

This Week's Citation Classic™

Storms M D. Videotape and the attribution process: reversing actors' and observers' points of view. *J. Personal. Soc. Psychol.* 27:165-75, 1973. [Department of Psychology, Yale University, New Haven, CT]

Sets of two unacquainted college students (actors) met for brief 'getting acquainted' conversations while two other students observed. One actor was videotaped and the tape was replayed to all four subjects. Actors who viewed themselves on tape made stronger personal attributions for their behavior during the conversation while actors who viewed the other actor on tape attributed their own behavior more to the situation. Observers' attributions about the two actors' behavior were similarly influenced by whom they saw on the videotape replay. [The *Social Sciences Citation Index® (SSCI®)* indicates that this paper has been cited in over 325 publications since 1973.]

Michael D. Storms
California School of Professional
Psychology
2235 Beverly Boulevard
Los Angeles, CA 90057

April 12, 1984

"During my last year of graduate school at Yale University, I had planned and started an applied social psychology dissertation at a local factory. Several weeks into the study, and after I had collected pretest data, the factory went out of business and I was left stranded without a dissertation. In desperation I approached every faculty member I knew and begged for a dissertation idea. One of my professors, Dick Nisbett, mentioned a theoretical paper he had just completed with Ed Jones¹ in which they argued that people tend to attribute the cause of their own behavior more to situational factors while they tend to attribute the cause of others' behavior more to personality factors—a phenomenon they called the 'actor/observer effect.' Dick thought I might be able to find some kind of dissertation idea in that paper.

"Meanwhile, I had also become

fascinated by the emerging technology of videotape recording. This was in the late 1960s, and few people had seen themselves on tape. In the process of taping several of my friends and colleagues and showing the tapes back to them, it occurred to me that when people see themselves on videotape for the first time, they are put in the unique position of being observers of their own actions. Would that then lead them to make more observer-like attributions about their behavior?

"Thus, the idea was born for a very simple dissertation in which two strangers would meet and converse for five minutes, one participant in the conversation would be taped, and the tape would be replayed immediately after the conversation. As hypothesized, the actor who saw him/herself on tape made more personal attributions for his/her own behavior during the conversation.

"It is hard to say why a particular study becomes frequently cited in psychology. I suspect this study has gained some attention because it makes a very simple point about the influence of salience and attention on higher-order cognitive processes — when my subjects saw themselves on videotape, information about themselves became more salient and more likely to become grist for their attribution mills. The field of social cognition and attribution theory has since spawned much more sophisticated analyses of the influence of salience, attention, perception, and 'point of view,' such as the acclaimed work of Shelley Taylor (e.g., reference 2). Dick, whose influential theoretical work provided the basic idea for my dissertation, has continued to publish insightful papers on how people's cognitive maps are influenced by the ways they process the data available to them (e.g., reference 3)."

1. Jones E E & Nisbett R E. *The actor and the observer: divergent perceptions of the causes of behavior.* Morristown, NJ: General Learning Press, 1971. 16 p.
2. Taylor S E & Fiske S T. Salience, attention, and attribution: top of the head phenomena. (Berkowitz L, ed.) *Advances in experimental social psychology.* New York: Academic Press, 1978. Vol. 11. p. 249-88.
3. Nisbett R E & Ross L. *Human inference: strategies and shortcomings of social judgment.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1980. 334 p.