

Reexamining the TAR Effect and its influence on Attitude Formation



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Introduction

Original Study

Gawronski and Walther (2008) studied the transfer of attitudes recursively (TAR) effect, defined as attending to a person's liking of others during impression formation of that person. For example, if James likes Robert, the TAR effect predicts that James' liking of Robert will transfer back to James, and James will be perceived as likeable. The original study used a source-target paradigm, where sources, the providers of evaluations, were paired with information (positive vs. negative vs. none) and evaluations towards targets (likes vs. dislikes) within-subjects. Participants were asked to imagine they had just started a new job, and they were learning information about their new colleagues. New colleagues were represented by pictures. New colleagues functioned as sources and targets in the experiment, but only information was provided regarding sources. Participants were provided three pieces of information about sources (positive vs. negative vs. none) in a trial-by-trial fashion. Participants were then provided source evaluations of targets (likes vs. dislikes) in trial-by-trial fashion. The researchers predicted that sources would acquire the valence of both their information and their evaluations; results supported this prediction. The acquisition of evaluation valence was the first evidence for the TAR effect (Gawronski & Walther, 2008).

Current Study w/ Differences

The current study attempted to replicate the TAR effect using a source-target paradigm. A neutral source description condition was added; the no information condition was eliminated. Sources were either Likers (liked three targets and disliked one target) or Dislikers (disliked three targets and liked one target) as opposed to 100% Liker or 100% Disliker. Sources were represented by names, not pictures. Trial presentation and context differed as well (see Methods). The hypothesis predicted that participants would rate Likers more positively than Dislikers, when equivalent information was available about the source

Methods

Participants

n = 62

Apparatus

Administered via computer using E-Prime software.

Procedure

The scenario was presented as an analysis of roommate selection. Participants were asked to imagine they had just met their neighbors who were living in a large cottage. Participants were then provided information about the current roommates living in the cottage, and were told the current roommates were looking for a new roommate to sign the lease. Participants were told they were going to make evaluations about current roommates and potential roommates, and should pay attention to the information provided. Sources functioned as current roommates, and targets functioned as potential roommates. There were six sources and four targets.

Set 1 of trials displayed information about the sources. Each trial presented three source descriptions for one source, resulting in six trials. Source descriptions were manipulated within-subjects (positive vs. neutral vs. negative). Source descriptions are located in Table 1.

Set 2 of trials presented source evaluations of targets. Each trial showed all four source evaluations for one source, resulting in six trials. Sources were assigned source evaluation (Liker vs. Disliker) within-subjects.

Participants provided individual evaluations of sources and targets after completing all 12 trials. For each source and target, the screen read "I rate (source name/ target name) on likeability." The participant was provided a scale from 1 (not at all) to 9 (very much). Participants provided 10 evaluations total; the 6 source evaluations were of theoretical interest

Results

Manipulation Check

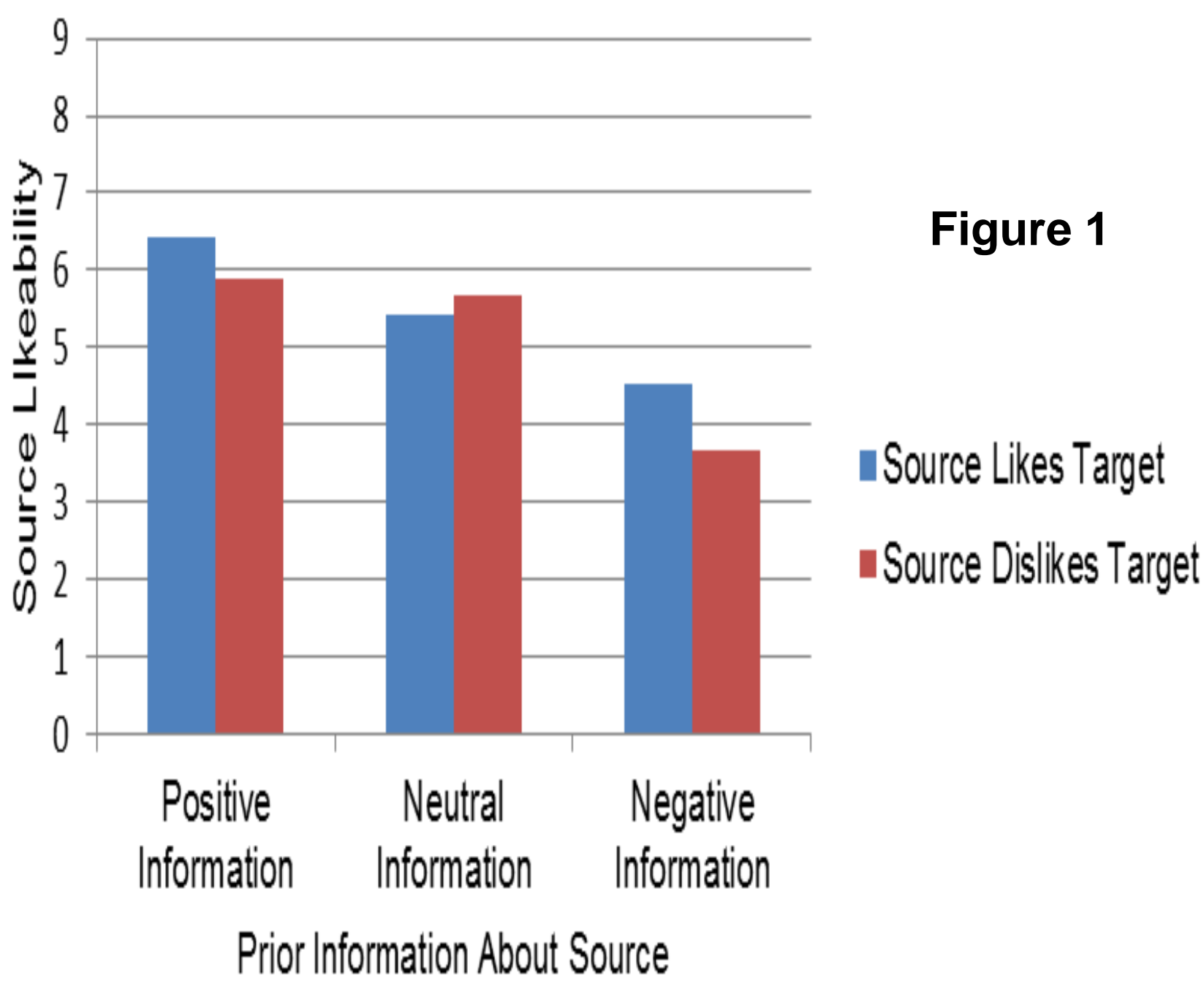
A univariate repeated measures ANOVA was run to test differences in likeability among the Positive, Neutral, and Negative sources, revealing a main effect, $F(2, 122) = 38.61, p < .001$. For pairwise comparisons, the Negative sources were rated less positively than Positive sources, $t(61) = 7.38, p < .001$; the Negative sources were rated less positively than the Neutral sources, $t(61) = 5.55, p < .001$; the Neutral sources were rated less positively than the Positive sources, $t(61) = 3.65, p = .001$. Means and SE's are located in Table 2.

TAR Effect

Three paired sample t -tests as post-hoc comparisons were run to test the effect of source liking vs. source likeability. Negative Likers ($M = 4.53, SD = 1.84$) were significantly evaluated more positively than Negative Dislikers ($M = 3.66, SD = 1.99$), $t(61) = 2.69, p = .009$. Positive Likers ($M = 6.42, SD = 1.89$) were evaluated more positively than Positive Dislikers ($M = 5.87, SD = 1.73$), $t(61) = 1.91, p = .061$. There was no significant difference between Neutral Likers ($M = 5.42, SD = 1.60$) and Neutral Dislikers ($M = 5.66, SD = 1.63$), $t(61) = .95, p = .348$. The negative information exhibited a stronger TAR effect than the positive information group; the latter did not reach significance at $\alpha = .05$. Thus, the TAR effect influenced participants' responses to negative sources significantly and positive sources moderately, but did not influence participant's responses to neutral sources. Means are plotted in Figure 1.

Table 2

	NEGATIVE	NEUTRAL	POSITIVE
Mean	4.097	5.540	6.145
SE	0.182	0.160	0.180



Discussion

The hypothesis was supported in two of the three source description conditions. Likeability of sources was greater for Likers over Dislikers, but only when positive and negative information was presented about the source. This was the first evidence for the TAR effect since its original finding, generally corroborating with the original study (Gawronski & Walther, 2008). The lack of a fully significant effect in the positive condition may have been due to a lack of statistical power. It may be, however, that people process negative information more deeply, thus integrating accessible negative information more critically. Future research could look at the TAR effect in the contest of real social interactions, romantic relationships, or in decision-making contexts.

References

Gawronski, B., & Walther, E. (2008). The TAR effect: When the ones who dislike become the ones who are disliked. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 34, 1276-1289.

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Table 1	Positive	Neutral	Negative
Sociability	Shares personal and enriching experiences with his roommates	Usually gets along with the rest of the house	Broke into a store and was charged with petty theft last year
Cleanliness	Ensures the common area is spotless everyday	Does the dishes when required	Is clumsy and spills things on the carpet
Reliability	Always repays loans money promptly and completely	Generally keeps promises	Cheated on his girlfriend twice last month
Hygiene	Dresses well and always looks sharp	Showers when necessary	Frequently doesn't flush the toilet
Cooking	Makes great food for the whole house	Prefers to eat out but can cook fine	Gave roommate food poisoning by serving undercooked chicken
Thoughtfulness	Is always happily willing to be designated driver	Locks the door when he leaves the house	Comes home late and drunk every weekend waking everyone up