/ejsp.2420140208](https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2420140208)

Publication date

1984

Published in

European Journal of Social Psychology

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

van der Pligt, J., & Taylor, C. (1984). Trait Attribution: evaluation, description and attitude extremity. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 14, 211-221.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2420140208>

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Aantal kopieën: 11

Uw referentie(s): A078216273

UVA KEUR (UB GRONINGEN)

Artikelomschrijving bij aanvraagnummer: 875380

Artikel: Trait Attribution: evaluation, description and attitude ex

Auteur: J. van der Pligt, C. Taylor

Tijdschrift: EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

Jaar: 1984

Vol. 14

Aflevering:

Pagina(s): 211-221

Plaatsnr.: 4045

Trait attribution: evaluation, description and attitude extremity

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Abstract

This study examines the importance of evaluation and description in attributional inference. Sets of trait attributes were selected to remove the usual confounding of descriptive and evaluative aspects of trait attribution. Results demonstrated that both evaluative and descriptive aspects play an important role in attributional inference. Furthermore, results suggest that extremity of own attitude leads to an increasing influence of evaluative factors in the ascription of personality traits. When subjects were forced to choose between evaluative congruity and descriptive consistency, more extreme subjects tended to ignore the descriptive properties of the trait attributes. This finding suggests that more extreme subjects' trait inferences primarily reflect their evaluation of the target. Implications of these findings for attributional inference research are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

A large number of studies within the framework of attribution theory use a procedure that Ross (1977) terms *attributional inference*. A popular method of eliciting such inferences is that used by Nisbett, Caputo, Legant and Marecek (1973). In their study subjects were asked whether each of a set of trait descriptive terms, its antonym, or the phrase 'it depends on the situation' provided the most accurate description of themselves and a number of others. Another option is to present subjects with brief anecdotes about the responses of one or more actors and ask them to rate the actor(s) on Likert-type scales. Extreme responses are then interpreted as dispositional attributions, while the middle categories are interpreted as indicating a situational attribution (e.g. Ross, Greene and House, 1977).

In the present paper we will focus on a possible ambiguity in the results of such studies. Most research on attributional inference emphasizes the importance of descriptive aspects of trait attributions. However, most trait-terms have an evalua-

tive as well as a descriptive component. Nisbett *et al.* (1973, study 3) were aware of the possible confounding of evaluation and description and attempted to unconfound evaluations and attributions by including only terms that were socially desirable. However, their effort to create pairs of trait terms equal in desirability was largely unsuccessful (Nisbett *et al.*, 1973, p. 161).

Unfortunately, subsequent research has paid less attention to the possible confounding of evaluative and descriptive aspects of trait attributions (e.g. McGee and Snyder, 1975; Monson, Tanke and Lund, 1980). Another illustration of this neglect of evaluative aspects of attributions is a study by Regan and Totten (1975) who included evaluative measures of the target behaviour on four dimensions, but did not include these measures in their analyses, since 'the hypothesis was concerned with the relative strength of situational versus dispositional attributions' (Regan and Totten, 1975, p. 853). Subsequent research has pointed out the necessity to include affective and evaluative aspects in the study of attribution (e.g. Fiske, 1981; van der Pligt, 1981). Research on the so-called positivity bias (e.g. Taylor and Koivumaki, 1976; van der Pligt and Eiser, 1983) also suggests that it is important to distinguish between evaluative and descriptive aspects of trait-attributions, *and* to include the rater's attitude towards the actor in the study of these attributional processes.

A further argument in favour of distinguishing between evaluation and description is the finding that the extremity of one's attitude to a target person seems related to the relative importance of descriptive and evaluative aspects of the response language. Research in the field of social judgment demonstrated that more extreme judges tend to neglect descriptive properties of the response language and primarily focus on evaluative aspects (van der Pligt and van Dijk, 1979). More recently, Judd and Johnson (1981) also pointed at the importance of affective intensity in attributional inference. Their findings showed that the extreme attitude groups found information concerning others' position on the attitudinal dimension to be highly diagnostic of personality traits. Furthermore, the extreme attitude group's trait attributions seemed to be guided mainly by evaluative considerations.

The present study attempts to assess the relative importance of evaluative and descriptive consistency in a situation where subjects had to select trait attributes to describe different hypothetical target persons. More specifically, subjects were asked to choose adjectives to describe a person with a favourable attitude and a person with an unfavourable attitude towards the use of soft-drugs, their *own attitudes* on this issue having been separately assessed. By first assessing the descriptive content and evaluative sign of the terms used in the main study, it was possible to test the relative importance of these two aspects for trait attribution. Depending on the condition, subjects made their selections from different sets of adjectives, in which descriptive meaning and evaluative sign were systematically varied. The purpose of the present experiment can be summarized as follows: (a) to investigate the relative importance of descriptive and evaluative factors in attributional inference, and (b) to explore the effects of attitudinal extremity on the relative importance of descriptive and evaluative factors in attributional inference.

METHOD

Selection of adjectives

On the basis of previous research (Eiser, 1973; van der Pligt and van Dijk, 1979) we selected twenty adjectives which were assumed to be appropriate to describe favourability towards drugs and drug-use. To measure their evaluative and descriptive content, the 20 adjectives were rated by 40 subjects (16–17 years old pupils from a comprehensive school in S.E. London). Subjects were informed that the general purpose of the study was to gain a better understanding of the meaning of different adjectives people generally use to describe different opinions towards the issue of (soft) drugs and drug-use. Subjects were asked to rate each adjective on a 100 mm linear scale ranging from 'Extremely opposed to drug use' (scored as -50) to 'Extremely in favour of drug use' (scored as +50), in response to the question: 'If you called someone . . . what do you think his/her attitude towards the use of drugs would be?' This measure was taken as an index of the descriptive meaning of each adjective in the context of drugs and drug use. Secondly subjects were asked to rate each adjective to how good or bad they thought each adjective to be, on a 100 mm linear scale ranging from 'very bad' (-50) to 'very good' (+50). This measure, similar to the one used by Anderson (1968) was taken as an index of the evaluative content of each adjective. On the basis of these scores were selected a set of 12 adjectives. The adjectives and their mean evaluative and descriptive ratings are shown in Table 1. As shown, each adjective was classified according to evaluative sign, (positive or negative) and descriptive content, 'anti-drug' (A) or 'pro-drug' (P).

Table 1. Trait descriptive terms and their evaluative (e) and descriptive (d) ratings*

	e	d		e	d
Weak-willed (P-)	-33	16	Overcautious (A-)	-13	-35
Foolhardy (P-)	-33	19	Unadventurous (A-)	-16	-32
Irresponsible (P-)	-35	25	Narrow-minded (A-)	-30	-19
Imaginative (P+)	32	12	Responsible (A+)	35	-19
Adventurous (P+)	12	18	Level-headed (A+)	29	-19
Daring (P+)	03	25	Careful (A+)	32	-23

*Possible range of scores from -50 (extremely opposed, or very bad) to +50 (extremely in favour, or very good). The means are significantly different from zero with $p < 0.001$ for all terms, except the evaluative rating of 'daring'.

Subjects

The subjects were 157 male and female pupils, aged 15–16 years, from two comprehensive schools in South London. A further eight subjects who returned incomplete questionnaires were excluded. All subjects were administered a questionnaire during a regular classroom period. The experiment was part of a larger scale investigation on attitudes towards smoking.

Procedure

Subjects were asked to select *two* adjectives from a set of six to describe (a) someone in favour of the use of soft-drugs, (b) someone opposed to the use of soft-drugs, and to indicate their own opinion on a 100 mm scale from 'Extremely opposed to drugs and drug-use' (−50) to 'Extremely in favour of drugs and drug-use' (+50). On the basis of this self-rating subjects were divided into two attitude groups; pro-drug (scores of 0 or more) and anti-drug (scores of less than 0).

Each subject was randomly assigned to one of six different sets of adjectives. These six sets constituted three basic conditions, as summarized in Table 2. Table 2 also shows the number of subjects presented with each set and the adjectives contained in each set. In each set the adjectives were systematically rotated, there were three different sequences in each set. In condition I, sets were composed of descriptively contrasting terms which were similar in evaluation, either all positive (set 1) or all negative (set 2). In condition II, the sets were composed of evaluatively contrasting terms which were descriptively similar, either all anti-drug (set 3) or all pro-drug (set 4). In condition III, both evaluation and descriptive contents were varied, but each set contained only two types of adjectives. Set 5 contained A− and P+ adjectives, and set 6 contained A+ and P− adjectives. Both descriptive 'correctness' and evaluative congruency were defined on the basis of the results of the pilot study, the assumption being that people prefer to describe others with a similar attitude in evaluatively positive terms and a dissimilar other in evaluatively nega-

Table 2. Adjectives presented in each condition*

Condition	Set	nSs	Adjective type			
			P+*	P−	A+	A−
I	1	27	Imaginative Adventurous Daring		Responsible Level-headed Careful	
	2	24		Weak-willed Foolhardy Irresponsible		Overcautious Unadventurous Narrow-minded
II	3	27			Responsible Level-headed Careful	Overcautious Unadventurous Narrow-minded
	4	28	Imaginative Adventurous Daring	Weak-willed Foolhardy Irresponsible		
III	5	26	Imaginative Adventurous Daring			Overcautious Unadventurous Narrow-minded
	6	25		Weak-willed Foolhardy Irresponsible	Responsible Level-headed Careful	

* Descriptive content is denoted by P (pro-drug) and A (anti-drug), evaluative sign by + (positive) and − (negative).

tive terms. This assumption is based on the well-established relationship between attraction and similarity (Byrne, 1971; Moreland and Zajonc, 1982). Data were thus analysed for a similar and a dissimilar other, in terms of attitude towards the issue of drugs. Condition I supplies information concerning the relevance of descriptive aspects while evaluation is constant. Condition II provides a test for the importance of evaluative aspects in the absence of descriptive variations. Both conditions function as a further test of our assumptions concerning descriptive 'correctness' and evaluative congruency, and will be discussed only briefly. Condition III enables us to test the joint influence of descriptive correctness and evaluative congruency, and provides a direct test of the relative importance of evaluative and descriptive factors.

The model

In all conditions of the experiment (I to III) each subject has a choice between *two* types of adjectives (x and y), furthermore each subject makes *two* choices. This situation can be cast in a simple diagram (see Table 3). Since the subjects were not asked to indicate their first choice and second choice separately, but just to select two adjectives, $P(xy)$ and $P(yx)$ are pooled to give observed $P(xx)$, $P(xy)$ and $P(yy)$. Under random selection from three x 's and three y 's one would expect the probabilities shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Diagram showing the probabilities of selecting one or two adjectives of each type

		1st Choice	
		x	y
2nd Choice	x	$P(xx)$ $(3/6.2/5 = 0.2)$	$P(xy)$ $(3/6.3/5 = 0.3)$
	y	$P(yx)$ $(3/6.3/5 = 0.3)$	$P(yy)$ $(3/6.2/5 = 0.2)$

Let X be the number of selected x 's, then $X = x_1 + x_2$ (being the number of x 's selected on the first and second choice respectively). The two choices constitute two Bernoulli trials (see Lindgren and McElrath, 1969), in which x_i can be either 0 or 1. The possible values of X are 0, 1 and 2. The expected value of X , $E(X)$, is then quite simple:

$$\begin{aligned}
 E(X) &= \sum_{i=1}^2 x_i \cdot P(X) \\
 &= 0(0.2) + 1(0.3 + 0.3) + 2(0.2) = 1
 \end{aligned}$$

In the analyses below $E(X)$ was subtracted from the observed value of X for each subject. If the subjects show a systematic preference for adjectives of type X , the $0(X) - E(X)$ difference should be significantly different from zero.

RESULTS

The dependent variable in the analysis was the difference between observed and expected preference for one of the two adjective categories, $O(X) - E(X)$. Subjects' extremity on the attitudinal continuum 'extremely opposed–extremely in favour of drugs and drug use' was included as an independent variable. Extremity of own position was defined as the absolute difference from midpoint on the 100 mm scale. Both the pro-subjects and the anti-subjects were divided into a more extreme and a less extreme group by median split. For each condition, data were cast in an analysis of variance design with the $O(X) - E(X)$ difference as a dependent variable and attitude extremity as an independent variable.

Analysis of condition I

The sets in this condition consisted of adjectives with the same evaluative sign (either all positive or all negative), but different descriptive content. The relevant variable in this condition is subjects' preference for descriptively correct adjectives. It was tested whether the $O(X) - E(X)$ difference was significantly different from zero. A positive difference indicates a preference for the descriptively correct adjective, while a negative difference indicates a preference for the relatively incorrect term. Preference for descriptively correct adjectives was highly significant for descriptions of a dissimilar other ($F(1, 49) = 58.40, p < 0.001$) and for descriptions of a similar other ($F(1, 49) = 53.85, p < 0.001$). Overall, 83 per cent of the traits ascribed to a dissimilar target were descriptively correct; the same percentage was obtained for traits ascribed to a similar other. These results show a clear preference for descriptively correct traits when evaluative sign is controlled for.

Analysis of condition II

Preference in this condition (same descriptive content, different evaluative sign) could only be influenced by evaluative sign of the adjectives. While condition I was included to investigate the influence of descriptive attributes in the relative absence of differences in evaluation, condition II was included to test the effect of evaluative sign in the relative absence of descriptive differences. Preference for evaluatively congruent adjectives was tested in an analysis of variance design with the $O(X) - E(X)$ difference as a dependent variable and the extremity of own attitude as an independent variable. Results concerning the influence of subjects' extremity on the attitude continuum were in accordance with results obtained in condition I, i.e. extremity of own position did not affect subjects' preference. Preference for evaluatively congruent adjectives was highly significant for descriptions of a similar other ($F(1, 53) = 40.41; p < 0.001$), and less so for a dissimilar other ($F(1, 53) = 11.29; p < 0.005$). The overall percentages of evaluatively congruent traits attributed to a similar and dissimilar other were 77 per cent and 66 per cent respectively. A direct test of the differences between the two targets is provided by casting the data in an analysis of variance design in which the difference between the two targets was the dependent variable. Results showed that preference for evaluatively congruent adjectives was significantly higher for attributions to a similar other as compared to a dissimilar other ($F(1, 53) = 4.31, p < 0.05$), implying

that the positive evaluation of a similar other is more extreme than the negative evaluation of a dissimilar other.

Analysis of condition III

The sets in this condition consisted of adjectives which differed in both evaluative sign and descriptive content. Depending upon the types of adjectives presented and subjects' own attitude the sets provide data concerning the following two comparisons: (a) adjectives that are both descriptively correct and evaluatively congruent versus adjectives that are neither, and (b) adjectives that are either descriptively correct but evaluatively incongruent, versus adjectives that are evaluatively congruent but descriptively less correct.

In comparison a¹ the two mechanisms (towards evaluative congruence and descriptive consistency) have converging predictions. Hence it was expected that the previous findings would at least be confirmed. Overall, 83 per cent of the selected traits were both descriptively correct and evaluatively congruent for dissimilar others, while the percentage for similar others was even higher (98 per cent). Preference for these traits was tested as before, the $O(X) - E(X)$ difference for this type of adjective being the dependent variable and the extremity of subjects' own position as the independent variable. Results showed no significant effects due to attitude extremity. Preference for these traits was highly significant for both a similar other ($F(1, 19) = 407.14, p < 0.001$), and a dissimilar other ($F(1, 19) = 30.11, p < 0.001$). A direct comparison between the two targets showed that preference for these adjectives was higher for attributions to a similar other ($F(1, 19) = 4.65, p < 0.05$). The latter finding supports the findings obtained in condition II, i.e. attributions to a dissimilar other are more mixed from an evaluative point of view than attributions to a similar other. The above conclusion assumes that the similar other/dissimilar other difference is mainly due to evaluative factors. This conclusion could be premature since the adjectives differ in both descriptive content *and* evaluative sign. However, our previous results showed differences due to evaluative sign only (condition II). It seems justified therefore to conclude that the above difference is also a function of the evaluative aspects of the trait-terms.

Finally, we will take a closer look at comparison b. This comparison constitutes a direct test between the two contending mechanisms. Subjects were forced to choose between evaluatively congruent (but descriptively less correct) adjectives, and descriptively correct adjectives that were incongruent with their evaluation of the target person. In the analyses below, the $O(X) - E(X)$ value for the descriptively correct but evaluatively incongruent traits is the main dependent variable. Results showed that more extreme subjects were less influenced by descriptive considerations. Averaged over the targets the $O(X) - E(X)$ value for the moderate subjects was +0.45, and -0.08 for the more extreme subjects. Inspection of the results for each target separately revealed that the more extreme subjects showed a significantly greater preference for the evaluatively congruent (i.e. positive) but descrip-

¹Comparisons a and b in condition III do not coincide with the distinction between item set five and set six. Comparison a is based on the inference data from pro-drug subjects exposed to set 5 and anti-drug subjects exposed to set 6. Similarly, comparison b is based on anti-drug subjects exposed to set 5 and pro-drug subjects presented with set 6.

tively less correct traits when describing a similar target (-0.26 versus $+0.45$, $F(1, 28) = 6.12$, $p < 0.025$). The effect for a dissimilar other was in the same direction ($+0.10$ versus $+0.45$), but did not reach statistical significance ($F(1, 28) = 1.64$).

Overall, preference for descriptively correct but evaluatively incongruent adjectives did not reach statistical significance for either of the two targets. Exactly 50 per cent of the traits assigned to a similar other were descriptively correct and evaluatively incongruent. This percentage was slightly higher for a dissimilar other (53 per cent). A direct comparison between the two targets showed no significant difference. In other words, when subjects are forced to choose between evaluative and descriptive consistency their choices show no significant preference for one of the two consistencies. The latter effect is fairly constant over targets. Finally, results show that extremity of own attitude influences the relative importance of evaluative versus descriptive aspects.

Comparisons of the three conditions

On the basis of the considerations presented earlier, it is possible to deduce a number of predictions concerning subjects' preference in the three conditions. If there is only *one* consistency producing mechanism (as in condition I and II) one would expect a more clearcut preference than in condition III (comparison b) where the two mechanisms *diverge*. Similarly one would expect a more clearcut preference in condition III_a where evaluation and description *converge*, as compared to the first two conditions where only one aspect can influence subjects' choice and condition III_b where the two aspects *diverge*.

In order to test the above differences a total of four comparisons were made. The data were cast in an analysis of variance design with the preference scores for the two targets as dependent variables and 'condition' as an independent variable. Results showed a significant difference between condition I and II, for attributions to a dissimilar other. In this case descriptive preference was higher than evaluative preference ($F(1, 104) = 6.41$, $p < 0.05$). This difference is clearly related to the previously discussed finding that people are not prepared to describe dissimilar others as extreme on the evaluative dimension as they do similar others. Averaged over targets, however, results of the first two conditions are quite similar and suggest that the two aspects are equally prevailing in subjects' choice of trait-terms. The latter conclusion is confirmed by the lack of preference found in condition III_b. Preference in condition III_a (for traits that were both descriptively correct and evaluatively congruent) was higher than in condition II (where only evaluative sign was varied). Results showed a significant difference for a similar other ($F(1, 74) = 8.24$, $p < 0.01$) and a marginal effect for a dissimilar other ($F(1, 74) = 3.72$, $0.05 < p < 0.06$). Preference in condition III_a was also higher than in condition I, but only for a similar other ($F(1, 104) = 4.19$, $p < 0.05$). Overall, these results show that when the two mechanisms converge, preference is more clear-cut than when only one mechanism operates. Along the same lines, one would expect a more clear-cut preference when only one mechanism operates as compared to situations in which the two aspects diverge. Results showed that preference in condition I was more clear-cut than in condition III_b both for a similar other ($F(1, 79) = 16.86$, $p < 0.001$) and a dissimilar other ($F(1, 79) = 7.64$, $p < 0.01$). Finally, preference in condition II was more clear-cut than in III_b, but

only for a similar other ($F(1, 83) = 11.51, p < 0.001$). Summarizing, direct comparisons of the three conditions reveal a fairly consistent pattern of preference. Preference is most clear-cut when the two mechanisms converge, less so when one mechanism operates and absent when the two mechanisms diverge.

DISCUSSION

Results of the study presented in this report indicate that both descriptive and evaluative factors are of importance in the attribution of trait adjectives to similar and dissimilar target others. If evaluation is held constant, people prefer descriptively correct adjectives. In the absence of descriptive differences, people's preferences are determined by evaluative considerations. This suggests that two consistency-producing mechanisms determine people's preferences; descriptive and evaluative consistency. Results showed that when both mechanisms converge, people show a more marked preference for the consistent trait adjectives than when only one mechanism operates. When subjects have to choose between descriptively correct but evaluatively incongruent adjectives and evaluatively congruent but descriptively less correct adjectives, results showed no preference for either of the two adjective categories. The present findings are complementary to those obtained in the field of trait-inference. Peabody (1967, 1970, 1978) and Felipe (1970) have shown that inferences from one personality trait to other personality traits are determined by both evaluative and descriptive aspects.

Results of the conditions which included both evaluatively positive and negative traits are in accordance with a positivity bias, i.e. similar others are described in positive terms while dissimilar others are described in relatively mixed terms (both positive and negative traits are attributed to dissimilar others). Results of condition III confirm the above interpretation. Overall then, subjects' trait preferences show a bias towards favourable evaluations, which is in accordance with Zajonc's (1968) and Warr's (1971) findings that people tend to evaluate their environment relatively favourably.

Present findings further suggest that the extremity of one's attitude influences the relative importance of evaluative and descriptive aspects of the attribution of personality traits. More extreme subjects tended to neglect descriptive properties and were more influenced by evaluative aspects of the attributes, when forced to choose between description and evaluation. This finding suggests that attributions of subjects with relatively extreme attitudes are more determined by evaluative aspects of the attributes. In other words, subjects with relatively strong feelings about the issue seem to use the response language differently from those with relatively moderate opinions. Thus, trait attributions of the more extreme judges could merely reflect their immediate *affective* reactions. There is some evidence suggesting that this could be the case, especially in the context of a hypothetical, unknown target. For instance, Fiske and Cox (1979) found that people when given the choice, prefer *not* to use personality traits to describe unknown others. Furthermore, the validity of trait-attributions to unknown others is remarkably low and highly unreliable (Kuiper and Rogers, 1979; Norman and Goldberg, 1966). These findings suggest that, under some conditions, trait-attributions can hardly be

assumed to reflect descriptively valid and reliable ascriptions of personality traits. A number of studies (e.g. Ross, 1977; Hamilton, 1979) have indicated that cognitive biases may influence our perception and evaluation of others. Our findings, however, suggest that affective intensity may influence cognitive processes and judgmental preference. An increase in attitude extremity may often be accompanied by increasing importance of the evaluative properties of the response language. A number of recent studies (Judd and Johnson, 1981; van der Pligt, Ester and van der Linden, 1983) confirm the above view.

Summarizing, present results suggest that it is premature to assume that ascribing personality traits to people primarily reflects a description of the actor. People are not only describing but also evaluating and it seems necessary to investigate the relative importance of these two processes. Further examination of the factors that determine the relative salience of description and evaluation in attributional inferences may help to elucidate the cognitive and affective dynamics underlying attributional biases.

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RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude examine l'importance de l'évaluation et de la description dans l'inférence attributive. Des ensembles de traits-attributs furent sélectionnés de façon à supprimer l'habituelle confusion entre aspects descriptifs et évaluatifs de l'attribution de traits. Les résultats ont démontré que les deux aspects -évaluatif et descriptif- jouent un rôle important dans l'inférence attributive. En outre, les résultats suggèrent que l'extrémité de sa propre attitude conduit à une augmentation de l'influence des facteurs évaluatifs dans l'attribution de traits de personnalité. Lorsque les sujets étaient forcés de choisir entre la congruité évaluative et la consistance descriptive, les sujets les plus extrêmes tendaient à ignorer les propriétés descriptives des traits-attributs. Ce résultat suggère que l'inférence de traits chez les sujets les plus extrêmes, reflète avant tout leur évaluation de la cible. Les implications de ces données pour la recherche sur l'inférence attributive sont discutées.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

In dieser Studie wird die Bedeutung der Faktoren Bewertung und Beschreibung bei attributiven Prozessen untersucht. Die Gruppen von Attributionszügen wurden so ausgewählt, dass die übliche Vermischung von beschreibenden und bewertenden Aspekten ausgeschlossen werden konnte. Die Resultate zeigen, dass die zwei Aspekte—beschreibend und bewertend—bei den Attributionsvorgängen eine wichtige Rolle spielen. Auf Grund der Ergebnisse ist zudem anzunehmen, dass die Unausgewogenheit der Einstellung den Einfluss bewertender Aspekte bei der Attribution von Persönlichkeitszügen vergrößert. Wenn die Vpn gezwungen sind, zwischen kongruenter Bewertung und konsistenter Beschreibung zu wählen, zeigt sich bei Vpn mit extremer Einstellung die Tendenz, die beschreibenden Attributionsmerkmale zu vernachlässigen. Diese Ergebnisse deuten darauf hin, dass der Bewertung des Zielobjekts beruht. Abschliessend wird die Bedeutung dieser Daten für die weitere Attributionsforschung diskutiert.