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Empathy Neglect: Reconciling the Spotlight Effect and the Correspondence Bias

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When people commit an embarrassing blunder, they typically overestimate how harshly they will be judged by others. This tendency can seem to fly in the face of research on the correspondence bias, which has established that observers are, in fact, quite likely to draw harsh dispositional inferences about others. These seemingly inconsistent literatures are reconciled by showing that actors typically neglect to consider the extent to which observers will moderate their correspondent inferences when they can easily adopt an actor's perspective or imagine being in his or her shoes. These results help to explain why actors can overestimate the strength of observers' dispositional inferences even when, as the literature on the correspondence bias attests, observers are notoriously prone to drawing those very inferences.

Nearly everyone has experienced the fear of social evaluation following an embarrassing mishap. One may worry about being forever labeled a klutz following an ungraceful turn on the dance floor, as disheveled if caught wearing mismatched socks, or as thoughtless after attending a birthday party without bringing a gift. These fears typically have relatively mild consequences, such as worry, self-doubt, and occasionally awkward attempts to repair face (Goffman, 1959). At other times, however, these fears can give rise to more debilitating problems, including shyness (Zimbardo, 1990), social anxiety (Clark & Arkowitz, 1975), and paranoia (Fenigstein & Vanable, 1992). Indeed, concerns over lost face have been linked to teenage suicide (Shafer, 1974, 1988), domestic violence (Cohen, Nisbett, Bowdle, & Schwartz, 1996), homicide (Daly & Wilson, 1988), and even accelerated HIV progression (Cole, Kemeney, & Taylor, 1997).

These fears are clearly important, but are they justified? Previously, we have shown that they are not—that people typically overestimate how harshly they will be judged for their failures and social blunders (Savitsky, Epley, & Gilovich, 2001). For example, people who imagined accidentally tripping a security alarm in the presence of others thought they would be judged more negatively than they actually were. So too with people who imagined showing up at a party without a gift, people who failed a particularly difficult test in front of others, and people who were introduced to a stranger as someone who experiences "occasional difficulties with bed wetting."

This miscalibration is further compounded by a related tendency for people to overestimate the extent to which others notice and attend to their appearance and behavior in the first place, a tendency dubbed the *spotlight effect* (Gilovich, Medvec, & Savitsky, 2000). Of course, people cannot be judged harshly if their seemingly obvious transgressions go unnoticed. Collectively, these findings suggest that people's fears over others' harsh recriminations are generally exaggerated. Not only are people less inclined than we think to see the worst in us, they are also less inclined to see us at all.

At first blush, this conclusion may strike the readership of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* as implausible. After all, more than a generation of attribution research testifies to observers' readiness to draw strong dispositional inferences on the basis of even the weakest behavioral evidence (Gilbert & Jones, 1986; Gilbert & Malone, 1995; Jones & Harris, 1967; Ross, 1977; Ross, Amabile, & Steinmetz, 1977), a tendency so common and reflexive that it has been labeled the *fundamental attribution error* (Ross, 1977). If observers are so eager to jump from acts to dispositions, is it plausible to contend that actors nonetheless overestimate observers' dispositionalist tendencies?

Recent evidence suggests that it is indeed. Van Boven, Kamada, and Gilovich (1999) asked individuals whose actions were constrained by experimental instructions to anticipate the inferences

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made about them by observers. These were then compared with observers' actual inferences. As in previous research, the observers drew dispositional inferences despite full awareness of the actors' constraints. But actors nevertheless overestimated the magnitude of these correspondent inferences.

In Van Boven et al.'s (1999) research, the actor's behavior was constrained, the observer was aware of the constraints, and the actor knew the observer was aware of the constraints. In situations in which the constraints are known, observers typically reign in their inferences, albeit insufficiently (Gilbert, 1989), leaving room for actors to overestimate. But what about when the behavior is not constrained? When people forget an acquaintance's name, go blank in the middle of a presentation, or fall flat while exiting the ski lift, the behavior in question is rarely constrained in the usual sense of that term. If people are quick to take such behavior at face value, why might individuals who suffer these unconstrained misfortunes nevertheless overestimate the harshness of others' impressions?

We contend that this puzzle can be solved by the conjunction of three psychological truths. First, as mentioned, research on the correspondence bias suggests that people give short shrift to situational influences, not that they fail to consider them at all. People do adjust their impressions to accommodate situational factors, even though this adjustment is often insufficient (Gilbert & Jones, 1986; Jones & Harris, 1967).

Second, research has demonstrated that such adjustment is particularly pronounced when observers can empathize with an actor or imagine being in his or her shoes (Regan & Totten, 1975; Storms, 1973). Such an empathic orientation leads people to soften the otherwise harsh dispositional inferences they would make about someone caught in an embarrassing moment. This orientation may be particularly likely when a person has experienced the same or a similar difficulty as the actor. Bystanders may readily recall times when they have forgotten a friend's name, gone blank during a talk, or stumbled through any number of uncoordinated athletic moves, leading them to soften their assessments of others experiencing similar mishaps.

Yet people may easily lose sight of an observer's empathic orientation when they are in the midst of an embarrassing moment because of a third psychological truth: People are fundamentally egocentric and have difficulty getting beyond their own perspective when anticipating how they will be judged by others (Gilovich & Savitsky, 1999; Griffin & Ross, 1991; Ross & Ward, 1996). Indeed, one reason people overestimate how harshly they will be judged after a blunder is that they focus egocentrically on the blunder itself and neglect to consider other "nonfocal" factors that might influence observers' impressions of them (Savitsky et al., 2001). This *focusing illusion* (Schkade & Kahneman, 1998; Wilson, Wheatley, Meyers, Gilbert, & Axsom, 2000) can lead people to overlook others' empathic orientation, causing them to miss times when people will soften their dispositional inferences.

These considerations lead us to hypothesize that people overestimate the harshness of an observer's assessment of them whenever the observer can empathize or imagine being in the actor's shoes. When observers have "been there, done that," in other words, they are likely to adopt the actor's perspective—to empathize with the actor[1]—and thus exhibit considerable inferential charity. The actor's fears of harsh recriminations in such situations are thus unlikely to be confirmed.[2] In contrast, when the observers find it hard to put themselves in the actor's shoes, they are likely to jump from acts to dispositions in the manner demonstrated so frequently in the attribution literature. In these cases, the actor's fears of harsh recriminations are quite likely to be confirmed.

The distinction can be illustrated by a pair of thought experiments. Imagine that you have just dropped a tray in a crowded dining facility, sending food, dishes, and silverware careening across the floor. Like most people, you would probably find this to be an embarrassing turn of events, and you would likely entertain worries that others would see you as something of a klutz. However, because most people have suffered a similar fate at some time or have at least experienced a close call or two, they are likely to empathize with your misfortune and judge you charitably as a result—more charitably than you expect.

But now imagine that you have been a participant in one of Milgram's (1974) obedience experiments, and, like the modal participant, you went along with the experimenter's command to administer what appeared to be a near-lethal dose of electricity to another human being. You would probably be ashamed if others learned of your actions, and, again, you would probably be worried about being judged harshly—this time as a weak or heartless individual with deficient moral scruples. Here, however, your fears are likely to be confirmed. Observers would almost certainly never have been in such a situation themselves and would have a hard time accurately imagining the pressures acting on you. In fact, when imagining what it would be like to be in your shoes, almost everyone would conclude that they would have acted differently (Bierbrauer, 1976; Epley & Dunning, 2000; Sherman, 1980). Observers are thus unlikely to look on you with much empathy, and you would in fact be seen as weak or uncaring—just as you feared.

Thus, observers are more likely to pass harsh judgments when they have difficulty adopting an embarrassed actor's perspective than when they can easily imagine being in the actor's position. Yet we propose that this difference is a feature of the human condition that people often fail to consider when anticipating how they will be seen by others. The net result is a tendency to

[1] Empathy is a multidimensional concept involving both affective and cognitive components (Davis, 1983), including concern or sympathy (e.g., Batson et al., 1991; Cialdini, Brown, Lewis, Luce, & Neuberg, 1997), personal distress (e.g., Mikulincer et al., 2001), and perspective taking (e.g., Chartrand & Bargh, 1999). Our use of the term throughout this article is limited to this last (cognitive) component—the capacity or inclination to adopt another person's perspective—and should not be confused with other aspects of the term.

[2] We have shown elsewhere that people tend to overestimate how much they will be noticed and how extremely they will be judged for both positive and negative behaviors (Gilovich et al., 2000; Savitsky et al., 2001; Van Boven et al., 1999). However, a number of psychological processes collude to make these effects more reliable and pervasive for negative behaviors than for positive behaviors (see Savitsky et al., 2001). As a result, in this article we focus exclusively on people's estimates of how harshly they will be judged after potentially embarrassing failures or mishaps. From an applied perspective, furthermore, this type of error probably carries the greatest consequence and is thus more pressing to understand.

overestimate how harshly one will be judged by observers who can adopt one's perspective.

We conducted four experiments to test our thesis. Three of these shared a common design in which participants were placed in an embarrassing situation—struggling to answer difficult word puzzles, performing poorly on a test of general knowledge, or singing the "Star Spangled Banner"—while being watched by observers. Some observers were in a position to empathize with the actor's plight; others were not. We expected observers who could empathize with the actor to form more charitable impressions of the actor than observers who could not. But because actors were likely to be focused inordinately on their own embarrassing blunder, we expected them to be insensitive to the difference in observers' orientations and therefore to anticipate being judged equally harshly by both. The fourth study explored whether this insensitivity is indeed the product of a tendency to overlook empathy by investigating whether people become better calibrated when explicitly asked to consider another's empathic orientation.

We believe a general failure to anticipate others' empathic orientation can help make sense of actors' tendency to overestimate how harshly they are judged by others, even if those others are prone to the correspondence bias.

Study 1

In early November 1999, presidential candidate George W. Bush sat down for a television interview and was subjected to a pop quiz. To gauge his knowledge of foreign policy, the interviewer asked Bush to name the leaders of four international "hot spots": Chechnya, India, Pakistan, and Taiwan. Bush went 1 for 4, answering correctly only that Lee Teng-hai was the current leader of Taiwan.

Hoping to minimize the damage caused by her boss's lackluster performance, Bush's campaign manager argued that the pop quiz was picky and revealed little about Bush's command of foreign policy. This political spin, however, may have been unnecessary. Although political pundits chastised Bush for his poor performance (e.g., Dowd, 1999; "A Pop Quiz," 1999), his popularity among rank-and-file voters suffered no downturn after the quiz (Moore, 1999). After all, most Americans likely found that they, too, were stumped by the questions and were reluctant to judge Bush harshly as a result. Still, we suspect that such inferential charity was lost on Candidate Bush, who, caught up in his embarrassing failure, likely believed that others would now think even less of his intellect than they already did.

We designed something of a reenactment of Bush's pop quiz to test our hypothesis. But instead of questioning participants about foreign relations, we questioned them about the relations between words. The items were difficult, so we expected participants to perform poorly. Each participant's poor performance was viewed by an observer stationed behind a one-way mirror in an adjacent room. In one condition, the observer was given the answers to the test items beforehand; in the other condition, he or she was not.

We made three predictions. First, we expected observers who had been given the answers to the puzzles (i.e., informed observers) to experience a *curse of knowledge* (Camerer, Loewenstein, & Weber, 1989) and judge the questions to be easier than those who did not have the answers (i.e., naive observers). Research has shown that once a person is given some information—told, for example, that "the goose hangs high" means that times are good, not bad—they are cursed with this knowledge and can have a difficult time imagining the perspective of someone who is not privy to the same information (Keysar & Bly, 1995). Second, we expected this curse of knowledge to lead informed observers to have difficulty empathizing with the actor's plight and cause them to judge the actor's intellectual ability harshly. In contrast, we expected naive observers to recognize more readily that they would also have been unable to answer the items, making them, like those who witnessed Bush's quiz, unlikely to render harsh judgments of the actor. Finally, we predicted that actors would fail to recognize the extent to which observers' empathic orientations would influence their impressions and thus would anticipate being judged harshly by both informed and naive observers.

Method

Participants. Fifty Cornell University undergraduates participated in same-sex pairs in exchange for extra credit in their psychology or human development courses.

Procedure. Participants were informed that the experiment involved "integrative orientation ability" and people's perceptions of that ability. They were told that integrative orientation consists of "the ability to see connections between various stimuli" and that it is related to one's intelligence and creativity. Participants were then told that they would be assigned to one of two roles in the experiment, either the solver or the observer. The solver would be given a test of integrative orientation ability by the experimenter and asked to respond verbally to each item. The observer would simply watch the solver take the test through a one-way mirror from an adjacent, soundproof room. Although observers could not hear the questions or the solver's responses, participants were told that the observer would have a copy of the test and would learn of the solver's performance on each question—an incorrect answer would be signaled by a sharp buzzing tone, and a correct answer by a chime.

The test of integrative orientation consisted of 10 word triads (e.g., *shopping*, *washing*, *picture*). For each triad, the solver was to think of a fourth word associated with all three (e.g., *window*; cf. Brown, 1990; McFarlin & Blascovich, 1984). Other items included *skunk*, *kings*, *boiled*; *chamber*, *staff*, *box*; and *jump*, *kill*, *bliss*.[3] Participants were given a sample question and answer to clarify the test format. Because we were interested in people's reactions after an embarrassing performance, participants were given a difficult version of the task. Those confronted with this version in previous research have generally answered only 2 or 3 of the 10 items correctly (Beauregard & Dunning, 1998; Kruger, 1999).

Observers were given one of two copies of the integrative orientation test. In one condition, informed observers were told, in the presence of the solver, that their copy of the test contained both the test items and the answers. In the other condition, naive observers were told, also in the presence of the solver, that their copy of the test contained only the test items, not the answers. Observers in both conditions were instructed to record the solver's performance during the testing phase.

During the test itself, solvers were told whether their answers were correct but were unable to hear the tones presented to observers. Solvers did not receive the answers to the test until the experiment was completed.

Dependent measures. Following the test, observers rated the solver on seven dimensions related to intellectual ability: integrative orientation, general knowledge, creativity, intelligence, test-taking ability, the ability to see connections between various stimuli, and the ability to think clearly.

[3] *Cabbage*, *music*, and *joy*, respectively.

All ratings were made in comparison with the average Cornell student on scales ranging from 0 (*much worse than average*) to 100 (*much better than average*), with 50 labeled *average*. Solvers, in contrast, anticipated how they would be rated by the observer on these seven dimensions.

Next, observers estimated how many items they would have answered correctly had they been the solver and also the average number of items they believed were answered correctly by all solvers throughout the experiment. Solvers also estimated the number of items observers would have gotten right had they been the solver and the average number of items answered correctly by all solvers. They also estimated the number of items observers would say they would have answered correctly had they been the solver. Finally, observers and solvers indicated the actual number of items the solver answered correctly.

Results

Gender did not influence the results of this or any other experiment reported in this article and is not discussed further.

Solver's performance. As expected, solvers generally performed poorly, answering an average of 1.3 of the 10 items correctly. Solvers believed they had solved fewer items than the observer would have solved if he or she had been the solver ($M = 3.68$) and fewer than what they believed to be the average performance of all solvers ($M = 3.92$), paired ts(24) = 7.02 and 6.87, respectively, ps $< .001$. Solvers' performance did not vary by the observer's condition, $t(23) < 1$, and was correctly recalled in all experimental sessions by both solvers and observers.

Actual and anticipated ratings. We expected informed observers to experience a curse of knowledge and find the items easier than would naive observers. As anticipated, informed observers indicated that they would have answered more items correctly if they had been the solver ($M = 3.75$) than did naive observers ($M = 1.84$), $t(23) = 2.46$, $p < .05$, and also tended to believe that the average solver would answer more items correctly ($M = 3.17$) than did naive observers ($M = 2.04$), $t(23) = 1.66$, $p = .11$.

These results suggest that informed observers found it difficult to imagine just how hard the questions would have seemed had they not known the answers—a tendency that would make it harder for them to empathize with the solver's difficulties. As a result, we expected informed observers to form a more negative impression of the solver's intellectual ability than would naive observers. Recall that both actual and anticipated ratings were made along seven dimensions related to intellectual ability. These dimensions were highly intercorrelated, so they were collapsed into a composite index for both anticipated and actual evaluations (both αs $> .87$). As can be seen in Figure 1, an analysis of this composite index revealed that informed observers did indeed evaluate the solver's intellectual ability more harshly than did naive observers, $t(23) = 2.20$, $p < .05$.

Nevertheless, we expected this difference between informed and naive observers to be lost on the solvers themselves, who, wrapped up in their own embarrassing failure, would overlook the observers' empathic orientation and anticipate being judged equally harshly by both informed and naive observers. To evaluate this last prediction, we first examined solvers' estimates of the number of items they thought observers would say they would be able to solve correctly. As expected, solvers anticipated that informed ($M = 4.75$) and naive observers ($M = 5.31$) would expect to perform equally well had they been in the solvers' position,

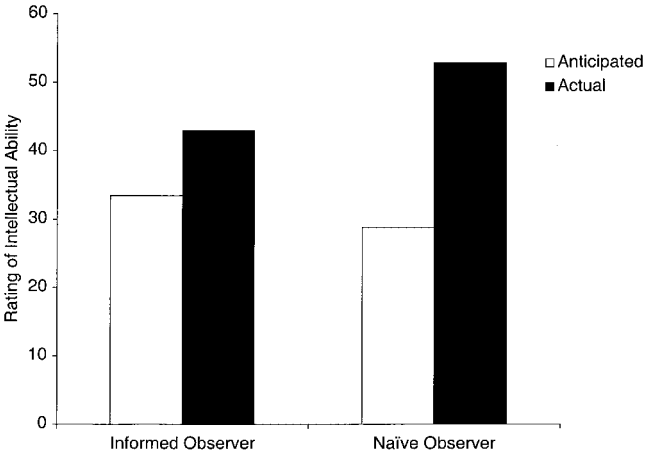

Figure 1. Anticipated and actual impressions of the solver, Study 1.

$t(23) < 1$. Thus, solvers failed to appreciate the difference in observers' estimates that resulted from the curse of knowledge. Notice, moreover, that these estimates are substantially higher than the 1.3 questions solvers actually answered correctly, paired $t(24) = 10.38$, $p < .0001$. Clearly, solvers thought they had done poorly and were expecting little empathy from either observer, whether they possessed the answers or not. And indeed, as can be seen in Figure 1, solvers expected to be judged equally harshly by informed and naive observers alike, $t(23) = 1.04$, *ns*.

To test the statistical significance of this overall pattern, we submitted anticipated and actual impressions of the solvers to a 2 (impression: anticipated vs. actual) × 2 (observer: naive vs. informed) mixed-model analysis of variance (ANOVA). This analysis revealed a main effect for impression, suggesting that solvers generally overestimated how harshly they would be judged by observers, $F(1, 23) = 31.33$, $p < .001$. This effect was qualified, however, by the predicted interaction, $F(1, 23) = 5.87$, $p < .05$. Naive observers tended to judge the solver more charitably than did informed observers, a difference that was lost on the solvers. Although solvers generally thought they would be judged more harshly than they actually were, this effect was particularly pronounced when the observer could readily adopt the solver's perspective.

Mediational analysis. We contend that observers' judgments of the solver were mediated in part by their ability to empathize with the solver's difficulties. Informed observers judged the solver more harshly, we believe, because the answers seemed obvious to them ("Why can't the solver get any of these right?"). Naive observers, on the other hand, did not have the answers and thus were in the same befuddled state as the solvers themselves ("I can't answer any of these either"). If so, the difference between informed and naive observers' ratings should be less pronounced when the observers' ability to empathize is statistically controlled.

To test this hypothesis, we derived an index of empathic orientation by subtracting the number of questions observers anticipated they would have answered correctly from the number the solver they viewed actually answered correctly. We reasoned that an observer who thought he or she would have answered, say, six more questions correctly than the solver actually did would expe-

rience greater difficulty adopting the solver's perspective than would an observer who thought he or she would have answered only one more item correctly.

As expected, this index revealed significantly less empathy among informed observers than among naive observers ($\beta = .46$), $t(24) = 2.47$, $p < .05$. Informed observers predicted that they would have answered 2.25 more questions correctly than the solvers actually did; naive observers predicted that they would have answered only 0.69 more questions correctly. In addition, this empathy index was related to observers' ratings of the solvers ($\beta = -.49$), $t(24) = -2.67$, $p < .05$. Those who were better able to empathize with the solver's difficulties formed more charitable impressions than did those who were less able. Of key importance, moreover, the empathy index remained marginally significant when both the empathy index and the observer's condition were entered into the regression ($\beta = -.37$), $t(24) = -1.85$, $p = .08$, whereas the effect of the observers' condition became nonsignificant ($\beta = .24$), $t(24) = 1.21$, $p = .24$. This change in the predictive power of the observer's condition was marginally significant by a Sobel test ($z = 1.84$, $p = .07$), indicating that observers' judgments were partially mediated by their ability to adopt the solver's perspective. Those who could imagine being in the solver's shoes formed more charitable impressions than did those who could not.

Discussion

These data support the contention that one reason people overestimate how harshly their failures will be judged by others is that they neglect to consider the extent to which others can empathize with the difficulties they face and moderate their harsh inferences accordingly. Observers in this experiment who could easily adopt the solver's perspective formed more charitable impressions than did those who were less able to do so. This difference, however, was lost on the solvers, who expected to be judged equally harshly by both.

But perhaps the observers' empathic orientation in this study was lost on the solvers because our manipulation of empathy was too subtle. Well-read social psychologists might understand the curse of knowledge and anticipate its ramifications, but the everyday, intuitive psychologist may not. In addition, our manipulation of the observers' empathic orientation was between subjects, which may have reduced its salience. Although we made every effort to make the observers' perspective obvious to solvers, it may be that such a manipulation would have more impact in a within-subject design. Study 2 uses exactly this design.

Study 2

This study was patterned after Ross et al.'s (1977) "quiz show" experiment, in which some participants (questioners) were asked to create 10 difficult general-knowledge questions that were then posed to other participants (contestants). Because questioners in that study were able to create questions that capitalized on their own idiosyncratic knowledge, contestants typically answered few questions correctly. We expected contestants in our rendition to perform poorly as well.

Unlike Ross et al. (1977), our key interest was how contestants would anticipate being rated by each of two observers who differed in their likely empathic orientation. One, the inside observer, sat beside the contestant throughout the procedure. The inside observer was thus privy to a broad range of information, including the contestant's demeanor, the contestant's (generally incorrect) responses, and, most important, the difficulty of the questions. We expected this information to make it easy for the inside observer to empathize with the contestant's failure—after all, the inside observer was in fundamentally the same position as the contestant and was unlikely to know the answers either.

The other, outside observer, was escorted to an adjacent, soundproof room from which he or she watched the procedure through a one-way mirror. The contestant's performance was signaled to the outside observer, but he or she was given no additional information on which to base an impression. The outside observer was thus unaware of the difficulty of the questions and of the contestant's particular responses. As a result, outside observers had no firm basis for knowing whether they would have had similar difficulty answering the questions had they been in the contestant's shoes. They were, in essence, unaware of the particular challenges confronting the contestant and could base an assessment only on the number of correct (and incorrect) answers.

Because of this differential ability to adopt the contestant's perspective, we predicted that outside observers would form more negative impressions of the contestant's intellectual ability than would inside observers. However, despite the within-subject design of this study, we again expected this difference to be lost on the contestants, who would anticipate being judged equally harshly by both.

Method

Participants. Forty-eight Cornell University undergraduates participated for extra credit in their psychology or human development courses. They were run in same-sex groups of 4 that had been screened beforehand to ensure that all were strangers.

Procedure. Participants were told that the purpose of the experiment was to investigate the processes by which people form impressions of one another's intellectual abilities. They were further informed that they would be playing a quiz game in which one person would be randomly assigned to the role of questioner, another to the role of contestant, a third to the role of inside observer, and the last to the role of outside observer. Participants drew slips of paper to learn their assignment.

All participants were then given verbal descriptions of their assigned roles in the presence of the entire group. Questioners learned that they were to generate 10 difficult but not impossible questions. They were told to avoid both easy (e.g., "Who founded Cornell University?") and unfair questions (e.g., "How many pet turtles do I have?") and to focus instead on areas in which they had particular knowledge or expertise (e.g., history, sports, literature). They were led to a separate cubicle and were given 15 min to generate their questions, each of which was to have only one correct answer.

Contestants learned that their task was to answer these questions to the best of their ability. Inside observers learned that they would simply watch the quiz game, acting as something like a studio audience, whereas outside observers learned that they would watch the quiz game from an adjacent, soundproof room. Outside observers were told that although they would be unable to hear any of the questions or answers, they would be informed of

the contestant's performance by means of a signaling device (the same used in Study 1).[4]

Prior to the quiz game, the outside observer was taken to an adjacent, soundproof room, seated in front of a one-way mirror, and given a quick demonstration of the signaling device. The inside observer, in contrast, was seated directly beside the contestant, across the table from the questioner.

The questioner then posed each question to the contestant, waited for a response, supplied the correct answer if necessary, and signaled the outside observer. Questioners and contestants were instructed to follow this script carefully and not to engage in extraneous conversation. After all 10 items had been asked, the experimenter announced—once to those in the room and once to the outside observer—the number and percentage of correct responses provided by the contestant.

Dependent measures. Following the quiz game, all participants rated the contestant and questioner on five dimensions related to intellectual ability: level of general knowledge, test-taking ability, memory for isolated facts, ability to answer general-knowledge questions, and level of intelligence. All ratings were made in comparison with the average Cornell student on scales ranging from 0 (*much worse than the average Cornell student*) to 100 (*much better than the average Cornell student*), with 50 labeled *average*. After indicating their actual impressions, contestants were asked to anticipate how they would be rated by the other 3 participants on the same five dimensions.

Results

Because the five ratings were highly correlated, they were collapsed into a composite index for both anticipated and actual judgments (all αs $> .88$).

Contestant's performance and the correspondence bias. Contestants generally performed poorly, answering an average of 2.8 of the 10 questions correctly. Consistent with previous research on the correspondence bias (Ross et al., 1977), participants generally rated the contestants' intellectual ability more poorly than the questioners', $F(1, 11) = 23.84$, $p < .01$. This main effect was qualified, however, by the participants' role, $F(3, 33) = 8.84$, $p < .01$. As can be seen in Table 1, outside observers, who were least able to adopt the contestant's perspective, exhibited the strongest correspondence bias, rating the contestant much more harshly than they rated the questioner, paired $t(11) = 4.74$, $p < .001$. Contestants and inside observers also rated the contestant more harshly than the questioner, paired ts(11) = 3.05 and 3.83, respectively, ps $< .05$, but rated the contestant far more charitably than did outside observers, paired ts(11) = 4.51 and 4.60, respectively, ps $< .01$. Also in line with previous research, questioners themselves did not commit the correspondence bias, paired $t(11) < 1$.

Table 1
Participants' Ratings of the Contestant and Questioner

Ratings by	Ratings of Contestant	Ratings of Questioner	Difference
Contestant	53.83	64.08	10.25*
Questioner	52.00	50.00	−2.00
Inside observer	51.33	58.66	7.33**
Outside observer	38.00	56.38	18.38***

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

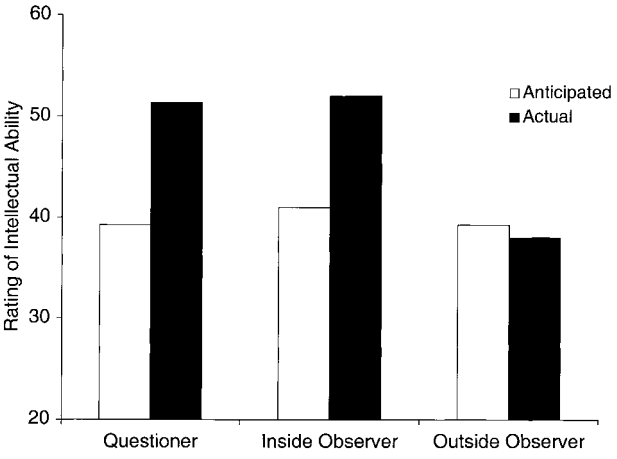

Figure 2. Anticipated and actual impressions of the contestant, Study 2.

Contestants: Actual and anticipated impressions. We expected contestants to be somewhat embarrassed by their inability to answer the questions asked of them and to anticipate being judged harshly by the observers as a result. Indeed, contestants expected to be rated significantly below average (i.e., below the scale midpoint of 50, which was labeled *average*) by those who witnessed their performance ($M = 40.64$), $t(11) = 2.63$, $p < .05$, and thought they would be rated more harshly by others than they rated themselves ($M = 53.80$), paired $t(11) = 3.67$, $p < .01$.

As expected, these fears of harsh judgment were generally exaggerated. A 2 (impressions: anticipated vs. actual) × 3 (rater: questioner, inside observer, outside observer) repeated measures ANOVA revealed a main effect for impressions, indicating that contestants generally overestimated how harshly they would be judged by others in the group, $F(1, 11) = 5.51$, $p < .05$. This effect was qualified, however, by the predicted interaction with the participant's role, $F(2, 22) = 4.73$, $p < .05$. As can be seen in Figure 2, questioners and inside observers, who could understand the challenges confronting the contestants, formed relatively charitable impressions of the contestants' intellectual ability (Ms = 52.00 and 51.33, respectively). Outside observers, on the other hand, who were unaware of contestants' difficult situation, formed significantly more negative impressions than did either questioners or inside observers ($M = 38.00$). A planned contrast comparing the first two ratings with the latter was significant, $t(11) = 4.87$, $p < .001$.

Despite this large difference in actual impressions, contestants made no allowance for the observers' empathic orientations and anticipated being judged equally harshly by all, $F(2, 22) < 1$. Thus, contestants correctly anticipated the negative evaluations on the part of the outside observer, paired $t(11) < 1$, but overlooked the extent to which an empathic orientation would produce more

[4] To be consistent with the procedures described in Ross et al. (1977), we asked contestants and both observers to generate their own lists of questions while they waited for the questioner to complete his or hers. They (unlike the questioners) were told to generate relatively easy questions that could be answered by approximately 90% of high school students.

charitable impressions in the minds of questioners and inside observers, paired $ts(11) = 2.60$ and 2.72, respectively, $ps < .05$.

Discussion

These results provide further evidence that one reason people overestimate how harshly they will be judged following an embarrassing episode is that they fail to consider others' empathic orientation. Contestants who performed poorly on a test of general knowledge thought they would be rated harshly by all observers regardless of the observer's ability to understand their difficult situation. This failure occurred even though the difference in observers' empathic orientation was highlighted by the use of a within-subject design.

We believe the results of Studies 1 and 2 help to reconcile the apparent contradiction between people's tendency to overestimate how harshly they will be judged and observers' tendency to take behavior at face value and make overly dispositional inferences. Although people are indeed inclined to jump from acts to dispositions, they are more likely to reign in or adjust those dispositional inferences when they can easily adopt an actor's perspective and empathize with his or her predicament. In embarrassing moments, this often leads observers to form relatively charitable impressions of embarrassed actors—a tendency that seems to be lost on the actors themselves. As a result, actors tend to expect more negative inferences from empathic observers than they actually receive.

Given the results of Studies 1 and 2, there can be little doubt that those who commit a blunder fail to anticipate charitable judgments from those who can empathize with them. But why? We maintain that individuals who have committed a blunder tend to overlook when others are likely to empathize with them. This may occur for a variety of reasons, the most well documented of which is that people in embarrassing moments tend to be inordinately focused on themselves and their own phenomenology (Savitsky et al., 2001). Note, however, that there is an alternative interpretation. People may be fully aware of when others will empathize with their plight but fail to understand what effect an empathic orientation has on another's judgments. Contestants in Study 2, for example, may have understood that inside observers would adopt their perspective more easily than would outside observers. They may not have understood, however, the implications of this difference for how observers were likely to evaluate them.

One way to determine whether people overlook others' empathic orientation or whether they instead misunderstand the link between empathy and charity is to examine a situation in which the situational factors that induce empathy are so obvious that actors could hardly fail to consider them when making their judgments. Under these circumstances, those who commit a blunder may be able to escape, at least partially, their egocentric perspective and realize that empathic observers will judge them relatively charitably. But if the error lies in a failure to understand the link between empathy and charity, then efforts to render differences in observers' empathic orientations salient would be unlikely to affect how actors expect to be judged. We designed Study 3 to investigate this issue.

Study 3

Participants in this experiment were asked to perform a task we thought would be mildly embarrassing for almost anyone—singing the "Star Spangled Banner" a cappella in front of a small audience (Apsler, 1975; R. S. Miller, 1987). To make the task especially challenging, we asked participants to chew a wad of gum while singing. Singers were then evaluated by two observers, one of whom was in the room with them and was thus aware of the gum-chewing constraint and another who heard only an audio recording of their performance and knew nothing of the gum. We expected observers who were aware of the gum to be better able to empathize with the singer's predicament and thus form more charitable impressions than would observers who were not aware of the gum-chewing constraint.

Furthermore, we expected this difference between observers—between those who knew about the gum and those who did not—to be quite prominent in the singers' minds. After all, chewing gum was a defining feature of this embarrassing event. We contend that the actors in Studies 1 and 2 failed to distinguish between the judgments of empathic and unempathic observers because the situational manipulation that induced empathy in those studies escaped their attention. If this is true, then making that manipulation too salient to be overlooked should give rise to the insight, among singers, that the two observers are likely to differ in their appraisals of the performance. If, on the other hand, participants' failure to draw the appropriate distinction in Studies 1 and 2 stemmed from a misunderstanding of the link between empathy and charity, then singers should expect to be evaluated equally harshly by both observers.

Method

Participants. Sixty Cornell University undergraduates participated for extra credit in their psychology or human development courses.

Procedure. Participants were recruited in pairs and told that the experiment was an investigation of people's ability to perform two tasks at once—in this case, singing while chewing gum. Participants were informed that they would be randomly assigned to one of two roles. One of them, the singer, would be asked to perform his or her best rendition of the "Star Spangled Banner" while chewing an unwieldy wad of bubble gum. The other, the inside observer, would simply watch the singer's performance.

Once roles were assigned, singers were situated behind a music stand at one end of the laboratory, and observers were seated at a table at the other end. Singers were then presented with an assortment of different flavors of bubble gum and asked to select several pieces to chew during their performance. Singers were required to chew approximately 1.5 square in. (14.44 cm^2) of gum, two pieces of one popular brand or five pieces of another. Singers were told that their rate of chewing during the song would be monitored and that they would be asked to sing a second time if they failed to chew continuously (no participant had to sing twice). Singers were then given a copy of the lyrics to the first verse of the "Star Spangled Banner" and a small hand-held microphone attached to a video camera. The experimenter activated the video camera and signaled the singer to begin when ready.

The audio portion of the videotape was played for a 3rd participant randomly selected from the same participant pool in a separate experimen-

tal session.[5] This participant, the outside observer, was given little information about the experiment—simply that another Cornell student had been asked to sing the "Star Spangled Banner." Outside observers neither met the singer nor knew his or her identity.

Dependent measures. Following the (actual or recorded) performance, observers were asked to rate the singer's ability on three dimensions: general singing ability, vocal pitch (the ability to sing in tune), and vocal clarity (the ability to sing clearly). These ratings were made in comparison with the average Cornell student on scales ranging from 0 (*much worse than average*) to 100 (*much better than average*), with 50 labeled *average*. Singers were told that their performance would be evaluated both by the observer who had watched their performance and by another observer who would hear an audio tape of their performance without being told anything else about the experiment. Singers then anticipated how they would be rated by each observer on the same three scales.

Results and Discussion

Because the three ratings were highly correlated, they were collapsed into a composite index for both anticipated and actual judgments (all αs $> .75$).

The "Star Spangled Banner" is a difficult tune to carry under the best of circumstances, and a mouth full of gum does not make it any easier. Our informal observations during the experiment more than confirmed our expectations that most singers would perform poorly. Nevertheless, in line with our previous experiments, we expected inside observers, who were aware of the singers' constraint, to find it easier to empathize with their difficulties and judge them more charitably than would outside observers, who were not aware of the constraint.

Of key interest was whether singers would anticipate this difference. Because the gum was so salient to both singers and inside observers and because its hindrance to good singing was so obvious to both, we expected singers to anticipate being judged more charitably by inside observers, who knew about the gum-chewing constraint, than by outside observers, who did not.

To test these hypotheses, we submitted participants' anticipated and actual evaluations to a 2 (rater: inside vs. outside observer) $\times$ 2 (impression: anticipated vs. actual) repeated measures ANOVA. As expected, both main effects in this analysis were significant, Fs(1, 19) = 18.88 and 35.04 for rater and impression, respectively, ps $< .001$. These effects were qualified, however, by a significant interaction, $F(1, 19) = 7.43$, $p < .05$. As can be seen in Figure 3, inside observers, who could better understand the singers' predicament, formed significantly more charitable impressions of the singer's ability than did outside observers, paired $t(19) = 5.53$, $p < .0001$. In addition, singers showed some appreciation of this difference, correctly anticipating that they would be judged more charitably by inside than outside observers, paired $t(19) = 3.16$, $p < .005$.

These data indicate that people understand the link between empathy and charity and that when the situational variables that distinguish an empathic observer from an unempathic one are particularly pronounced, people will adjust their expectations accordingly. The problem appears to be that, in many cases, such as in Studies 1 and 2, the variables that induce such an orientation are difficult to identify because they are generally background features of the situation.

Note, however, that the significant interaction indicates that although singers understood that empathic observers would be more charitable than would unempathic observers, they still underestimated the impact of the observer's empathic orientation. This finding suggests that increasing people's attention to an observer's empathic orientation may only be a partial remedy for inaccurate expectations. There may be other mechanisms that hinder people's ability to fully appreciate when others are likely to empathize and when they are not. We return to this issue in the General Discussion.

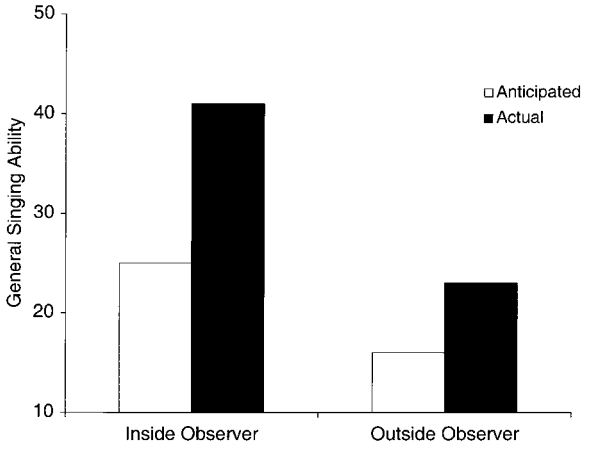

Figure 3. Anticipated and actual impressions of the singer, Study 3.

Study 4

Study 3 casts doubt on the possibility that people overlook empathy because they misunderstand its psychological impact. When the cause of their poor performance was too salient to be missed, participants were confident that observers would not miss it, and this resulted in more accurate predictions than those observed in Studies 1 and 2. But note that we neither measured nor manipulated the extent to which participants thought that observers were likely to empathize with them, so an important part of the evidentiary support for our thesis is missing. Study 4 was designed to provide that evidence. We reasoned that explicitly asking participants to evaluate an observer's likely empathic orientation would lead them to notice an important variable they would otherwise have overlooked. This, in turn, should lead actors to expect a difference in the judgments rendered by empathic and unempathic observers—expectations we did not observe from the actual actors in Studies 1 and 2.

More specifically, we asked participants to imagine being in one of the preceding three experiments. Participants in the control condition simply estimated how they would be judged on the same dimensions used in the original experiments—just as actors in those experiments had done. Participants in the empathy condition, in contrast, first rated how much they thought observers would be able to empathize with them and then estimated how they would be judged. Because participants in the original experiments over-

[5] This session was run as soon after the original as possible, often within 5 min from the end of the original session and no longer than 3 days afterward.

looked the impact of the observers' empathic orientations in Studies 1 and 2 but not Study 3, we expected that participants led to consider empathy in this experiment would anticipate being judged more charitably by the empathic observer than by the unempathic observer in Studies 1 and 2 but that this manipulation would have little or no impact in Study 3. After all, the problem with the actual singers in Study 3 was not that they failed to understand an observer's likely empathic orientation but that they underestimated its impact.

This analysis makes it clear why explicit measures of anticipated empathy could not have been collected in Studies 1–3. We contend that in the normal course of events, an observers' empathic orientation is likely to be overlooked by those caught in the throes of an embarrassing moment. As we have shown elsewhere (Savitsky et al., 2001), those in an embarrassing moment tend to be inordinately focused on themselves and their own phenomenology when anticipating how they appear to others (see also Kenny & Depaulo, 1993; Gilovich, Savitsky, & Medvec, 1998; Gilovich et al., 2000). But what this egocentrism would otherwise render unavailable becomes quite noticeable when it is the object of an explicit query. If people naturally overestimate how harshly they will be judged because they neglect to consider the extent to which an observer can empathize with them, then leading people to consider empathy should produce more charitable and more accurate anticipated judgments. After all, our thesis is not that people cannot see the implications of empathic and unempathic observers but that such distinctions are generally overlooked or neglected in embarrassing moments.

Method

Participants. One hundred fifty Cornell University undergraduates participated for extra credit in their psychology or human development courses. Fifty participants imagined participating as actors in each of Studies 1, 2, and 3.

Procedure. Participants were given detailed descriptions of the procedures of one of the three previous experiments and then asked to imagine that they had participated as an actor in that experiment—that they had been a solver in Study 1, a contestant in Study 2, or a singer in Study 3. For Studies 1 and 2, participants were asked to imagine that their performance was at a level typical of participants in the original studies (i.e., one item correct in Study 1, two items correct in Study 2). For Study 3, participants were simply asked to imagine, as best they could, how their performance would look and sound.

After reading the description and engaging in the pertinent act of imagination, participants were asked to estimate how they would have been judged by observers. These judgments were made in a manner akin to the judgments made in the original experiments. Thus, half of the participants who imagined having participated in Study 1 predicted how they would have been judged by an observer who possessed the correct answers to the word puzzles, and half predicted how they would have been judged by an observer who did not possess the answers (i.e., a between-subjects manipulation, as in the original study). In contrast, participants who imagined having participated in Study 2 or Study 3 predicted how they would have been rated by each of two observers—one who heard the difficult questions and one who did not for those who imagined participating in Study 2, and one who knew about the chewing gum and one who did not for those who imagined participating in Study 3 (i.e., a within-subject manipulation, as in the original studies).

Before anticipating how they would be evaluated by each of the observers, participants in the empathy condition rated the extent to which the observer in question would be able to "empathize with the difficult situation you were in . . . or imagine being 'in your shoes.'" These ratings were made on 11-point scales ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 11 (*a great deal*). Participants in the control condition did not make this rating before anticipating how they would be judged.

Results

We predicted that participants in the control condition would overlook the impact of observers' empathic orientations in Studies 1 and 2 and thus anticipate being judged harshly by both observers, just like actors in the original experiments. In contrast, we predicted that participants in the empathy condition who explicitly considered the extent to which an observer could adopt their perspective would incorporate this consideration into their judgments and anticipate more charitable ratings from observers who could adopt their perspective. We predicted that this manipulation would not influence judgments in Study 3, however, because that experiment was explicitly designed to highlight the observer's empathic orientation and thus would be taken into account even by those not explicitly asked to consider it.

Table 2 presents the anticipated judgments of participants in the empathy and control conditions for each of the three experiments (averaged across the specific items into a composite index for each experiment, all αs $> .70$). Because participants were not randomly assigned to the scenarios, we submitted these data to three separate 2×2 ANOVAs, one for each experiment, with one factor for whether participants considered empathy and another for the type of observer (empathic vs. unempathic). These analyses revealed a significant interaction among participants who imagined themselves participating in Study 1, $F(3, 46) = 9.31$, $p < .01$, and Study 2, $F(1, 48) = 5.68$, $p < .05$. Participants who initially evaluated the observers' empathy (i.e., those in the empathy condition) anticipated being judged more charitably by naive than by informed observers in Study 1, $t(19) = 2.44$, $p < .05$, and also more charitably by inside than by outside observers in Study 2, paired $t(24) = 6.51$, $p < .001$. In contrast, participants in the control condition did not make the same distinction between

Table 2
Anticipated Ratings by Participants Who Imagined Being an Actor in Study 1, Study 2, or Study 3 After Explicitly Evaluating the Observer's Ability to Empathize or Without Doing So

	Condition	
Simulated study	Empathy evaluated	Control
Study 1: Integrative orientation		
Informed observer	34.50	45.83
Naive observer	48.57	37.14_a
Study 2: The quiz bowl		
Outside observer	34.24	35.20
Inside observer	50.16	38.80_a
Study 3: Singing		
Outside observer	23.97	25.17
Inside observer	43.97	41.95

Note. Means that differ significantly ($p < .05$) within rows are marked by subscript.

empathic and unempathic observers, just like actors in the original experiments. If anything, these participants anticipated a difference in the opposite direction from the actual effect for Study 1 (replicating the same pattern seen among actors in the original experiment as well), $t(27) = 1.81$, $p = .08$, and no difference for Study 2 ($t < 1$).

This occurred, it appears, because participants who explicitly considered empathy anticipated that naive observers ($M = 8.00$) would adopt their perspective more easily than would informed observers ($M = 4.78$) in Study 1, $t(19) = 2.76$, $p < .05$, and that inside observers ($M = 7.56$) would be better able to adopt their perspective than would outside observers ($M = 4.06$) in Study 2, paired $t(24) = 8.16$, $p < .001$. These empathy ratings correlated strongly with anticipated judgments in Study 1, $r(21) = .72$, $p < .01$, and the difference between the observers' ability to empathize was strongly correlated with the difference in anticipated judgments in Study 2, $r(25) = .53$, $p < .01$.

Those who imagined participating in Study 3 anticipated being judged more charitably by the inside observer than by the outside observer, $F(1, 48) = 117.05$, $p < .001$, regardless of whether they explicitly considered empathy (F for interaction < 1). Participants in the empathy condition felt that the inside observer ($M = 9.00$) would find it easier to adopt their perspective than would the outside observer ($M = 2.73$), paired $t(25) = 16.56$. The lack of a significant interaction suggests that these considerations were already on the minds of participants in the control condition.

Because observers' likely empathic orientation in Study 1 was manipulated between participants, we were able to determine in this study whether perceptions of the observer's empathic orientation mediated participants' anticipated judgments. To do this we first predicted, using linear regression, participants' anticipated empathy from whether or not the observers were said to have possessed the answers to the items (i.e., from experimental condition). We then predicted participants' anticipated judgments from their anticipated empathy. Finally, we predicted participants' anticipated judgments simultaneously from both anticipated empathy and experimental condition (Baron & Kenny, 1986).

Whether or not observers had the answers significantly predicted their perceived ability to empathize ($\beta = .53$), $t(20) = 2.76$, $p < .05$, and perceived empathy in turn predicted participants' anticipated judgments ($\beta = .72$), $t(24) = 4.54$, $p < .001$. Most important, when participants' anticipated judgments were predicted from both condition and anticipated empathy, there was a significant effect of anticipated empathy ($\beta = .64$), $t(24) = 3.39$, $p < .01$, but no effect of experimental condition ($\beta = .14$, $t < 1.00$). This change in the predictive power of the experimental condition was significant by a Sobel test ($z = 2.40$, $p < .05$), indicating that participants' anticipated judgments in the empathy condition were mediated by their perceptions of the observer's ability to empathize with their embarrassing failure.

Discussion

Taken together, these data demonstrate more conclusively that people in the midst of an embarrassing moment tend to overlook the impact of others' empathic orientation and are consistent with our previous findings that this may occur because people are excessively focused on their own embarrassing blunder or mishap (Savitsky et al., 2001). Participants who imagined being actors in Studies 1 and 2, just like those in the original experiments, failed to anticipate more charitable judgments from observers who could empathize with them than from observers who could not. This oversight was overcome by simply asking participants to consider the extent to which an observer would be able to empathize with them before anticipating how they would be judged. The fact that participants were perfectly able to identify charitable and uncharitable judges when asked to consider empathy also shows that people possess the knowledge to make more calibrated judgments but that this knowledge might be overlooked in the midst of an embarrassing moment.

General Discussion

One of the first things a student of social psychology typically learns is that people (Westerners at least) underestimate the impact of situational variables on others' behavior and draw stronger dispositional inferences on the basis of observed behavior than is warranted (e.g., Gilbert & Malone, 1995). Confusion might set in when this same student also learns that people tend to overestimate the extent to which others are likely to draw strong dispositional inferences about them (Savitsky et al., 2001; Van Boven et al., 1999). If people are so inclined to take behavior at face value, where is there room for exaggeration?

This article has attempted to head off any potential confusion by examining the critically important role played by the observer's ability to empathize or imagine being in the actor's position. Consistent with past research, we found that observers who could empathize with the actor's predicament were more charitable in their assessments than were those who were not in a position to empathize. We also found, however, that actors typically failed to anticipate the significance of this difference in observers' empathic perspectives. This failure led actors to assume that empathic observers would form stronger dispositional inferences about them than they actually did. In four experiments, we demonstrated how this tendency to overlook empathy leads people to overestimate how harshly they are judged for their failures and mishaps.

In Studies 1 and 2, observers in a position to adopt an actor's perspective formed more charitable impressions of the actor's intellectual ability than did observers who were not in such a position. In both experiments, however, the actors failed to anticipate this difference, expecting to be judged equally harshly by both. This failure occurred even when both empathic and unempathic observers were included in the same experimental session (Study 2). Studies 3 and 4 rule out the possibility that people are simply unaware of the link between empathy and judgmental charity by demonstrating that actors do anticipate a difference between empathic and unempathic observers when the distinction between the two is made particularly obvious or when they are asked explicitly to consider another's empathic orientation. Of course, because the situational factors that induce empathy in everyday life tend to be more subtle than those we used in Study 3 and because individuals rarely pause to assess explicitly the extent to which others empathize with them, the results of Studies 1 and 2, in which actors failed to consider observers' empathy altogether, are probably more typical.

Readers might wonder, though, whether the results of these experiments were artifactually produced by observers' reluctance to admit to passing harsh judgments on an embarrassed actor. Inside observers in Study 3, for example, may have thought the actor they observed had a perfectly hideous voice but were reluctant to admit being such a harsh critic. But this alternative interpretation runs afoul of two findings. First, we have demonstrated elsewhere that people are fully willing to admit to judging others harshly when they have little information other than an embarrassing blunder on which to base an impression or are unaware of the prevailing situational constraints (Savitsky et al., 2001). Second and most important, observers in the current studies who were unable to adopt an actor's perspective were also perfectly willing to express their harsh judgments.

Readers might also worry that self-presentational concerns were at work in actors' predictions of how they would be judged, with a sense of false modesty making the actors reluctant to report that they expected observers to rate them charitably. But this is a similarly unsatisfactory account of our findings. Note that the singers in Study 3 and all participants in the empathy condition of Study 4 anticipated different evaluations on the part of empathic and unempathic observers—differences that would not have emerged if actors were simply withholding their true expectations out of false modesty.

It thus seems clear that an important reason why people often overestimate how harshly they will be judged for a public failure or embarrassing mishap is that they fail to recognize when others will empathize with their predicament and moderate their judgments accordingly. But note that the results of Study 3 suggest that even when an observer's empathic orientation is blatantly obvious, people still fail to adjust sufficiently for another's empathic charity. We believe this insufficient adjustment is produced by at least three additional barriers that hinder a full appreciation of another's empathic orientation.

The first is one we alluded to earlier—that people who commit an embarrassing blunder tend to focus excessively on the blunder itself when anticipating how they will be judged and neglect to consider other factors that may moderate observers' impressions (Savitsky et al., 2001). Embarrassing blunders, after all, do not take place in isolation but instead are part of an ongoing social context. Musicians who miss one key note in a concert still hit countless others, and a speaker who blows an opening joke often has 49 minutes to recover. To the extent that actors focus too much attention on one embarrassing event and fail to consider the context surrounding that event, they will overestimate the impact of their focal blunders. People may therefore direct too little attention to others' empathic orientation because their attention is too focused elsewhere.

A second reason that people often anticipate excessively harsh judgments on the part of others, even when they recognize that the observer can see things from their perspective, is that people tend to hold overly cynical beliefs about others. People tend to believe that others will behave less morally than they will themselves (Alicke, 1985; Allison, Messick, & Goethals, 1989; Epley & Dunning, 2000; Goethals, 1986), that others will claim more responsibility for joint tasks than they actually deserve (Kruger & Gilovich, 1999), and, more generally, that others are narrowly motivated to maximize their material and psychological self-interest (D. T. Miller, 2000). This *naive cynicism* (Kruger & Gilovich, 1999) is also reflected in the tendency for people to believe that others are motivated to try to think highly of themselves by disparaging others (Savitsky et al., 2001).

This dark view of others' motivations may contribute to exaggerated fears of harsh evaluations by leading people to believe that others are inclined to think that they would do better—that observers are likely to believe that they, unlike the actor, would act morally, resist temptation, or exercise greater skill and ability. One ancillary finding from Study 1 is consistent with this possibility. Recall that observers in that experiment were asked to anticipate how many items they would have answered correctly if they had been the solver. Solvers, in contrast, were asked to anticipate how many items observers would believe they would have answered correctly if they had been the solver. We found that solvers expected both empathic and unempathic observers to anticipate answering more items correctly than those observers themselves did, $F(1, 23) = 22.81$, $p < .01$. Solvers may have anticipated little judgmental charity from the observers, then, because they exaggerated the observers' anticipated performance.

A third psychological barrier that may hamper people's ability to appreciate others' empathy rests on beliefs not about others' willingness to adopt their perspective but rather about others' ability to do so. Actors may fail to anticipate the empathy that comes from shared understanding because they are unaware of how often others have experienced blunders and setbacks similar to their own. Forgetting an acquaintance's name, for example, may seem like one's own personal affliction while one is struggling to cover it up, but such a misstep is probably not as rare as one might think. Because people try to cover up their embarrassing actions, the average person is likely to falsely assume that he or she is more prone than the average person to suffer from such mishaps (D. T. Miller & Prentice, 1994; Nisbett & Ross, 1980).

To examine this contention, we asked 20 Cornell students to consider a list of 14 embarrassing mishaps and to indicate whether they had committed each of them within the last 5 years. They were also asked (in counterbalanced order with the previous question) to estimate the percentage of their peers who would indicate having committed each of the blunders. If people think their own missteps are relatively unique, then the percentage who indicate that they have suffered each blunder should be higher than the average estimated percentage of others who have committed it. As can be seen in Table 3, participants did indeed think they committed the embarrassing events ($M = 76.1\%$) more than their peers had ($M = 63.9\%$), paired $t(19) = 3.04$, $p < .01$. This pattern emerged on 11 of the 14 events ($p < .01$ by binomial test). Of these 11, 9 were significant at the .01 level.

This tendency to overestimate the uniqueness of one's personal failings may be fairly common. After all, because people are almost always aware of their own behavior, their own missteps, blunders, and failures are hard to miss. Not so with the shortcomings of others, who may slip while one is not looking, forget someone else's name, or bungle a talk that one happens to miss. Because people are necessarily present at all of their embarrassing moments but not others', they may conclude that they are uniquely prone to embarrassing mishaps.

Although we have been most concerned in this analysis with those determinants of empathic orientation that people fail to

Table 3
Percentage of Participants Who Have Committed Various Blunders and Their Estimates of the Percentage of Their Peers Who Have Done So

Behavior	% committed by self	Average % committed by peers	Difference
Tripped over a crack in the sidewalk	100	77	23***
Left bathroom with zipper down	70	65	5
Spilled water on pants (so it looked like they had wet themselves)	80	63	17***
Tripped over shoelaces	55	57	−2
Worn clothes with unnoticed but obvious stain	85	67	18***
Committed an embarrassing slip of the tongue	85	82	3
Forgotten name of acquaintance	95	79	16***
Said something embarrassing in class	75	58	17**
Forgotten what to say in middle of a sentence	100	73	27***
Spilled drink at party	90	70	20***
Dropped tray in cafeteria	35	39	−4
Accidentally triggered security system	20	24	−4
Had coughing or sneezing fit in class	75	53	22**
Had a bad hair day	100	92	8**

** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

recognize, we suspect there are also many determinants they do anticipate. Doubtless people expect to be judged especially charitably by friends, relatives, and acquaintances, and doubtless these expectations are, on the whole, confirmed. The tale we are telling, then, is a familiar one—of people failing to take account of transient situational variables (in this case, contextual determinants of empathy) while also giving considerable weight to less transient, person-centered variables (in this case, the observer's motivation to empathize or not because of a preexisting relationship with the actor). Thus, recent research on the spotlight effect is not, after all, at variance with the more established literature on the fundamental attribution error. As this analysis makes clear, the two literatures fit together in several respects like hand in glove.

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