Report

# Professed impressions: What people say about others affects onlookers' perceptions of speakers' power and warmth

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ABSTRACT

During a conversation, it is common for a speaker to describe a third-party that the listener does not know. These professed impressions not only shape the listener's view of the third-party but also affect judgments of the speaker herself. We propose a previously unstudied consequence of professed impressions: judgments of the speaker's power. In two studies, we find that listeners ascribe more power to speakers who profess impressions focusing on a third-party's conscientiousness, compared to those focusing on agreeableness. We also replicate previous research showing that speakers saying positive things about third parties are seen as more agreeable than speakers saying negative things. In the second study, we demonstrate that conscientiousness-power effects are mediated by inferences about speakers' task concerns and positivity-agreeableness effects are mediated by inferences about speakers' other-enhancing concerns. Finally, we show that judgments of speaker status parallel judgments of agreeableness rather than of power, suggesting that perceivers use different processes to make inferences about status and power. These findings have implications for the literatures on person perception, power, and status.

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It seems almost inevitable that when two people start talking, the topic of conversation will turn to a third person. Sometimes, a mutual exchange of gossip ensues: Donny and Marie, for instance, may discuss what each thinks of their mutual acquaintance Harry. Other times, Donny tells Marie about Sally, whom Marie has never met before. We have all played each of these roles and have learned much about many Harrys and Sallys along the way. But what does Marie learn about Donny, the speaker, from these conversations? In the past decade, a growing number of scholars have examined the impact of what we call professed impressions, when someone like Donny publicly professes his impression of another person. Some scholars have found that the traits a speaker ascribes to a third party can boomerang, with perceivers ascribing those very traits—perhaps automatically and unwittingly—to the speaker herself (e.g., Carlston & Skowronski, 2005; Crawford, Skowronski, & Stiff, 2007; Skowronski, Carlston, Mae, & Crawford, 1998). Other scholars have shown that speakers declaring liking for a third party are themselves liked and those declaring disliking are disliked by listeners (Gawronski & Walther, 2008).

In the present paper, we extend the scholarship about professed impressions in two ways. First, we reveal how professed impressions can impact inferences about a speaker's power, a judgment that has not been examined in prior research on professed impressions. Second, we provide evidence of an underlying mechanism for inferences based on professed impressions, suggesting that they can be driven by judgments about speakers' interactional concerns. We also examine judgments of speaker status, finding that these inferences more closely resemble judgments of agreeableness than judgments of power. Overall, our results expand the discipline's account of which inferences are affected by professed impressions and why.

## The social-signaling function of professed impressions

### Professed impression trait content and inferences of speaker power

To navigate the social world, perceivers are understandably interested in diagnosing other people's power—the extent to which they control resources or outcomes (e.g., Ellyson & Dovidio, 1985; Magee, 2009). Previous research has shown that onlookers often use a target's behavior as a way of inferring his or her power. For instance, those who initiate goal-oriented action, are less tentative, or speak up more about a joint task are often seen as more powerful (e.g., Bales, Strodtbeck, Mills, & Roseborough, 1951; Goldberg & Katz, 1990; Hall, Coats, & LeBeau, 2005; Magee, 2009). Although some research has linked the substance of targets'

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verbal explanations to inferences of their power (Lee & Tiedens, 2001), comparatively little is known about how the content of communication is used to decipher power.

Recent work by Ames and Bianchi (2008) suggests that the content of professed impressions could be taken as a signal of power. They found that when a perceiver is in a relatively low power position (e.g., judging her potential new manager), she tends to be concerned with how the target will treat her, yielding impressions focused on target warmth and agreeableness. By contrast, perceivers in relatively high power positions—such as a manager judging a potential subordinate—seem less concerned with how they will be treated and more concerned with the target's task performance, leading to impressions focused on conscientiousness. If, as Ames and Bianchi (2008) found, power shapes impression content by influencing interactional concerns, it seems plausible that onlookers could reverse this sequence, inferring a speaker's power based on how she describes a third party. If a speaker's professed impression focuses on a target's agreeableness, listeners might intuit the speaker is concerned with how she will be treated by the third party—a seemingly low power concern. If a speaker's professed impression focuses on conscientiousness, a listener might intuit that the speaker is concerned with others' task performance—a seemingly high power concern.

Thus, a first prediction tested in the present work is that the content of professed impressions—focused on either the agreeableness or the conscientiousness of a third party—affects listeners' inferences about the speaker's power. To our knowledge, no prior work has examined such a link.

Implicit in the account noted above is a mechanism: The reason professed impression content affects judgments of speaker power is because it signals the speaker's interactional concerns. This is consistent with Wyer, Swan, and Gruenfeld's (1995) observation that listeners "not only assess the semantic implications of a speaker's statements (i.e., the literal meaning of the words expressed) but also are likely to construe the reasons why these statements were made under the specific conditions in which they were uttered" (p. 244). Put another way, what speakers focus on seems to reveal what they are concerned about. The idea that perceivers take professed impressions as a signal of the speaker's interactional concerns leads to our second prediction: the link between professed impression content (agreeableness versus conscientiousness) and listeners' inferences about speaker power will be at least partly mediated by listeners' inferences about the speaker's task concerns (e.g., a focus on others' work productivity). Such apparent task concerns signal power because they imply that the speaker has control over resources and people, two typical characteristics of those who occupy powerful positions.

*Professed impression valence and inferences of speaker agreeableness*

Prior research has already established that professed impressions can affect onlookers' judgments of a speaker's likeability or, as we formulate it here, agreeableness. Wyer, Budesheim, and Lambert (1990) showed that speakers who described a target more favorably were seen as more likeable. Recently, Gawronski and Walther (2008) demonstrated a similar valence effect—speakers evaluating targets positively were themselves seen more positively—and argued that this effect was not simply a matter of priming or implicit associations. Rather, they suggested that observers may possess a naïve psychological theory that those who (dis)like others are themselves (dis)likeable, though they did not measure this potential mediating step in their studies.

We seek to replicate these valence effects and to explicitly test whether the general mediating mechanism we posit applies to such effects. We argue that upon hearing a speaker say something positive about a target, a listener may intuit, rightly or wrongly, that the speaker possesses "other-enhancing" interactional concerns, such as taking pleasure in saying positive things about others. Upon hearing something negative, a listener may intuit an absence of other-enhancing concerns, such as taking pleasure in saying negative things about others.

In short, we expect that the present studies will replicate the previously established valence effects and show that those who profess positive impressions will be seen as more agreeable. Our novel contribution with respect to agreeableness inferences is to test whether the mechanism of interactional concerns will partly account for this effect. Specifically, we predict that ascriptions of other-enhancing concerns (taking pleasure in saying nice things about others) will at least partly mediate the link between professed impression valence and judgments of speaker agreeableness.

### Summary and plan of study

In sum, we sought to provide the first evidence that the trait content of professed impressions (agreeableness versus conscientiousness) affects inferences of speaker power. We expected this link to be mediated by judges' intuitions about the speaker's task concerns. We also expected to replicate prior findings that the valence of professed impressions affects judgments of speakers' agreeableness. We went beyond prior work by testing whether this link was at least partly mediated by ascriptions of other-enhancing concerns. We tested our effects in two studies. In Study 1, we sought basic evidence for the links between professed impression content and power inferences as well as professed impression valence and agreeableness inferences. Study 2 built on these results, examining the mediating roles of interactional concerns and extending the design to address another judgment we expect to be shaped by professed impressions: status. We anticipated that status judgments would more closely resemble (valence-driven) agreeableness inferences than (content-driven) power inferences, a hypothesis that we formulate more extensively in Study 2.

### Study 1

Participants reviewed emails from a supposed coworker in which the speaker (i.e., the email's author) described a colleague. We manipulated the trait content and valence of the email description and measured participants' inferences of speaker agreeableness and power.

*Method*

*Participants*

One hundred eighty-six US working adults (113 women and 73 men) participated as part of an online survey research program for which they earned credits redeemable for consumer goods. The modal age range was between 35 and 55 years old (60.1%). More than half (50.9%) reported holding management positions at work.

*Design and procedure*

The design was a 2 (trait Content: agreeableness vs. conscientiousness) × 2 (valence: positive vs. negative) between-subjects design. Though we did not expect gender effects, we counter-balanced speaker and third-party gender.

Participants read an email in which the email's sender, John, reported his initial impression of David, a coworker who had recently transferred from another office. In all conditions, John reported that he had just met David and had spoken with him for awhile. In the agreeableness condition, John indicated that David seemed "nice." He went on to write that David "came across as friendly from the beginning of our conversation through to the end. If I
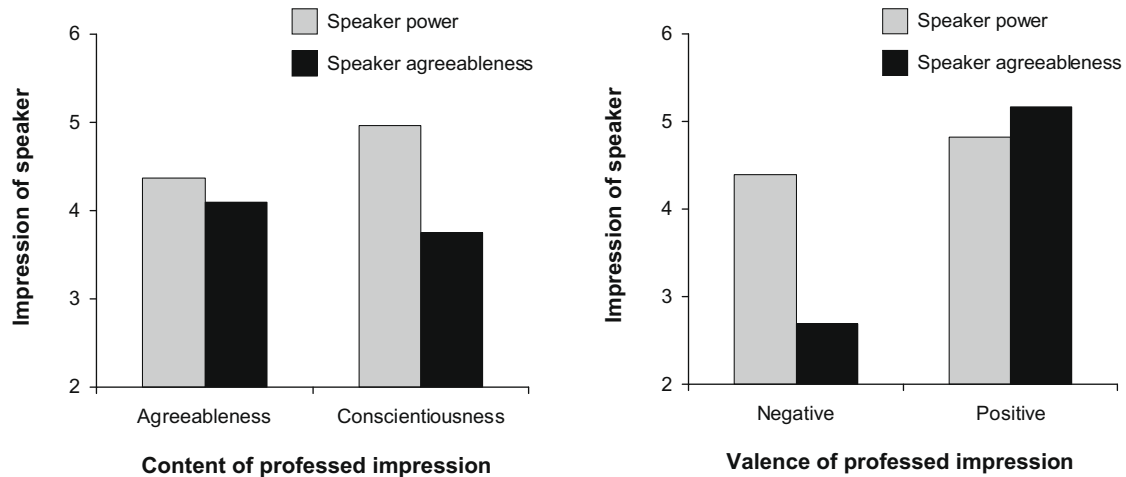
**Fig. 1.** Impact of content and valence on impressions of speaker power and agreeableness, Study 1.

had to describe him in one word, I'd say he's warm." In the other conditions, the context and structure remained the same, but the adjectives John used to describe David were changed. In the negative agreeableness condition, John reported that David seemed disagreeable and came across as unfriendly and cold. In the positive conscientious condition, John reported that he found David to be organized, responsible, and reliable. In the negative conscientious condition, John described David as disorganized, irresponsible, and unreliable. Both speaker and third party sex were counter-balanced between conditions by alternating names (Jane for John, Denise for David).

*Dependent measures*

After reading the email, participants were asked to evaluate John's agreeableness and power in the organization. Items were rated on a scale ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 7 ("strongly agree") and were randomly ordered for each participant. Following Gosling, Rentfrow, and Swann (2003), agreeableness items included "John is sympathetic, warm" and "John is critical, quarrelsome" (reverse scored) ($\alpha$ = .70). Power items were adapted from Magee (2009) and included "John has a lot of power in the organization," "John has control over others in the organization," and "John has control over resources in the organization" ($\alpha$ = .91). Finally, participants indicated whether they thought John was a supervisor or subordinate to the person he was describing in the email. This question was designed to measure inferences of the speaker's formal power in an organization.

As a manipulation check for trait content, participants indicated which words from a list were used to describe the target. Participants in the positive valence conditions were given the choice of "warm," "reliable," "competent," and "outgoing." Participants in the negative valence conditions were given "cold," "unreliable," "incompetent," and "reserved."

*Results*

Eighty-eight percent ($n$ = 163) of participants identified the trait matching the email manipulation. The remaining twenty-three participants were removed from subsequent analyses.

*Inferences about speaker power*

We expected ratings of speaker power to vary as a function of professed impression content. As predicted, a 2 (content) × 2 (valence) × 2 (speaker gender) × 2 (third-party gender) ANOVA on power inferences revealed the predicted main effect of content,

$F(1, 147)$ = 6.87, $p$ = .010, $\eta^2$ = .045. There was a somewhat weaker main effect of valence on power inferences, $F(1, 147)$ = 5.02, $p$ = .027, $\eta^2$ = .033. No other main effects or interactions were statistically significant ($ps$ > .06).[1] As shown in the left half of Fig. 1, speakers professing impressions of the third-party's conscientiousness were seen as more powerful ($M$ = 4.97, $SD$ = 1.31) than those professing impressions of the third-party's agreeableness ($M$ = 4.37, $SD$ = 1.41, $t(161)$ = 2.72, $p$ = .007).

*Inferences about organizational position*

Like ratings of speaker power, we expected inferences about organizational position (formal power) to vary as a function of professed impression content. As expected, a 2 (content) × 2 (valence) × 2 (position: supervisor vs. subordinate) hierarchical loglinear analysis revealed only that inferred position depended on trait content, $\chi^2(1, N$ = 163) = 4.82, $p$ = .028. The other 2-way interactions and the 3-way interaction were not significant ($ps$ > .11). Fifty-two percent of participants encountering an agreeableness-focused professed impression identified the speaker as a supervisor (i.e., 48% identified the speaker as a subordinate) whereas 69% of participants encountering a conscientiousness-focused professed impression identified the speaker as a supervisor.

*Inferences about speaker agreeableness*

We expected inferences of speaker agreeableness to vary as a function of professed impression valence. As predicted, a 2 (content) × 2 (valence) × 2 (speaker gender) × 2 (third-party gender) ANOVA on agreeableness inferences revealed the predicted main effect of valence, $F(1, 147)$ = 160.68, $p$ < .001, $\eta^2$ = .522. No other main effects or interactions were statistically significant ($ps$ > .06). As shown in the right half of Fig. 1, speakers professing positive impressions were seen as more agreeable ($M$ = 5.17, $SD$ = 1.08) than those professing negative impressions ($M$ = 2.69, $SD$ = 1.21), $t(161)$ = 13.79, $p$ < .001. Professed impression content (agreeableness vs. conscientiousness) did not significantly affect impressions of speaker agreeableness.

*Discussion*

Study 1 established the basic effects we predicted: professed impression trait content appears to shape inferences of speaker

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[1] Interactions with participant gender were typically not meaningful due to very small cell sizes (many with $n$ < 5).

power whereas professed impression valence appears to shape inferences of speaker agreeableness. However, the underlying mechanism remains unclear. In Study 2, we turned our attention to the potential mediating role of interactional concerns.

## Study 2

Study 2 sought to replicate the content-power and valence-agreeableness effects of professed impressions from Study 1 in a different context, moving from email descriptions to vignettes of speakers professing their impressions in a conversation. Study 2 also examined the underlying mechanism: We expected that the link between trait content and speaker power would be mediated by ascriptions of the speaker's task concerns (e.g., a focus on others' work productivity) whereas the link between valence and speaker agreeableness would be mediated by ascriptions of the speaker's other-enhancing concerns (e.g., taking pleasure in saying positive things about others).

Study 2 also examined inferences of speaker status. Although power and status may sometimes be seen as interchangeable, there are reasons to suspect that they are judged in different ways. Whereas power is based on control over resources and outcomes (Fiske & Berdahl, 2007; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003), status reflects the extent to which an individual is respected and admired by others (Anderson, John, Keltner, & Kring, 2001; Ridgeway & Walker, 1995). These may co-occur (e.g., an admired executive), but one could also be seen as powerful yet low-status (e.g., an unpopular boss) or relatively powerless but high-status (e.g., a much-respected peer) (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). We believe that professed impressions affect inferences of power and status in different ways; documenting such distinct paths would help scholars more fully understand the impact of professed impressions as well as shed further light on the ways in which power and status judgments differ.

Demonstrating one's own conscientiousness affects one's status (e.g., Berger & Zelditch, 1985; Ridgeway, 1991), but, in our paradigm, merely being concerned with a third party's task performance is unlikely to influence status inferences. Instead, we suspect that status judgments are influenced by whether one paints others in a positive light (as agreeable or as conscientious) or derogates them (as disagreeable or as unconscientious). By lifting others up, a speaker may signal that he is worthy of respect and admiration, whereas criticizing or disparaging others may suggest that he ought to be held in low esteem. Thus, we argue that inferences of a person's status may be more closely tied to perceptions of their concerns with speaking positively about others than to perceptions of their concerns about others' task performance. In other words, we expect that inferences of status are more like those of agreeableness than of power, characterized by ascriptions of other-enhancing concerns and positive professed impressions rather than task concerns and the trait content of professed impression. To test this prediction, in Study 2 we measure inferences of status as well as agreeableness and power, predicting that status would vary as a function of professed impression valence and that this would be at least partly mediated by other-enhancing concerns.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 204 undergraduate students (95 women and 109 men) enrolled in a professional degree program who received partial course credit for their participation. Participants' median age was 20 years.

### Design and procedure

As in Study 1, we used a 2 (trait content: agreeableness vs. conscientiousness) × 2 (valence: positive vs. negative) between-subjects design and counter-balanced speaker gender and third-party gender. Participants read a scenario about being at a work-related networking event with approximately 100 other people. They were told that they walked over to join a group of three people in the middle of a conversation. As they joined, a person whose nametag read "John" was talking to the others about a colleague of his, Tom. In the positive agreeableness condition, John said that "Tom seems nice. I talked with him for a while and he came across as friendly. If I had to describe him in one word, I'd say Tom's warm." In the other conditions, the same sentence structure was used but the target adjectives (nice, friendly, warm) were changed. The negative agreeableness condition featured disagreeable, unfriendly, and cold. The positive conscientious condition featured organized, responsible, and reliable whereas the negative conscientious condition featured disorganized, irresponsible, and unreliable. As in Study 1, both speaker and third-party gender were counterbalanced by changing the actors' names (John or Jill, Tom or Tina).

### Measures

After the scenario, participants rated the speaker's power, status, agreeableness, task concerns, and other-enhancing concerns. We used the same items for power and agreeableness as in Study 1 ($\alpha$ = .92 and .74, respectively). The status items were "John has a great deal of respect among his coworkers" and "John is admired by his coworkers" ($\alpha$ = .91). Three items gauged task concerns: "John is concerned with whether Tina will perform well in her job," "John is focused on Tina's work productivity," and "John is interested in whether Tina can complete tasks effectively" ($\alpha$ = .87). Two items gauged other-enhancing concerns: "John takes pleasure in saying positive things about people" and "John takes pleasure in saying negative things about people" (reverse coded) ($\alpha$ = .75). A trait content manipulation check parallel to the one used in Study 1 was also included.

### Results

#### Manipulation check

Ninety-nine percent of participants passed the manipulation check. The three participants who failed were removed from all remaining analyses, leaving 201.

#### Inferences about speaker power

We expected impressions of speaker power to vary as a function of professed impression trait content. As predicted, a 2 (content) × 2 (valence) × 2 (speaker gender) × 2 (third-party gender) × 2 (participant gender) ANOVA on power revealed the predicted main effect of trait content, $F(1, 169) = 6.56$, $p = .011$, $\eta^2 = .037$. No other main effects or interactions were statistically significant. As shown in Fig. 2a, speakers professing impressions focused on conscientiousness were seen as more powerful ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 1.18$) than those professing impressions focused on agreeableness ($M = 3.51$, $SD = 1.21$), $t(199) = 2.64$, $p = .009$. Participants did not ascribe more power to speakers professing positive (vs. negative) impressions, $t(199) = 1.56$, $p = .122$.

#### Inferences about organizational position

Like ratings of speaker power, we expected inferences about organizational position (formal power) to vary as a function of professed impression trait content. As expected, a 2 (content) × 2 (valence) × 2 (position: supervisor vs. subordinate) hierarchical loglinear analysis revealed that inferred position depended on content, $\chi^2(1, N = 201) = 16.53$, $p < .001$. Forty-two percent of participants encountering an agreeableness-focused professed
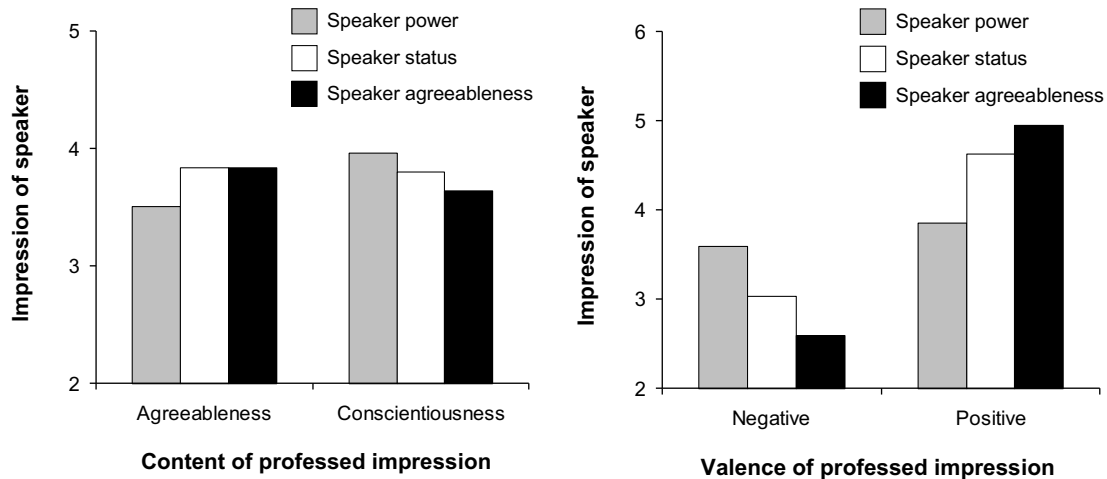
**Fig. 2a.** Impact of content and valence on impressions of speaker power, status, and agreeableness, Study 2.

impression identified the speaker as a supervisor whereas 70% of participants encountering a conscientiousness-focused impression did so. Inferred position also depended on valence, $\chi^2(1, N = 201) = 12.14$, $p < .001$. Forty-four percent of participants encountering a negative professed impression identified the speaker as a supervisor, whereas 68% of participants encountering a positive professed impression identified the speaker as a supervisor. The 3-way interaction was not significant, $p = .359$.

*Inferences about speaker agreeableness*

We expected inferences of speaker agreeableness to vary as a function of professed impression valence. As expected, a 2 (content) × 2 (valence) × 2 (speaker gender) × 2 (third-party gender) × 2 (participant gender) ANOVA on agreeableness inferences revealed the predicted main effect of valence, $F(1, 169) = 342.86$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .670$. As shown in Fig. 2a, speakers professing positive impressions were seen as more agreeable ($M = 4.95$, $SD = .95$) than those professing negative impressions ($M = 2.59$, $SD = .89$), $t(199) = 18.23$, $p < .001$.

The main effect of trait content was also significant, $F(1, 169) = 4.30$, $p = .041$, $\eta^2 = .024$. In addition, we found an unexpected 3-way interaction between valence, third-party gender, and participant gender, $F(1, 169) = 18.53$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .099$, such that when the participant and third-party were of the same gender, agreeableness judgments were more polarized (e.g., compared to men, women made harsher [more generous] judgments of speakers describing a female third-party negatively [positively]). No other main effects or interactions were statistically significant ($ps > .06$).

*Inferences about speaker status*

We expected inferences about speaker status to act more like those of agreeableness than power, varying as a function of professed impression valence. As predicted, a 2 (content) × 2 (valence) × 2 (speaker gender) × 2 (third-party gender) × 2 (participant gender) ANOVA on status inferences revealed the predicted main effect of valence, $F(1, 169) = 100.31$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .372$. Speakers professing positive impressions were seen as higher in status ($M = 4.63$, $SD = 1.12$) than those professing negative impressions ($M = 3.04$, $SD = 1.07$; see Fig. 2a). Professed impression trait content (agreeableness vs. conscientiousness) did not significantly affect inferences of speaker status, $p = .514$, and no interactions were significant.

*Mediation analyses*

We expected that task concerns would mediate the link between professed impression trait content and inferences of speaker

power. Consistent with this, a 2 (content) × 2 (valence) ANOVA on task concerns revealed a significant main effect for content, $F(1, 197) = 55.15$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .219$. Speakers professing impressions focused on conscientiousness were seen as higher in task concerns ($M = 4.71$, $SD = 1.32$) than those focusing on agreeableness ($M = 3.29$, $SD = 1.36$; see Fig. 2b). The main effect for valence and the 2-way interaction were not significant ($ps > .7$). We used regression analyses to test for mediation (see Table 1). Models 1a–c show that ascribed speaker task concerns fully mediated the link between professed impression trait content and inferences of speaker power (Sobel $z = 2.11$, $p = .034$).[2]

We expected that other-enhancing concerns would mediate the link between professed impression valence and inferences of speaker agreeableness. Consistent with this, a 2 (content) × 2 (valence) ANOVA on other-enhancing concerns revealed a significant main effect for valence, $F(1, 197) = 284.25$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .591$. Speakers professing positive impressions were seen as higher in other-enhancing concerns ($M = 5.25$, $SD = 0.91$) than those professing negative impressions ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 1.00$; see Fig. 2b). The main effect for content and the 2-way interaction were not significant ($ps > .1$). We used regression analyses to test for mediation (see Table 1). Models 2a–c show that ascribed speaker other-enhancing concerns fully mediated the link between professed impression valence and inferences of speaker agreeableness (Sobel $z = 5.98$, $p = .001$).[2]

We expected a similar pattern for inferences of speaker status. Consistent with this, Models 3a–c (Table 1) suggested that ascribed other-enhancing concerns partially mediated the link between professed impression valence and impressions of speaker status (Sobel $z = 4.47$, $p < .001$).

*Discussion*

Study 2 replicated the conscientiousness-power effect and valence-agreeableness effects shown in Study 1 and revealed new evidence about the underlying mechanisms. Ascribed task

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[2] Table 1 presents results of regressions featuring inferences of power (models 1a–c), agreeableness (models 2a–c), and status (models 3a–c) as dependent measures. We also conducted regressions to test whether the independent measures predicted the hypothesized mediators. A regression predicting task concerns with professed impression content and valence revealed a significant content effect, $b = 1.41$, $se = .19$, $t(198) = 7.45$, $p < .001$, but not a valence effect, $b = .04$, $se = .19$, $t(198) = 0.20$, $p = .845$. A regression predicting other-enhancing concerns with professed impression content and valence revealed a significant valence effect, $b = 2.28$, $se = .14$, $t(198) = 16.89$, $p < .001$, but not a content effect, $b = -.18$, $se = .14$, $t(198) = -1.34$, $p = .181$.
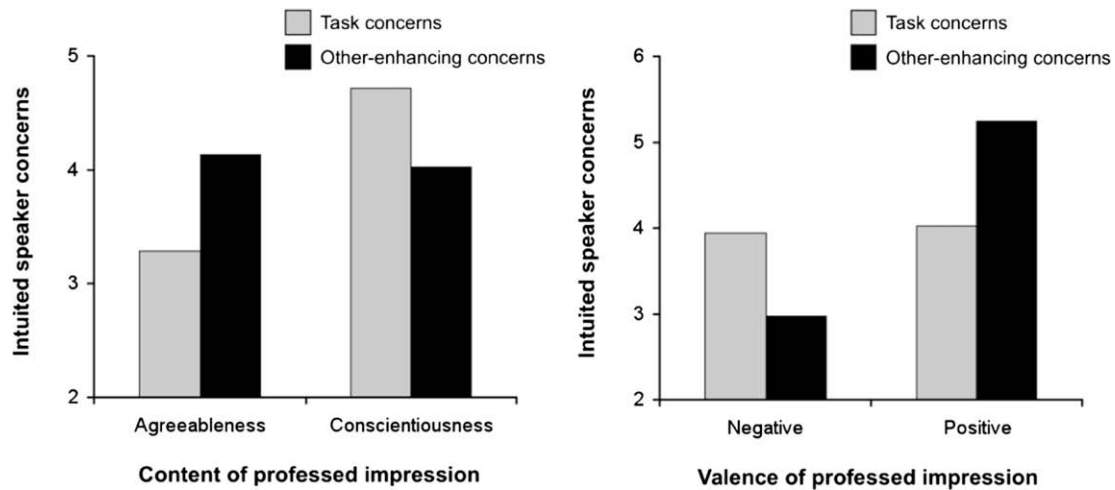
**Fig. 2b.** Impact of content and valence on impressions of speaker other-enhancing concerns and task concerns, Study 2.

**Table 1**
Regression models testing mediation of effects of speaker's description of third-party on inferences of speaker's power, agreeableness, and status.

| Variable | Power inference models | | | Agreeableness inference models | | | Status inference models | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1a | 1b | 1c | 2a | 2b | 2c | 3a | 3b | 3c |
| *Professed impression dimension* | | | | | | | | | |
| Conscientiousness (vs. Agreeableness) | .44$^*$ (.17) | | .12 (.19) | −.28$^*$ (.13) | | −.21 (.12) | −.05 (.08) | | −.01 (.07) |
| Positive (vs. Negative) | .25 (.17) | | .24 (.16) | 2.37$^{***}$ (.13) | | 1.51$^{***}$ (.18) | .80$^{***}$ (.08) | | .34$^{**}$ (.11) |
| *Mediating inference* | | | | | | | | | |
| Task concerns | | .24$^{***}$ (.05) | .22$^{***}$ (.06) | | | | | | |
| Other-enhancing Concerns | | | | | .77$^{***}$(.05) | .38$^{***}$ (.06) | | .58$^{***}$ (.05) | .40$^{***}$ (.08) |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | .04 | .09 | .09 | .63 | .58 | .69 | .34 | .40 | .42 |
| *F* | 4.62$^*$ | 20.30$^{***}$ | 7.69$^{***}$ | 171.59$^{***}$ | 280.81$^{***}$ | 147.25$^{***}$ | 53.45$^{***}$ | 135.07$^{***}$ | 49.65$^{***}$ |
| *Df*s | (2, 198) | (1, 199) | (3, 197) | (2, 198) | (1, 199) | (3, 197) | (2, 198) | (1, 199) | (3, 197) |

*Note.* Unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. "a" models regress the dependent measure (inferences of power, agreeableness, or status) on the independent variables. "b" models regress the dependent measure on the mediator. "c" models regress the dependent measure on the independent variables and the mediator. Models regressing mediators on the independent variables are described in Footnote 2.
$^*$ $p < .05$.
$^{**}$ $p < .01$.
$^{***}$ $p < .001$.

concerns mediated the link between trait content and power whereas ascribed other-enhancing concerns partially mediated the link between valence and agreeableness. As expected, Study 2 also showed that inferences of status, like those of agreeableness, were driven by professed impression valence and were a product of other-enhancing concerns (rather than task concerns) ascribed to speakers.

## General discussion

To listeners, what we say about others may say something about us. But how exactly does a speaker's professed impression of a third party affect a listener's judgment of the speaker? And what mechanisms account for these associations? The present studies go beyond past work showing a valence effect—that positive professed impressions lead to positive evaluations of the speaker. We introduced another connection: When a professed impression focuses on a third-party's conscientiousness, rather than agreeableness, the speaker is seen as higher in power because he or she is seen as more concerned with task performance. This process of using professed impressions to intuit speaker concerns also extends to the valence effect. Speakers saying positive things about third parties are seen as harboring more other-enhancing concerns than those saying negative things. In short, our account

suggests that what a speaker says about others is often taken as a signal of the speaker's interactional concerns, and listeners may use these ascribed concerns to intuit attributes such as the speaker's power and agreeableness.

Given researchers' ongoing interest in distinguishing inferences about power from inferences about status, we also measured status judgments in Study 2, expecting that they would more closely resemble agreeableness judgments than those of power. Our results were consistent with this hypothesis, showing that status judgments were shaped by professed impression valence but not by trait content.

Our research has a number of limitations, including a reliance on written materials rather than live interactions and a focus on only a limited set of professed impression dimensions. Nonetheless, our results lead us to join others in acknowledging that professed impressions can affect judgments of speakers and to call for further attention to when and how this happens.

### Implications for research on power and status

Power and status structures determine the extent to which peoples' lives are governed and constrained by others. Our studies reveal some of the ways people come to understand who has power or status and who does not. Concerns about task-related issues, re-

vealed through professed impressions about third-parties' conscientiousness, signal the possession of power to observers. Other-enhancing concerns, revealed through positive professed impressions, suggest to observers that one is respected and admired, and, thus, has high status. Other-enhancing concerns only partially mediated the relationship between the valence of the professed impressions and inferences of status, suggesting that there are other mediating variables that help explain how perceivers make status inferences. These divergent results highlight an important contrast: not only are power and status theoretically distinct constructs (Magee & Galinsky, 2008; Weber, 1915/1947), but Study 2 also suggests that people follow different inferential paths to gauge who has power and status.

Our results suggest that professed impressions affect inferences of speaker power, a finding that joins a growing list of factors that appear to be part of a pervasive lay theory about how power-holders behave relative to powerless individuals. Observers infer that individuals who are more assertive and more action-oriented are more powerful than individuals who are more tentative and deliberative (Bales et al., 1951; Goldberg & Katz, 1990; Hall et al., 2005; Magee, 2009). Our research adds a new dimension to this profile of power-holders. Individuals who express their opinions of others in terms of conscientiousness suggest that they are focused on tasks being performed efficiently and effectively. Such concerns are associated with individuals who control important resources and could take corrective action for poor performance.

*Implications for person perception*

The present results build on earlier work showing that perceivers' relational expectations and concerns may be reflected in the content of their impressions. Ames and Bianchi (2008) found that perceivers who believed they were observing a potential subordinate were more likely to note conscientiousness, and less likely to reference agreeableness, than perceivers who believed they were observing a potential superior. The results reported here essentially invert this pattern: When confronted with an impression focused on conscientiousness, listeners believed that the speaker was higher in power. Thus, impression content and valence seem to reflect interpersonal and task concerns and, when impressions are professed to others, listeners use them to judge speaker concerns and personality.

Our findings suggest some practical implications for impression management. For instance, in first encounters with listeners, it may behoove speakers to avoid professing overly negative impressions of third parties, or to focus solely on third parties' agreeableness, which could lead speakers themselves to be judged as low in power, status, or agreeableness.

Our results also have implications for impression validity. On the one hand, judgments based on professed impression content could be biased. Listeners may take a speaker's content to be a reflection of his or her habitual concerns when, in fact, it is in response to situational factors, such as a question from another party. Listeners may also have idiosyncratic theories about how impression content signals character (e.g., "If someone talks about a third party's insecurity, it's because they themselves are inse-

cure"). In some cases, these theories may be wrong. On the other hand, professed impression content could be a meaningful and valid source of insight into speakers' motives and concerns. People may be circumspect and artful when discussing themselves but less guarded when discussing third parties. To the extent that this is true, it may signal an irony of person perception: When we talk about others, we may end up saying more about ourselves.

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