Reactions to the statements made during an informal conversation are likely to be influenced by perceptions of their pragmatic implications (i.e., why the statements occurred) as well as their literal implications for the persons and objects to which they refer. Recipients' sensitivity to a statement's pragmatic meaning may depend on (a) their information processing objectives at the time they encounter the statement and (b) the extent to which the statement violates normative expectations concerning the content and style of messages that are typically transmitted in the social context in which it occurs. These hypotheses are supported by research in which subjects were asked to form impressions of persons on the basis of information exchanged during conversations in which they both did and did not actively participate. The cognitive mediators of the impressions formed in informal conversations are quite different from those that have usually been investigated in previous research on person memory and judgment, in which only the semantic implications of the information presented typically come into play.

Research on the cognitive mediators of person impressions has traditionally been concerned with how different types of information influence liking for a person. The information presented has included descriptions of a person's general traits (Anderson, 1971, 1981; Fishbein & Hunter, 1964; Wyer, 1974), specific behaviors that have implications for these traits (Hamilton, Katz, & Lierer, 1980; Hastie et al., 1980; Srull & Wyer, 1989; Wyer & Carlston, 1994), and the similarity of the traits to those of the evaluator (Byrne, 1971; Clore, 1975). This research has provided considerable insight into the cognitive processes that underlie person impression formation under the conditions in which it has been investigated.

This research was supported by Grant MH 3-8585 from the National Institute of Mental Health. Thanks are extended to the University of Illinois Social Cognition Group for numerous suggestions at several stages of the design and preparation of these studies and for insights in interpreting the results.

Address correspondence to Robert S. Wyer, Jr., Department of Psychology, University of Illinois, 603 E. Daniel Street, Champaign, IL 61820.
However, the generality of conclusions drawn from this body of research may be limited to the specific conditions that have been studied. The information presented in this research has usually been conveyed out of its social context (e.g., in a randomly ordered list, presented on cards or on a computer screen). Moreover, the information usually comes from a disinterested and objective source. Finally, it is apparently selected by the experimenter from a larger pool, implying that it is particularly important for the impression formation objectives that subjects are given. Under such conditions, subjects are likely to believe they should take the information literally, at face value. Thus, they may focus primarily on the semantic implications of the information.

Outside the laboratory, however, the information on which person impressions are based is commonly acquired from statements that people make to one another in informal conversations or other social interactions. These statements, which can either be about the speaker or about other people and events, are essentially communicative acts (Searle, 1969). As such, they potentially have implications for not only the traits and general likableness of their referent but characteristics of the speaker as well. Hence, recipients not only assess the semantic implications of a speaker's statements (i.e., the literal meaning of the words expressed) but are also likely to construe the reasons why these statements were made under the specific conditions in which they were uttered.

The factors that influence perceptions of why a communication is generated have been investigated in many areas of research including the detection of deception (DePaulo, 1992; Krauss, 1981; Kraut, 1978), communication and persuasion (Eagly & Himmelfarb, 1978; Eagly, Wood, & Chaiken, 1978; Mills & Jellison, 1967), and social attribution (Jones & Davis, 1965). With few exceptions (Higgins, 1981), however, these factors have not been taken into account either theoretically or empirically in research on person memory and impression formation. This article examines the ways in which the nonliteral implications of communications exchanged in informal conversations can affect the processing of these communications as well as other available information, and the consequent effects of this processing on impressions of both the speakers and the persons to whom the messages refer.

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this article, we will refer to the reasons why a communication is transmitted as the pragmatic implications of the message, as opposed to its semantic implications or literal meaning. Note that our use of the term "pragmatic" is broader than its use in linguistics, where it refers to the meaning that the communicator intends to convey through his or her message. The pragmatic implications that a recipient perceives in a message can often include the meaning that the communicator intends to transmit, but this is not necessarily the case. Moreover, these perceived implications can also pertain to more general feelings, attitudes, and personality characteristics of the speaker that the speaker does not actually wish to convey. Thus, for example, the statement "Ronald Reagan's fiscal policies were certainly good for the economy" might be intended as irony and, therefore, as a disparagement of Reagan's policies rather than an endorsement of them. However, the recipient might not perceive these implications. By the same token, a professor's comment that his graduate assistant is about as helpful as a well-trained ape might convey that the assistant is not very competent. However, the recipient may infer from this utterance that the professor himself is rather nasty and hypercritical, and is unpleasant to work for, although these implications were obviously not intended by the speaker himself.

Most communications that are transmitted in a social context have pragmatic meaning as we conceptualize it. That is, they are generated for a particular purpose—to inform, to persuade, to create a good impression, or simply to entertain. However, a construal of the pragmatic implications of communications requires cognitive effort over and above the assessment of their semantic implications, and this additional effort may not always be expended. It seems reasonable to postulate that recipients’ attention to the pragmatic implications of information is greater when either:

1. these implications are particularly relevant to recipients’ processing goals at the time they encounter the information, or
2. the communication deviates in either content or style from normative expectations for the type of messages that are appropriate to transmit in the particular social situation at hand.

Two sets of studies that bear on these possibilities are described in this article. The first set provides evidence that the pragmatic implications of people’s statements about themselves and others are considered spontaneously when individuals receive information about persons with the objective of forming an impression of these persons. The second set of studies bears on the hypothesis that subjects’ attention to the pragmatic implications of communications transmitted during a conversation is further augmented when the communications deviate from normative expectations, and that this increased attention is reflected in not only the judgments that subjects make, but also their recall of the counternormative messages and their processing of other available information.
GENERAL INFLUENCES OF PRAGMATIC MEANING ON PERSON IMPRESSIONS

The information exchanged about persons in informal conversations can consist of either trait descriptions of the individuals or anecdotal accounts of their behavior in various situations. However, the statements that convey this information are themselves behaviors that can have implications for the speakers themselves. Thus, someone’s description of an acquaintance as stupid and unkind could indicate that the acquaintance is not very likeable. On the other hand, it could also indicate that the communicator is more disagreeable than others, who typically describe people in less disparaging terms. Because the statements made about people in social interactions are often matters of opinion, they can reflect as much on the communicator as on the persons being described. Indeed, forming an impression of the speaker may often be considered a precondition for evaluating the person the speaker is describing.

These conditions suggest that when people wish to form an impression of someone on the basis of information they receive in a conversational context, they focus on the pragmatic implications of this information as well as its semantic implications. Three studies bear on this possibility. In the first two studies, subjects formed impressions of target persons on the basis of information conveyed in conversations in which they did not themselves participate. These studies are reported elsewhere and will be described only briefly. The third experiment, which concerns the role of pragmatic information processing in conversations in which subjects are active participants, is described in more detail.

IMPRESSIONS FORMED ON THE BASIS OF CONVERSATIONS BETWEEN OTHER PERSONS

Impressions Formed from Speakers’ Descriptions of Others

The first evidence obtained in our laboratory of the impact of pragmatic information processing on person impressions was reported by Wyer, Budesheim, and Lambert (1990). Subjects listened to an audiorecorded conversation between two persons (ostensibly college students) about a male acquaintance, being told to form an impression of the person being described. The tape began with brief instructions to the two speakers in which each speaker was ostensibly asked to write down a set of general trait descriptions of the target person. The tape was then stopped, and the two speakers’ hand-written trait descriptions, which varied systematically in favorableness, were passed on to the subjects. When the conversation ensued, the two speakers exchanged both favorable and unfavorable anecdotes about the target’s behavior. After listening to the conversation, subjects reported their liking for both the target and the speakers, and then recalled the behaviors that were mentioned.

The trait and behavior descriptions were very similar to those presented in studies of person impression formation in which information is conveyed out of its social context, in a randomized list (e.g., Wyer, Bodenhausen, & Srull, 1984; Wyer & Martin, 1986). In these earlier studies, subjects typically used the semantic implications of the initial trait descriptions of the target to form an initial concept of him as likeable or disagreeable, and their later judgments were typically based on this concept. In Wyer et al.’s study, however, the results were quite different. In this case, subjects used the speakers’ trait descriptions of the target to form concepts of the speakers, judging them more likeable when they described the target favorably than when they described him unfavorably. Then, having done this, subjects appeared to use these speaker-based concepts as standards of comparison, judging the target to be less likeable when the speakers had described him favorably (and, therefore, were personally considered more likeable) than when the speakers had described him unfavorably. These effects were very similar to those obtained when subjects were explicitly told to form impressions of speakers rather than the target. In other words, subjects spontaneously focused their attention on the implications of the information for the speakers, even when they were explicitly told to evaluate the person the speakers were discussing.

Recall data suggested that subjects organized the speakers’ descriptions of the target’s behavior around concepts of the speakers rather than a concept of the target, and that they paid particular attention to those descriptions that confirmed the validity of these concepts. For example, subjects had better recall of behaviors one speaker mentioned that were inconsistent with the trait descriptions of the target provided by the other speaker, and therefore confirmed that the latter speaker’s trait description reflected a general disposition to evaluate people favorably or unfavorably rather than to describe the attributes of the target accurately.

In summary, therefore, subjects in this study paid relatively little attention to the literal implications of the speakers’ trait descriptions of the target. Rather, they focused on the implications of these descriptions for characteristics of the speakers who provided them. Moreover, subjects thought more extensively about behaviors the speakers mentioned that confirmed the concepts they had formed about the speakers...
rather than thinking about the implications of the behaviors for the target per se.¹

**Concepts Formed from Self Descriptions**

People who describe others favorably are likely to be considered more tolerant, and generally nicer, than are people who describe others in negative terms. The way in which impressions of people are affected by people's descriptions of themselves is less obvious. This is because both the semantic implications of these self descriptions and the pragmatic implications that subjects derive from them may be taken into account, and these implications can evaluatively differ. For example, the semantic implications of a man's description of himself as intelligent and clever is favorable. In a conversational context, however, such a self description could also imply that the man is arrogant. Analogously, a man who characterizes himself as unintelligent might be attributed modesty as well as lack of brilliance. When the pragmatic implications of a person's self description for his or her likableness are opposite in direction to its semantic implications, their effects could offset one another.

Data consistent with this possibility were obtained in a series of studies by Wyer, Budesheim, Lambert and Swan (1994). These studies were similar to Wyer et al.'s (1990) earlier study, except in this case, the conversation that subjects heard was about one of the speakers. Specifically, one speaker initially provided a favorable or unfavorable trait description of the target, whereas the other, target person provided either a favorable or unfavorable description of himself. Then, during the conversation itself, both speakers exchanged anecdotes concerning the target's behavior, about which they had mutual knowledge.

The favorableness of the other speaker's trait description of the target had little impact on subjects' liking for the target, but had a positive influence on their liking for the speaker. These data, therefore, replicated the results of the earlier study. In contrast, the target's trait description of himself had no influence at all on subjects' evaluations of him. This was true regardless of whether subjects had initially been told to form

---

¹ Note that these recall data also differ from those obtained in previous person memory research (e.g., Snell & Wyer, 1989) in which subjects generally show better recall of behaviors that are evaluatively inconsistent with trait adjective descriptions of the person being judged. This recall advantage presumably results from subjects' attempts to reconcile semantic (evaluative) inconsistencies between the behaviors and the concept of the target that was formed on the basis of the initial trait information. However, there was no evidence of such an inconsistency resolution process when similar information about persons was presented in a conversational context, either in this study or in subsequent ones to be reported (e.g., Wyer, Budesheim, Lambert, & Swan, 1994).

an impression of the target or an impression of the other speaker. This could of course indicate that the target's self description was considered totally incredible. However, it could also indicate that the semantic implications of the target's self-description had an effect, but that this effect was offset by the implications of this description for the target's arrogance or boastfulness.

The semantic and pragmatic implications of self-descriptions are easier to separate when recipients' processing objectives do not require a judgment to which both are equally relevant. In a study by Jones, Schwartz, and Gilbert (1984), for example, subjects anticipated bargaining with a partner who was described by either himself or another as either honest or deceitful. Here, the attribute in question was directly relevant to subjects' anticipated interaction with the target, and subjects were explicitly asked to judge this attribute. In this case, semantic implications of the target's self-description appeared to predominate. That is, targets' self-descriptions of their honesty had a greater positive effect on subjects' judgments of this attribute than did others' description of the trait.

The relative emphasis placed on the semantic and pragmatic implications of self-descriptions can also be influenced by independent evidence that the semantic implications are likely to be credible. Rosen, Cochrane, and Musser (1990) found that the favorableness of job candidates' self descriptions had a positive effect on subjects' own recommendations of them when these descriptions were accompanied by favorable external letters of reference. However, it had the opposite effect when the candidates' reference letters were unfavorable. Thus, subjects appeared to give the semantic implications of the candidates' self description more weight when there was outside evidence of the candidates' credibility, but focused on the pragmatic implications of these descriptions when the candidates' credibility was more doubtful. In informal conversations, however, perceptions of both the semantic and pragmatic implications of participants' self descriptions may have an impact on evaluations of them.
social relationship they have established. This goal may be particularly characteristic of women, who are more likely than men to seek a sense of community, or "connectedness", in their conversations with others (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Chodorow, 1979; Gilligan, 1982; Tannen, 1990). Thus, although people's comments and behavior during a conversation can often have implications for both their general traits and their attitudes toward the particular persons to whom they are speaking, the effects of the latter implications may predominate.

Second, the pragmatic meaning of people's communications in actual interaction situations can be inferred not only from the context of these communications but also the style in which the communications are delivered. For example, people who elaborate answers to their conversation partner's questions, or who ask the partner questions in return, may convey that they are interested in the partner and in the conversation more generally. Partners who are sensitive to these implications may consequently like the communicators more than they like those who provide only "yes" or "no" answers to their questions and do not reciprocate these questions (thereby conveying lack of interest in the interaction). These differences could occur independently of the actual content of the information transmitted.

Differences in partners' tendency to elaborate or reciprocate questions during a conversation could of course affect subjects' liking for them for other reasons as well. For example, when a partner responds to a question with a "yes" or "no" answer and does not ask a question in return, the subject is required to think of a new topic to discuss. This increases the difficulty of conducting the conversation and, therefore, decreases the subject's enjoyment of it. This negative evaluation could generalize to the partner as well, and consequently could affect liking for the partner independently of the possible implications of the partner's conversational behavior for the partner's traits and feelings about the subject.

We investigated those possibilities. Subjects participated in a 5-minute get-acquainted conversation with another student. They were told that the study's purpose was to understand how impressions were formed in informal conversations. Before meeting, one subject was given a list of five questions to ask the partner. These questions were similar to those that college students typically ask one another when they first meet, and typically elicit responses whose semantic content has few evaluative implications. However, the partners responded to these questions (a) by either elaborating or simply giving a 1-2 word (e.g., "yes" or "no") answer, and (b) by either asking the subject a question in return or not doing so. Except for these responses, partners behaved as they would in any similar conversation outside the laboratory. After engaging in the conversation, subjects reported their liking for the partner and then made other judgments concerning their reactions to the partner and the conversation itself.

One feature of our methodology should be mentioned. Subjects' conversation partners were not trained confederates. Rather, they were themselves participants in the experiment whose service as accomplices was enlisted at the time of the study. This procedure allowed the general content of the conversations to vary randomly over subject pairs within each experimental condition, thus increasing the likelihood that the effects of our experimental manipulations would be independent of the semantic implications of what was communicated. The procedure had the added advantage of permitting the conversations to be as natural as possible, and therefore maximally similar to those in which subjects typically engage outside the laboratory.

Method

A total of 138 male and 146 female introductory psychology students participated in the study for course credit. They were randomly assigned to pairs of the same or the opposite sex. One member of each pair was arbitrarily assigned the role of the actual subject, and the other was recruited as the partner (thus serving, in effect, as an accomplice). The design involved four factors: sex of subject, sex of partner, elaboration and question reciprocation. Between seven and ten subject pairs were run at each combination of these variables.

Instructions to Subjects. Upon arriving at the experiment, subjects and partners were placed in separate experimental booths where they were individually instructed. (Subjects were kept blind to the individual with whom they would interact prior to the start of the conversation.) Subjects were told that we were interested in how people form impressions in get-acquainted conversations, and that we would therefore like them to engage in a 5-minute conversation with another student, "much as if you had met the person for the first time in an informal setting, such as at lunch or on a break between classes." However, on the pretext that it "is important . . . to have some similar information conveyed in all of the conversations," we indicated that we would like them to ask their partner five questions. These questions, which were given to each subject in a list, were:

1. Where are you from?
2. Do you like school?
3. Where do you live on campus?
4. What is your major?
5. How are you doing in your classes?
Subjects were told to work the questions into the conversation in a way that seemed natural. They were told that their partner would not know they had been told to ask the questions and would not be given any questions to ask them. Rather, the partner would be told only to carry on a conversation as naturally as possible. Subjects were told that except for asking the five questions, they should converse naturally and should try to form an impression of the partner and whether they would like the person if they got to know him or her better.

Instructions to Partners. Instructions to partners also indicated that the study’s purpose was to investigate impression formation in informal conversations. However, they were further told that we were particularly interested in participants’ reactions to how others respond to their questions. The instructions continued:

Some people answer questions by giving a lot of information about themselves and by asking a lot of questions in return. Other people are more resistant to giving information about themselves. We are interested in how these different response styles affect the impressions that are formed.

The partner’s help was then solicited. The partner was given the list of questions the subject was told to ask. Then, under elaboration, question-reciprocation conditions, the partner was told:

We would like you to do two things when your partner asks you these questions. First, rather than simply answering the questions with a yes-or-no answer, elaborate your answer in one or two sentences. Then, after doing so, ask the other person the same question in return. For example, when your partner asks you if you like school, you might say, “Yes, I like the social life, but the tests are hard. How about you?” Or, when you are asked where you are from, you might say, “I’m from the North side of Chicago, but before that I lived in Detroit. Where are you from?” Answer the questions truthfully, but don’t go into too much detail. Keep your answer to one or two sentences, and then ask your partner the same question that you were just asked. Except for your responses to the five questions that I have passed out to you, however, carry on the conversation as naturally as possible.

Under no-elaboration, question-reciprocation conditions, partners were told to restrict their answers to 1-2 words but to ask the other the same question in return. Instructions in elaboration, no-question-reciprocation and no-elaboration, no-question-reciprocation conditions were similar to those in the first two conditions except that partners were told not to ask a question in return. In all cases, examples were provided to convey the sort of response to make.

The experimenter then left to retrieve the subject, thereby giving the partner time to think about how he or she would respond to the subject’s questions. The subject was then ushered into the room and seated on the other side of a partition so that participants were out of visual contact. The subject and partner were introduced and then left alone to engage in the conversation. (The conversation was tape recorded with the participants’ permission.)

Dependent Variables. After five minutes had elapsed, the experimenter returned to the room and escorted the partner back to his or her original booth. Subjects then completed a questionnaire pertaining to several aspects of the experiment. Specifically, subjects indicated how much they thought they would like their partner if they got to know him or her better. In addition, they reported the extent to which the partner was aloof and self-centered, whether the partner was interested in them personally, and whether the partner liked them. Finally, they indicated how easy it was to conduct the conversation and how much they enjoyed engaging in it. These ratings were all made along a scale from 0 (not at all) to 10 (extremely).

Manipulation Checks. After completing the ratings described above, subjects answered some open-ended questions about the conversation. Then, they indicated (a) whether the partner only gave “yes” or “no” answers to their questions or elaborated in response to these questions, and (b) whether partners asked them a question in return. In addition, subjects were given a list of the questions they had asked and indicated what their partner had said in response to the questions. Partners independently reported what they had said. These data permitted us to verify that the partner had responded as instructed and that subjects were in fact aware of these responses.

Results

Subjects were clearly sensitive to the other’s (O’s) responses to their questions. Their post-experiment reports of O’s verbal responses coincided with O’s own reports of these responses 84% of the time. Subjects’ more general descriptions of their partners’ behavior confirmed this conclusion. That is, subjects were more likely to describe O as elaborating under elaboration than under no-elaboration conditions (.79 vs. .39), \( F(1,126) = 32.31, p < .01 \), and were more likely to report O as reciprocating their questions under reciprocation than no-reciprocation conditions (.85 vs. .50) \( F(1,126) = 28.77, p < .01 \).

Overall analyses of subjects’ judgments of the conversation and their conversation partner typically yielded no effects that depended significantly on whether the conversation partner was male or female, or was
of the same or the opposite sex (p > .10). Therefore, data are pooled over sex of partner in the analyses to be reported.

Liking for Partners. Subjects' liking for the other (O) was expected to vary with both O's reciprocation of subjects' questions and O's elaboration of answers to these questions. Data relevant to these hypotheses, shown at the top of Table 1, provide only partial support for this hypothesis. That is, subjects reported greater liking for partners who elaborated than those who did not (7.13 vs. 6.52), F(1,126) = 3.85, p < .05. However, question reciprocation had only a small and nonsignificant influence on subjects' liking for O (p > .10). Neither of these effects was contingent on sex of subject (p > .10). It should nonetheless be noted that males' liking for O was substantially greater when O both elaborated and reciprocated questions than under other conditions. Therefore, the effects of question reciprocation on males' liking for O cannot be entirely dismissed. Further evidence bearing on these effects is provided presently.

Although the effect of partners' conversational behavior on subjects' liking for them is not surprising, the question is why the effect occurred. As noted previously, the effects could be mediated by either (a) subjects' spontaneous attribution of evaluation-relevant traits to the partner, (b) their perception of the quality of their relationship with the partner, or (c) their reactions to the conversation itself. The following analyses bear on these possibilities. The results of these analyses are somewhat more complex than one might wish. However, the mediating effects of the three factors we considered are clarified by path analyses to be reported presently.

Trait Inferences. The two traits we expected to be most clearly implied by partners' conversational style, and to have the greatest impact on subjects' liking for them, were aloofness and self-centeredness. In fact, however, neither question reciprocation nor elaboration had a significant effect on judgments of either attribute (p > .10). Aloofness and self-centeredness obviously do not constitute the entire set of traits that subjects might spontaneously infer from the partner's conversational style. Therefore, the influence of trait attributions cannot be completely discounted. Nevertheless, these data raise a question as to whether such attributions were an important mediator of the effects of partners' conversational style on subjects' liking for them.

Perceptions of the Relationship. Subjects' perceptions of the relationship they established with their partner during the conversation were reflected by their judgments that O was interested in them and, more particularly, liked them. These judgments are shown in the second and third sections of Table 1. Question reciprocation increased both males' and females' perceptions that O was interested in them, F(1,126) = 5.22, p < .01. However, it did not significantly affect their perceptions that O liked them (p > .10). Thus, any effect of question reciprocation on subjects' liking for O seems unlikely to be mediated by their perception that O reciprocated this liking.

In contrast, elaboration had a positive influence on females' perceptions that O both was interested in them and liked them. However, it had little if any effect on males' judgments. The interaction of subject sex and elaboration was only significant in analyses of subjects' perceptions that O liked them, F(1,126) = 4.69, p < .05. It nevertheless seems clear that only females' perceptions of the relationship were appreciably affected by partners' elaboration of answers to their questions. This means that whereas the effect of elaboration on females' liking for O might be a result of its mediating influence on their perceptions of the relationship, its influence on males' liking for O was due to other factors.

Reactions to the Conversation. Both elaboration and question reciprocation also seemed likely to affect the ease with which subjects could
conduct the conversation and, therefore, their enjoyment of it. This appeared to be the case, as shown in the last two sections of Table 1. However, the relative magnitude of their effects depended on subject’s sex. Specifically, males believed that the conversation was both easier and more enjoyable when their partner reciprocated their questions. Females, however, believed that the communication was equally easy and enjoyable regardless of whether their partner asked them questions or not. This sex difference is confirmed by interactive effects of subject sex and question reciprocation on judgments of both the ease of conducting the conversation, \( F(1,126) = 4.90, p < .03, \) and enjoyment of it, \( F(1,126) = 3.08, p < .08. \) In contrast, although elaboration had a positive effect on subjects’ perception that the conversation was both easy, \( F(1,126) = 5.95, p < .05, \) and enjoyable, \( F(1,126) = 7.32, p < .01, \) these effects were both nonsignificantly greater among females than among males.

Path Analyses. The results summarized above suggest that although partners’ conversational style affected both males’ and females’ perceptions that the conversation was easy and enjoyable, it affected only females’ perceptions that the partner was interested in them and liked them. This suggests that although males’ liking for O was mediated by only their perceptions of the conversation per se, females’ liking for O was also influenced by their beliefs that they had established a sense of connectedness with O during the interaction. In contrast, neither males’ nor females’ liking for the partner appears to have been influenced by the effect of O’s conversational style on more general trait attributions.

These conclusions were confirmed through path analyses. In these analyses, which were performed separately for males and females, we assumed that subjects’ liking for O (LikeO) was a function of both subjects’ perception of O’s aloofness and self-centeredness (Aloof), their enjoyment of the conversation (Enjoy), and their beliefs that O liked them (OLikeS). Each of these variables in turn, was assumed to depend on how easy the conversation was to conduct (Easy) and perceptions that O was interested in them personally (OIntS). Finally, these variables, as well as perceptions of O’s aloofness, were each expected to be influenced by question reciprocation (Quest) and elaboration (Elab). Analyses based on these assumptions yielded the path equations shown in Table 2. The implications of these results are seen more easily from Figure 1, which shows only significant paths relating the variables of concern.

These data confirm the conclusion that neither males’ nor females’ liking for O was a function of their perceptions of O as aloof or self-centered. Rather, it was a joint function of their enjoyment of the conversation and their perceptions that O liked them. However, the factors that mediate these effects appear to differ between men and women. Specifically, females’ enjoyment of the conversation, and their perception that

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Regression Equations and Regression Weights (Path Coefficients)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Male subjects</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aloof = .07Elab + .06Quest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OIntS = .02Elab + .25*Quest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easy = .14Elab + .27*Quest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OLikeS = .65*Easy + .11OIntS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoy = .75*Easy + .16OIntS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LikeO = .60<em>Enjoy + .30</em>OLikeS + .10Aloof</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Female Subjects</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aloof = .17Elab + .21Quest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OIntS = .24*Elab + .14Quest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easy = .27*Elab + .08Quest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OLikeS = .25<em>Easy + .60</em>OIntS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoy = .50<em>Easy + .35</em>OIntS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LikeO = .64<em>Enjoy + .27</em>OLikeS - .09Aloof</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Path coefficient is significant at \( p < .05. \)

O liked them, depended on both their beliefs that O was interested in them personally and their perception that the conversation was easy to conduct. However, males’ perception that O was interested in them had no influence on either their enjoyment of the conversation or their belief that O liked them. Instead, these latter judgments (and, therefore, males’ liking for O) were determined solely by perceptions that the conversation was easy to conduct.²

Some apparent discrepancies between implications of these results and those of the analyses of variance should be noted. In the latter analyses, for example, only elaboration had a significant effect on subjects’ liking for O, and these effects did not significantly differ between males and females. In contrast, Figure 1 suggests that although females’ liking for the partner was primarily due to the effects of elaboration, males’ liking for the partner was primarily a result of O’s question reciprocation. A closer scrutiny of the data in Table 1 also suggests that the effect of question reciprocation on liking for O was greater among males than among females, whereas the effect of elaboration on liking for O was relatively less. Although these sex differences were not statistically

². An alternative model to the one evaluated in this study might assume that subjects’ liking for their partner affects their perceptions that the partner likes them rather than the reverse. This alternative possibility seems plausible in the case of male subjects, whose liking for the partner appears to be determined primarily by their perception of the conversation as easy to conduct. It is somewhat less plausible in the case of female subjects. Nevertheless, the possibility should be kept in mind when evaluating the results.
Male Subjects

Female Subjects

FIGURE 1. Path diagram of significant relations among (a) the partner’s (O’s) conversation style, (b) perceptions of the partner relationship and conversation, and (c) liking for the partner. (For simplicity, residual variance is not shown.)

significant in analyses of variance, they are directionally consistent with the implications of the path analyses. The sample sizes in this study were unfortunately too small to permit a meaningful statistical comparison of the different data patterns for males and females suggested in Figure 1. In the absence of such a comparison, however, some caution should be taken in accepting the difference as reliable pending replication.

DISCUSSION

The factors that mediated impression formation in this study differed markedly from those that have typically been assumed to provide the basis of impressions formed from information that is presented out of its social context (cf. Srull & Wyer, 1989). For one thing, these impressions were based in part on subjects’ reactions to the conversation itself (e.g., the difficulty they had in conducting it). Moreover, women’s impressions, if not men’s, were mediated by the pragmatic implica-
whereas the failure to respond to this manner is counternormative. Therefore, it is conceivable that subjects' sensitivity to the pragmatic implications of their partner's failure to elaborate or to reciprocate their questions was stimulated in part by its counternormativeness, over and above the more general motivational factors that are induced by subjects' impression formation objectives. This possibility is elaborated in the next section.

**EFFECTS OF EXPECTANCY DEVIATIONS ON PRAGMATIC INFORMATION PROCESSING**

As we postulated earlier, people are more likely to expend the cognitive effort required to identify the pragmatic implications of communications they receive in a social context if these communications deviate from expectations for the messages that typically occur in this context. These expectations could pertain to either the content of the communications or the style in which they are delivered. In the former regard, social communication is usually governed by a number of implicit principles that influence both the content of the messages that communicators transmit and recipients' ultimate interpretation of them (for detailed analyses of these principles, see Green, 1989; Grice, 1975; Higgins, 1981; Sperber & Wilson, 1986). For example, communications are supposed to be informative, or to provide information that the recipient does not already have. Consequently, communicators typically try to generate messages that meet this criterion. Moreover, recipients assume that the communicators have this intention and interpret their messages accordingly. For similar reasons, recipients typically assume that communicators intend their messages to be accurate (i.e., to convey information that accurately reflects his or her attitudes, beliefs, or state of knowledge about the issues being discussed) and to be relevant to the topic at hand.

Other normative principles, however, may be specific to certain types of interactions. For example, people in informal conversations are typically expected to be polite, or not intentionally to offend or embarrass the persons with whom they interact. Moreover, people in conveying information about themselves are expected to appear modest, or not to tout their own horns unnecessarily. Still other communication norms may be restricted to certain groups of individuals who have a long interaction history and have established communication patterns that are unique to them (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967).

Finally, normative principles can also guide aspects of conversational behavior that are independent of communication content. The study described in the last section provides an example. That is, conversation partners may expect one another to respond to questions by elaborating, or by asking similar questions in return, regardless of the particular topic under discussion. Other, nonverbal or paralinguistic behaviors (e.g., eye contact, voice tone) may also be governed by normative considerations. Whatever their specific nature, communication norms and the expectations they induce may function similarly. That is, when a communication is consistent with norm-based expectations, recipients may not think extensively about its pragmatic implications unless these implications are particularly relevant to their information processing goals at the time. If, however, a communication violates a normative expectation, recipients are likely to try to understand why the communication occurred. In doing so, they may often reconstruct its implications in a way that is consistent with the norm that was ostensibly violated. This reconstruction sometimes leads the communication to be assigned a meaning that is not reflected by its semantic meaning, but could often be the direct opposite.

Some effects of violating communication norms on the interpretation of messages in the public media were identified by Gruenfeld and Wyer (1992). However, these effects may be particularly evident in informal conversation. Wyer and Collins (1992), for example, postulate that the recognition of such violations is central to the identification of statements as witticisms rather than serious expressions of opinion. For example, the statement "What America needs is another Ronald Reagan" may elicit amusement to the extent the recipient regards the statement as obviously false and, therefore, in violation of a conversational norm to be accurate. In these circumstances, the recipient may infer that the statement is intended as sarcasm and that the speaker actually intends to disparage Reagan. However, such an inference would probably not be made if either (a) the recipient regards the statement as true (and, therefore, as consistent with an "accuracy" principle), or (b) he or she believes that the speaker is an arch-conservative, and therefore personally endorses the statement's literal meaning.

As this example points out, the construal of a statement's pragmatic meaning often requires a substantial amount of knowledge about both the reference of the statement and characteristics of the communicator. For this reason, sensitivity to the pragmatic implications of communica-

3. Evidence that the failure to elaborate or to reciprocate questions is considered counternormative was confirmed on the basis of data from 64 introductory psychology students. Subjects were asked four questions concerning the extent to which they perceive members of the same and the opposite sex "to ask a lot of questions in the course of a conversation" and "to elaborate in response to questions rather than simply answering 'yes' or 'no'". These estimates, along a scale from 0 (not at all likely) to 10 (extremely likely) in all cases averaged greater than 5.7. Therefore, the assumption that both elaboration and question reciprocation are normative behaviors in informal interactions appears to be justified.
tions is often greater when the communicator and recipient are well acquainted than when they are strangers. Partners in close relationships, for example, often develop a private meaning system that permits them to convey emotions to one another to which others are not privy (Watzlawick et al., 1967). A man whose wife comments, "I think it’s cold in here," may interpret this comment as informative if his spouse has not typically made such a statement before. If, however, the comment is one of many similar ones that the wife has made over a period of weeks (and, therefore, is uninformative), the husband might interpret it as expression of irritation at his compulsion to keep the thermostat low. Listeners who are not privy to the couples’ interaction history would obviously not be sensitive to this emotional meaning. (For an elaboration of the role of conversational norm violations in emotional communication, see Scott, Fuhrman, & Wyer, 1991).

The effect of conversational norm violations on the interpretation of communications was not investigated in the studies reported here. However, two possible consequences of the cognitive processing that underlies these effects were examined:

1. Subjects may think more extensively about norm-violating communications than about norm-consistent communications in an attempt to explain their occurrence. Therefore, if more extensively processed information becomes more accessible in memory (Craik & Lockhart, 1972; Wyer & Hartwick, 1980), subjects may be better able to recall norm-violating communications than other types of messages.

2. Subjects who seek an explanation for a norm-violating communication may be more attentive to other available information. Consequently, this information might have more influence on judgments to which it is relevant than it otherwise would.

Two studies that evaluate these possibilities are described below.

EFFECTS OF CONVERSATIONAL NORM VIOLATIONS ON MEMORY

The hypothesis that subjects devote more cognitive effort to processing communications that violate normative expectations was investigated by Wyer et al. (1994) in a series of studies mentioned earlier in this article. To reiterate, subjects listened to a tape-recorded conversation between two male students in which the person being discussed was one of the speakers. Thus, one person (the target) described both favorable and unfavorable behaviors that he had personally performed, and the other also mentioned favorable and unfavorable things the target had done. Some subjects were told to form an impression of the target on the basis of things the other speaker said about him, whereas others were told to do so on the basis of things the target said about himself. Subjects in a third condition were told to form an impression of the other speaker on the basis of his statements about the target. After listening to the conversation, subjects in each condition recalled all of the behaviors that were mentioned.

Two conversational norms—politeness and modesty—were expected to operate in these conditions. Specifically, unfavorable behaviors that the other speaker mentions violate a norm to be polite, or not to embarrass the person to whom one is talking. Therefore, these behaviors should be thought about more extensively than favorable behaviors the other describes. On the other hand, behaviors the target himself mentions are more likely to be considered counternormative if they are favorable and, thus, violate a norm to appear modest in presenting oneself to others. Therefore, these behaviors should be thought about more extensively than unfavorable behaviors the target mentions. The implications of this reasoning were supported. That is, behaviors described by the other speaker were recalled better if they were unfavorable, whereas behaviors described by the target himself were recalled better if they were favorable. Moreover, these recall differences did not significantly vary over the three instructional conditions. Thus, subjects appeared somewhat sensitive to the counternormativeness of the behaviors mentioned, and therefore thought about them more extensively, even when the behaviors were not obviously relevant to the impressions they were asked to form.

EFFECTS OF CONVERSATIONAL NORM VIOLATIONS ON SENSITIVITY TO OTHER INFORMATION

In discussing our study of the effects of conversation partners’ responses to subjects’ questions on pragmatic information processing, we noted that this processing might have been more extensive when the partners’ behavior was counternormative (i.e., when partners failed to reciprocate questions or to elaborate answers to these questions) than when their responses were consistent with normative expectations (see Footnote 3). That is, when partners’ responses to subjects’ questions were normative, subjects may not have paid much attention to them and so the responses had relatively little impact on their impressions per se. When partners’ responses were counternormative, however, subjects may have been stimulated to think about their pragmatic implications. If this is so, and if subjects who are stimulated to consider the pragmatic implications of communications become more sensitive to other available information
about the communicator, this latter information should have more impact on subjects’ judgments than it otherwise would.

To investigate this possibility, we restricted our consideration to female subjects whose impressions in the earlier experiment were most strongly affected by the pragmatic implications of their partners’ behavior. These subjects conversed with a same-sex partner (O) who either (a) both elaborated responses to their questions and reciprocated these questions or (b) did neither. Before engaging in the conversation, however, some subjects were “accidentally” informed that another subject had described O as either sociable (a trait to which O’s conversational style was relevant) or as having integrity (a trait to which O’s style was irrelevant). In a third, control condition, no trait information was provided.

In the absence of trait information, O’s counternormative conversational style was expected to have a negative effect on subjects’ impressions of her, as in the earlier study. When trait descriptions of O were provided, however, their effects were expected to depend on whether or not the partner’s conversational behavior was consistent with normative expectations. Specifically, if O’s responses to subjects’ questions are similar to those that people typically make in informal conversations, subjects may not think about the pragmatic implications of the behavior. However, if O’s responses are counternormative, subjects should seek explanations for its occurrence, and so they are likely to pay more attention to the trait descriptions than they would otherwise. Consequently, these descriptions should have a greater impact on subjects’ later evaluations of O than they would if O’s behavior were normative.

The contingency of these effects on the relevance of trait descriptions to O’s behavior was also of interest. If subjects restrict their attention to information that is specifically relevant to O’s counternormative behavior, the influence of the trait information pertaining to sociability should be greater than that of information pertaining to integrity. If, on the other hand, subjects who seek an explanation for their partner’s behavior are generally sensitive to other information about her, both types of trait descriptions could have an impact under these conditions.

Method

A total of 110 female introductory psychology students participated in the study for course credit, with an equal number being randomly assigned to the roles of subject and partner. Between eight and eleven pairs of subjects participated at each of six combinations of conversational style (normative vs. counternormative) and trait information (sociability, integrity, or none).

Procedure. Participants reported to the experiment in different rooms, one of which was used to instruct subjects and the other to instruct partners. Several pairs of participants were run in a single session with subjects and partners being transferred to smaller cubicles after receiving general instructions about the conversation and their role in it. Instructions to partners were identical to those used under elaboration, question-reciprocation conditions and no-elaboration, no-question-reciprocation conditions of the earlier experiment. Instructions to subjects were also identical except for the induction of trait expectations.

Specifically, the experimenter began the study by asking subjects if they had participated in the experiment before. When the subjects all indicated they had not, the experimenter explained that she needed to know because (a) in some conditions of the study, participants were engaging in two conversations “for purposes of comparison,” (b) their partners had been among those who had taken part in an earlier conversation, and (c) we wanted to be sure that their communication partner had not previously met. In this context, subjects were told that we wanted to keep the conversations independent, and therefore, not to ask their partner anything about the prior conversation. This preamble set the stage for our manipulation of trait description information to be described presently.

The instructions then continued as in the first experiment, after which subjects were escorted to their separate booths to wait for their partners. The experimenter then indicated that while they were waiting, it might be helpful for them to see one of the rating forms they would be asked to complete. The experimenter then checked the name of the partner and gave the subject a form with the partner’s name on it, leaving the room before the subject had a chance to look at it carefully.

The form that subjects were given contained a top page that was blank except for a space in which the partner’s name had been written by the experimenter. The next page contained instructions to list three to five adjectives the subject might use to describe the partner. Under control conditions, the rest of this page was also blank. In experimental conditions, however, the form had ostensibly been completed by another subject, and contained a list of handwritten adjectives. In conversation-irrelevant trait conditions, the adjectives were genuine, responsible, and has integrity. In conversation-relevant trait conditions, the adjectives were sociable, friendly, and warm.4

After a delay of about two to three minutes, the experimenter returned

4. In principle, it could of course have been desirable to include conditions in which unfavorable as well as favorable trait descriptions were provided. However, we did not consider it appropriate to convey bogus unfavorable information about someone without permission, and yet we did not wish to prejudice the nature of the conversation by informing the partner that trait descriptions of her were being conveyed. Therefore, unfavorable trait descriptions were not administered.
to pick up the sample rating form and to ensure that the subject was ready to meet her partner. At this point, the subject typically mentioned that the form had already been completed. If she did not, the experimenter appeared to discover this for herself. She then added:

Uh-oh... It looks like this form was filled out last time... Oh well, it probably won't make any difference... You know what? Don't mention it, because it might affect the conversation. I'll tell your partner about it after it's over.

The experimenter then left and returned with the partner, and the conversation proceeded as in the earlier study.

**Dependent Variables.** The main dependent variables were generally similar to those assessed in the first study. For plausibility, an initial form comparable to the one ostensibly completed by the previous subject was given, asking subjects to generate open-ended descriptions of the partner. However, additional scales were provided on the main questionnaire to assess subjects' inferences of the partner's integrity (specifically, judgments of the partner as sincere, dependable, and honorable) and sociability (scales pertaining to sociable, outgoing, friendly, and warm). Judgments along each set of scales, which ranged from 0 (not at all) to 10 (extremely), were averaged to provide a single score for each attribute.

**Results**

**Liking for the Partner.** We expected that when the partner’s responses to questions were counternormative, subjects would be stimulated to seek an explanation for these responses, and they would consequently be more attentive to the trait descriptions of the partner. To this extent, the trait descriptions should have more influence on subjects' evaluations of their partner in these conditions than when the partner's responses were normative. This was in fact the case. Subjects' liking for their partner is shown in the top section of Table 3 as a function of experimental manipulations. Subjects generally liked their partner more than she elaborated and reciprocated their questions than when she did not, \(F(1,49) = 31.72, p < .01\). In contrast, trait descriptions of the partner had a positive influence on evaluations of her only when her conversational style was counternormative. When the partner both elaborated and reciprocated subjects' questions, subjects' evaluations of her were generally high and, if anything, decreased when trait descriptions were provided. (This decrease, although nonsignificant, argues against the possibility that the relatively little impact of trait descriptions was simply due to a ceiling effect.) This pattern of results is confirmed by an interaction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trait Description</th>
<th>Conversation-relevant</th>
<th>Conversation-relevant</th>
<th>None</th>
<th>M</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Liking for partner</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normative style</td>
<td>8.56 (9)</td>
<td>8.78 (9)</td>
<td>8.95 (9)</td>
<td>8.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counternormative style</td>
<td>6.63 (11)</td>
<td>6.78 (9)</td>
<td>3.88 (8)</td>
<td>5.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(M)</td>
<td>7.50</td>
<td>7.78</td>
<td>6.56</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Partner's sociability</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normative style</td>
<td>8.89</td>
<td>8.64</td>
<td>9.45</td>
<td>8.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counternormative style</td>
<td>5.84</td>
<td>6.00</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>5.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(M)</td>
<td>7.21</td>
<td>7.32</td>
<td>6.09</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Partner's integrity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normative style</td>
<td>8.61</td>
<td>8.22</td>
<td>8.44</td>
<td>8.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counternormative style</td>
<td>6.36</td>
<td>6.34</td>
<td>4.56</td>
<td>5.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(M)</td>
<td>7.37</td>
<td>7.28</td>
<td>6.38</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Partner's interest in subject</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normative style</td>
<td>8.33</td>
<td>7.89</td>
<td>8.75</td>
<td>8.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counternormative style</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>2.22</td>
<td>3.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(M)</td>
<td>5.90</td>
<td>6.29</td>
<td>5.29</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Partner's liking for subject</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normative style</td>
<td>8.11</td>
<td>8.56</td>
<td>8.75</td>
<td>8.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counternormative style</td>
<td>6.73</td>
<td>6.63</td>
<td>6.67</td>
<td>6.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(M)</td>
<td>7.35</td>
<td>7.65</td>
<td>7.65</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

of trait descriptions and the partner's conversational style, \(F(1,49) = 4.60, p < .05\).

Two aspects of these data are particularly noteworthy. First, when the partner's conversational style was consistent with normative expectations, the initial trait descriptions of her had no effect on liking for her whatsoever. This further strengthens our speculation that general trait characterizations, either spontaneously inferred (as in the first experiment) or explicitly stated, mediate liking for persons in conversations under rather limited circumstances (specifically, when these persons' conversational behavior deviates from expectations and subjects are stimulated to seek an explanation for it). Second, the effect of the trait information presented did not depend on whether it was descriptively relevant to the partner's conversational behavior or not. Apparently subjects who sought an explanation for their partner's counternormative behavior increased their sensitivity to all of the information available about her regardless of its actual relevance.

Judgments of the partner with respect to the two attributes to which
trait information was relevant—sociability and integrity—are shown in the second and third sections of Table 3. Judgments of sociability show a pattern similar to that of liking judgments. That is, subjects judged their partner to be more sociable when they elaborated and reciprocated questions when they did not, $F(1,49) = 43.69, p < .01$. More important, trait descriptions had a positive influence on subjects' ratings only when the partner's conversational style was counternormative. When the partner reciprocated questions and elaborated, judgments of her sociability were generally high and did not depend on the availability of trait information. This conclusion is confirmed by an interaction of the partner’s conversational style and trait descriptions, $F(2,49) = 3.75, p < .03$.

Although the partner's conversational style had no implications for her integrity, it nevertheless affected judgments of this attribute. Data relevant to these effects are shown in the third section of Table 3. Subjects judged the partner to be higher in integrity when she reciprocated questions and elaborated than when she did not, $F(1,49) = 24.59, p < .01$. The effect of trait information was not significant ($p > .10$), nor did that effect depend on the partner's conversational style ($p > .10$). Nevertheless, the pattern of these judgments was similar to that of sociability and evaluative judgments. That is, favorable trait descriptions had no effect on integrity judgments when the partner reciprocated questions and elaborated, but increased integrity judgments when her behavior was counternormative.

**Perceptions of the Relationship.** The interactive effects of trait information and conversational style on liking and trait judgments are consistent with the hypothesis that when the partner's conversational behavior is counternormative, subjects increase their sensitivity to other information about her. There was no reason to suppose that this increased sensitivity would influence subjects' perception of their relationship with the partner, however. That is, the effects of conversational style on these perceptions should be similar regardless of the presence of these trait descriptions. This appears to be the case. Subjects' perceptions that their partner was both interested in and liked them were greater when she reciprocated questions and elaborated than when she did not; in each case, $F(1,49) > 16.06, p < .01$. As shown in Table 3, however, these effects did not depend on whether trait descriptions of the pattern were provided; in no case was either the main effect of trait descriptions or its interaction with conversational style significant ($p < .10$).

**Discussion**

The results of this study are consistent with the hypothesis that when a conversation participant's communication behavior violates normative expectations, other participants spontaneously attempt to understand why the behavior occurred. In doing so, they think more extensively about other available information about the participant, and so this information has greater impact on their later judgments than it otherwise would. This is true regardless of whether the information is relevant to the participant's counternormative behavior or not.

Two considerations are important in evaluating this conclusion. First, only females were employed in the study. Male subjects, who appear to base their liking for their conversation partners primarily on their enjoyment of the conversation itself (see Figure 1), might be less inclined to consider the pragmatic implications of the partner's behavior spontaneously under the conditions we constructed, and therefore might be similarly influenced by the trait information regardless of the counternormativeness of the behavior.

Second, only favorable trait information was presented (see Footnote 4). The extent to which analogous results would occur when trait descriptions are unfavorable is not clear. It is conceivable, for example, that once a favorable impression has been formed, additional favorable information has less impact. To this extent, favorable trait descriptions would have generally less influence when the information accompanying them is favorable than when it is not, independent of the normative consistency of this information. Two factors should be considered in evaluating this possibility. First, the partner's communication behavior occurred after rather than before the trait adjective information was provided. Therefore, if subjects simply based their judgments of the target on this initial trait information independently of the target's behavior, the information should have had similar impact regardless of the nature of the behavior, and it did not. Second, the decreased influence of the trait adjective information when the partner's conversational style was favorable might be attributed in part to ceiling effects. However, the fact that subjects' liking for the partner was nonsignificantly less when favorable trait adjective descriptions were provided than when they were not (see Table 3) argues against this possibility. Be that as it may, whether unfavorable trait descriptions would also have greater impact when the target's conversational behavior is counternormative than when it is not must remain an open question pending further research on this matter.

**FINAL REMARKS**

Despite certain ambiguities, the studies described in this article converge on the conclusion that subjects who receive information about persons in a conversational context (regardless of whether or not they personally
participate in the conversation) often pay attention to why the information is conveyed as well as its literal interpretation. This is particularly likely when subjects have an objective of forming an impression of the person to whom the information is relevant, or when the statements that convey the information deviate in style or content from normative expectations. This increased attention can affect both the recall of the information and judgments that are made on the basis of it. Subjects' consideration of the pragmatic implications of statements made during a conversation can also influence the way the statements are interpreted. Although these latter effects were not investigated in the experiments reported here, they have been demonstrated to underlie the effects of information on subjects' beliefs and opinions about a communication's referent (Gruenfeld & Wyer, 1992), the elicitation of humor (Wyer & Collins, 1992), and the perception of emotion (Scott, et al., 1991; Watzlawick et al., 1967).

Substantial research is obviously necessary to understand completely the particular pragmatic meaning that is extracted from information exchanged in social interactions and the conditions in which it occurs. However, this understanding will ultimately be necessary in developing an adequate conceptualization of impression formation processes in social contexts. The processes are not captured by existing models of person impression formation (e.g., Hastie, et al., 1980; Wyer & Carlston, 1994; Wyer & Srull, 1989), which focus almost exclusively on responses to the semantic meaning of the information that is conveyed. The mental representations of persons that are formed from information conveyed in social situations have only begun to be addressed (e.g., Wyer et al., 1990; Wyer, Lambert, Budesheim, & Gruenfeld, 1992). As both our own and others' research becomes increasingly sensitive to the social context in which information is presented, a more generally conceptualization of the impact of pragmatic meaning will undoubtedly be necessary.

REFERENCES


