Can Perspective-Change Change Your View on Jerks?

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Author Contributions
Drew Walker, Sean Trott, Aiden Iveris, and Joshua Kim conceived of the experiment(s) and developed the analyses.
Drew Walker, Aiden Iveris, and Joshua Kim wrote the analysis code and analyzed the data.
Drew Walker, Sean Trott, and Aiden Iveris analyzed the specialty data and provided data and advised analyses.
Joshua Kim wrote the manuscript and edited the manuscript.

Competing Interests
The authors declare no competing interests.

Abstract

Why do we relate with morally complex characters in movies, TV shows, and books? When we follow a story through a main character's perspective, even a flawed or morally complex one, it seems like we often begin to *justify* rather than *blame* that character. It's as if we internalize their point of view, allowing us to apply the same situational reasoning we normally reserve for ourselves.

Understanding how people assign blame and/or justification is a significant concept in the fields of cognitive science and social psychology. One concept in social psychology, the actor-observer bias by Edward Jones and Richard Nisbett (1971), suggests that people attribute their own behavior to the situation (e.g. "I had no choice.") but attribute others' actions to stable personality traits (e.g. "She's just a bad person."). The actor-observer bias emerges from differences in access to information: we know our own context, but we don't know other peoples' contexts. It seems like narratives can affect or manipulate the actor-observer bias by altering the perspective/point-of-view from which a story is told.

Brunyé et al. (2009) found that participants verified internal-perspective images (pictures in first-person view) faster after reading sentences where the subject noun is "you" compared to sentences where the subject noun is "I" or "he" (e.g. "You are cutting the tomato."). Brunyé et al. claims that the pronoun "you" prompts readers to mentally adopt the perspective of the actor in the sentence (2009). This leads to embodied simulation as if the reader is performing the action themselves (Brunyé et al., 2009). This embodied simulation effect, Brunyé et al. claims, is

stronger and more consistent with "you" than with "I" or "he", and narrative perspective influences embodiment and how much we simulate the read experience ourselves (2009).

Yaacov Trope and Nira Liberman (2010) claim that psychological distance affects the way people mentally represent events. The closer something feels, whether in time, space, or identity, the more concretely we interpret it (Trope & Liberman, 2010). They claim that 2nd-person perspective may reduce psychological distance, making the events feel more immediate and vivid, and, as a result, readers may attribute actions more to the situation than to stable character traits (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Also, Caitlin Fausey and Lera Boroditsky (2010) found that agency framing influences how much blame and financial responsibility readers assign an actor.

Based on these works, we can know that subtle linguistic cues can shift how we assign blame, and we wanted to test if the point-of-view from which a narrative is told affects judgments on jerkiness. We predict that stories in 2nd-person perspective might increase situational attribution and decrease dispositional blame for jerks, mirroring the actor-observer bias we apply in real life when explaining our own behavior.

This study investigates whether the narrative point-of-view in short stories affects evaluations of a character's "jerkiness." Participants (N = 187 after filtering junk data) read and rated 48 stories from "Am I the Asshole?" forum on Reddit, which were condensed and rewritten into one of the three perspectives.

We found that stories in third-person stories got the least "jerk" ratings (the most "not the jerk" ratings), which is contrary to our original prediction that second-person narratives would evoke the most empathy.

As there is a possible trend suggesting that 3rd-person stories lead to less "jerk" ratings than other perspectives, this trend may be something to investigate further. We propose that this effect may stem from pragmatic inference: readers may suspect self-justification or bias from first-person narrators, while trusting third-person accounts as more neutral.

These findings expand our understanding of how subtle linguistic cues, like pronoun choice, can shape judgments, opinions, views, and reasoning along with how media outlets, public statements, and political speeches can shape your beliefs. More broadly, the findings suggest that narrative structure affects not just how we imagine events, but how harshly we judge the people involved.

Future work could test whether pragmatic inference is the underlying mechanism for third-person stories getting the most "not the jerk" ratings and whether the findings are the same for Large Language Models (LLMs), like ChatGPT and Google Gemini, as there is growing discussion that LLMs are sycophantic (overly flattering and overly agreeing).

Introduction

The idea that people judge their own actions differently from others is an important concept in cognitive science and social psychology. The actor-observer bias, established by Edward Jones and Richard Nisbett (1971), suggests that people attribute their own behavior to situational factors (e.g., "I had no choice.") but others' behavior to dispositional factors (e.g., "She's just a bad person."). Narratives may alter the actor-observer bias by giving readers access to a character's context. Research by Brunyé et al. (2009) found that second-person pronouns ("you") lead readers to mentally simulate events from the actor's perspective. Trope and Liberman's work (2010) suggests that second-person pronouns ("you") reduces psychological distance, making the events feel more immediate and vivid, and, as a result, leading to more concrete reasoning. Fausey and Boroditsky (2010) show that subtle language cues influence how people assign blame and responsibility.

While prior work shows that language influences judgments, it is unclear how narrative perspective affects judgments on morality in narrative contexts. Specifically, we do not know if changes in pronoun choice affect how readers judge morally complex or controversial characters. Understanding this is significant as narratives shape opinions, and subtle linguistic framing affects blame.

We tested whether the perspective of a short story affects judgments of a character's "jerkiness." Using stories from the Reddit forum *Am I the Asshole?*, we condensed 48 stories into first-, second-, or third-person forms. Participants (N = 187 after filtering junk data) read one point-of-view for each story and rated how much of a jerk the main character was. We analyzed the ratings using linear mixed-effects models and conducted pairwise comparisons using estimated marginal means in R.

Contrary to our prediction, stories in third-person perspective received the lowest jerk ratings. There was no significant difference between pairwise comparisons for first- versus second-person perspective and second- versus third-person perspective, but there was a marginally significant difference between first- and third-person perspective. This suggests that readers may view third-person narrators as neutral, possibly due to pragmatic inference. These results show that even small shifts in pronoun use can significantly shift moral evaluations, with implications for how media, politics, and AI-generated text shape perception and judgment.
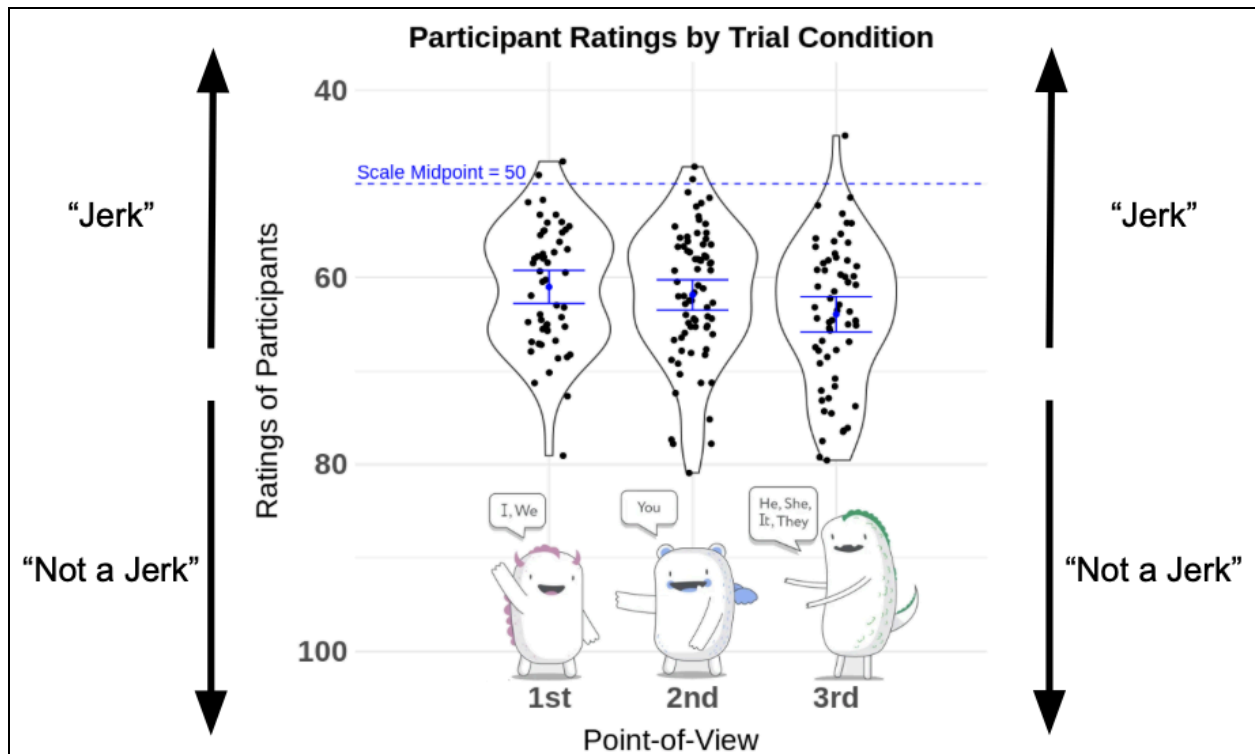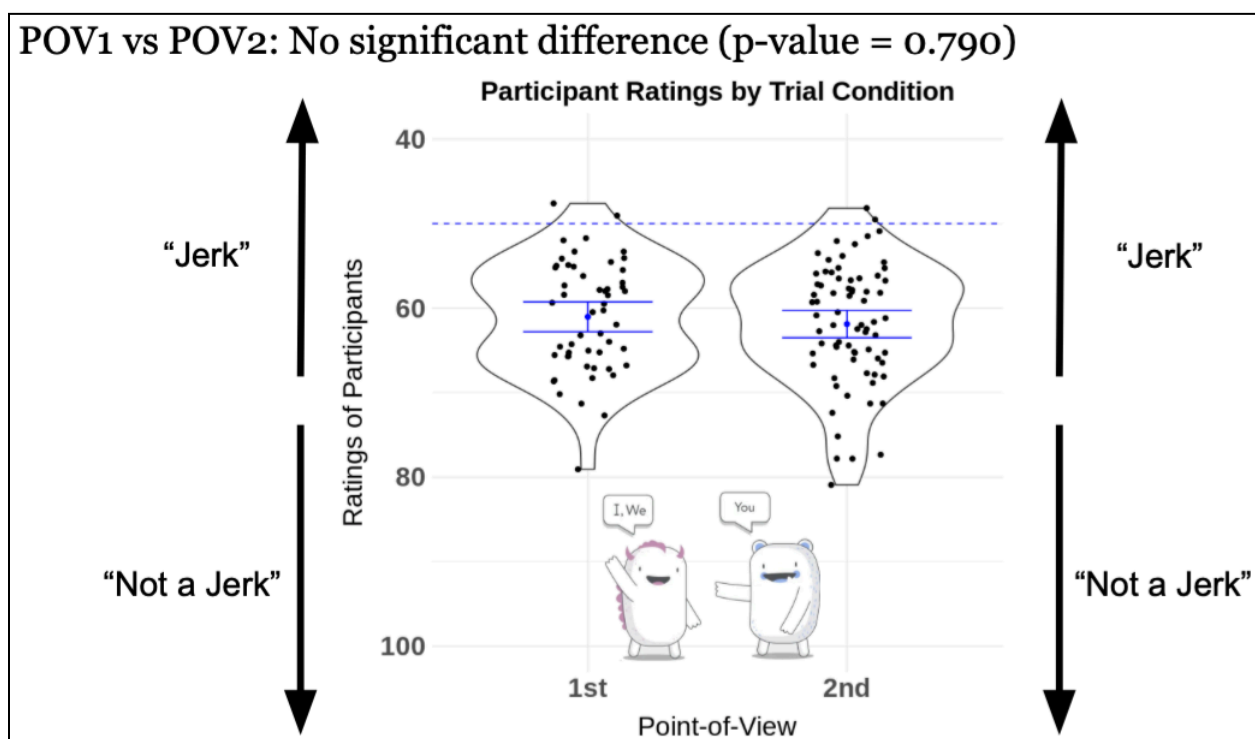
Figure 1: Results Graph

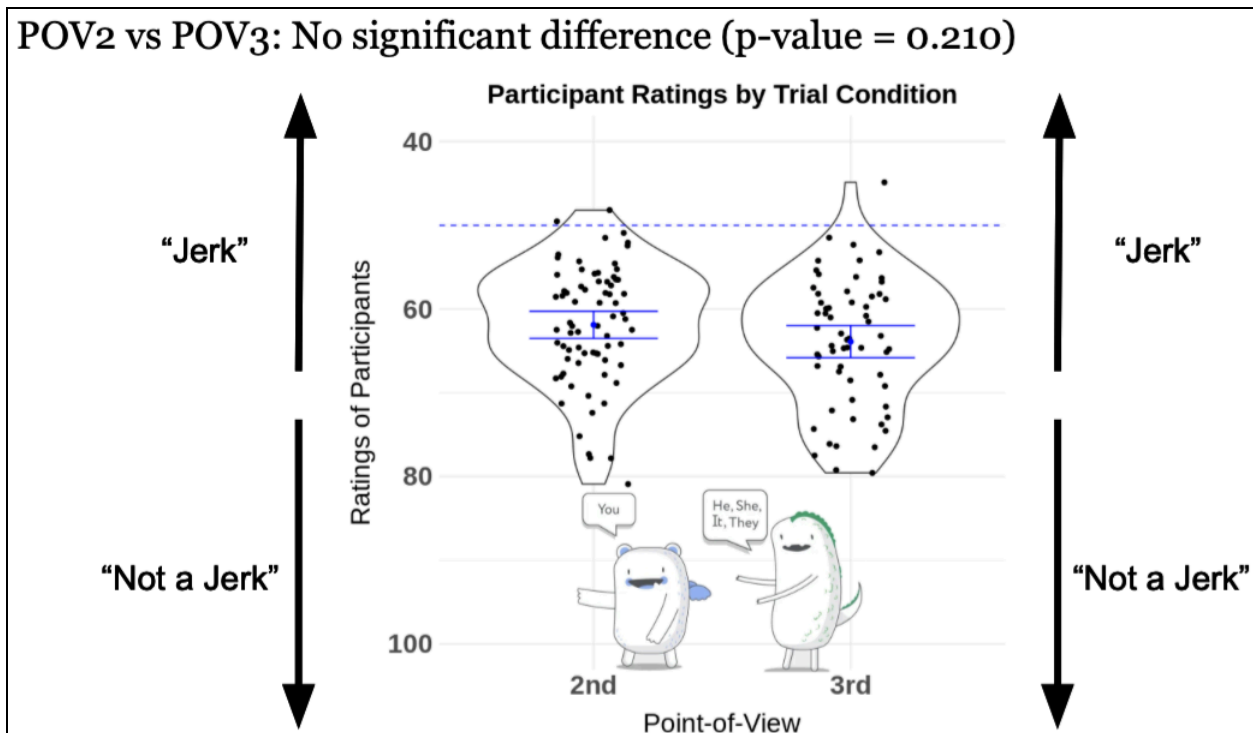Figure 2: Pairwise Comparison of POV1 VS POV2 (p-value: 0.790)

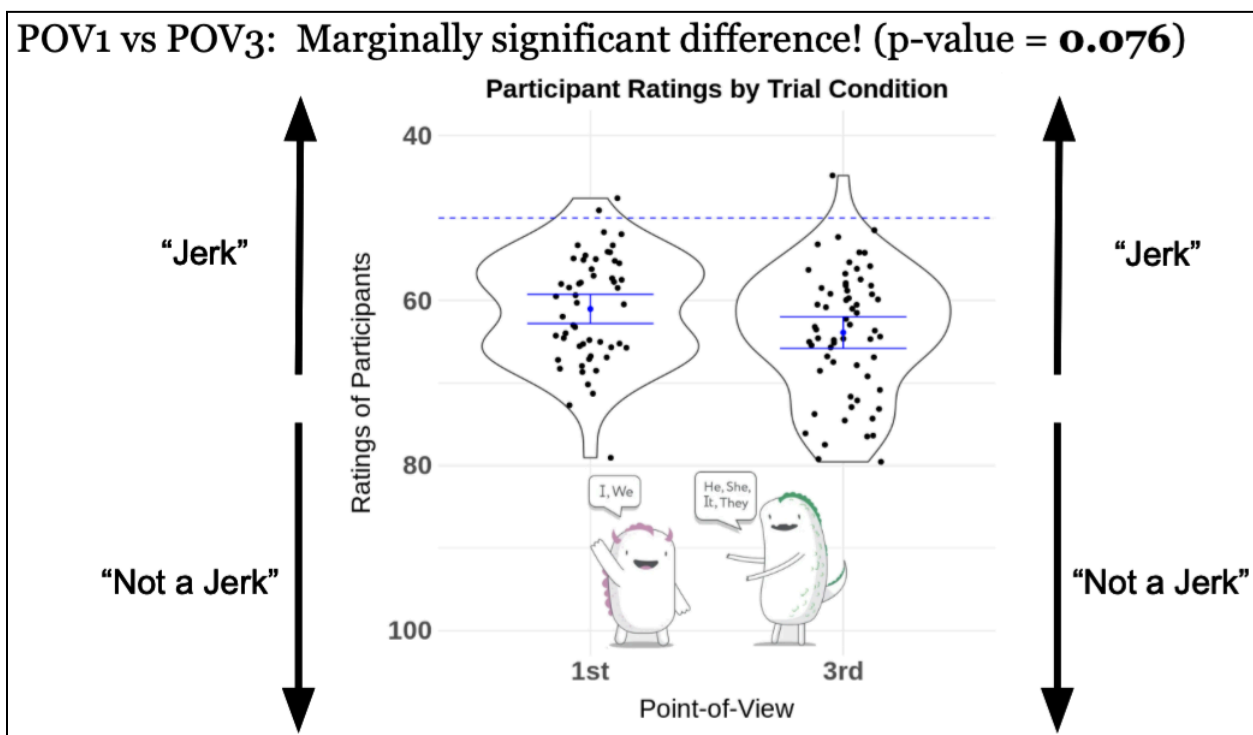Figure 3: Pairwise Comparison of POV2 VS POV3 (p-value: 0.210)

Figure 4: Pairwise Comparison of POV1 VS POV3 (p-value: 0.076)

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I bought a 1952 Telecaster in mint condition for $4,000 from a seller who was clearing out a late parent's belongings. I knew it was worth $50,000, but the seller set the price. Two weeks later, the seller learned the real value and demanded it back. I refused. After continued contact, I obtained a restraining order. My friends and family supported me, though some of my co-workers disagreed. I believe the purchase was fair and plan to keep the guitar for the long haul.

I'm a Jerk   I'm not a Jerk

Figure 5: A Survey Question from the 1st-Person Perspective Story Set

I'm a Jerk   I'm not a Jerk

You're a Jerk   You're not a Jerk

Bellamy's a Jerk   Bellamy's not a Jerk

Figure 6: The slider labels were renamed to fit the perspective of the story set. For third-person perspective stories, the name of the subject noun changed in each story along with the slider labels.

Methods

Human subjects information

All participants gave their informed consent in accordance with the protocols approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of California, San Diego.

Data Sources

48 short stories were derived from the Reddit forum *r/AmItheAsshole*. Each story was condensed to around 100 words and rewritten in three perspectives: first-person ("I"), second-person ("You"), and third-person (Name).
Participants (N = 187 after filtering junk data) were randomly assigned to a set of one perspective and read one version of each story and rated the main character's "jerkiness" on a scale. The number values were hidden to the participant, but the numerical values of both ends of the scale were from 0 (jerk) to 100 (not the jerk). Each participant rated 48 stories total. The study was administered online using Qualtrics.

Task Description

Participants read a set of short scenarios in one perspective (first, second, or third) and to rate whether the protagonist was being a jerk or not in each scenario. Each story was presented in either first-, second-, or third-person perspective. The slider scale for rating the jerkiness was below each story, with no time constraint for responses.

Data Analysis

All data were analyzed using R. Linear mixed-effects models were fitted using the `lme4` package, and estimated marginal means were computed using the `emmeans` package. The primary model tested the effect of perspective (POV: first-, second-, or third-person) on jerk ratings:

```
rating ~ POV + (1 | id) + (1 | trial_Q)
```

This model included random intercepts for participant (`id`) and story (`trial_Q`) to account for individual differences and item-level variability. Estimated marginal means and pairwise comparisons between perspectives were also computed using `emmeans()`.

Visualizations and diagnostic checks were created using `ggplot2`, and additional simulations were run in Python to validate model behavior and replicate trends.

To examine whether perspective affected participants' moral evaluations, I conducted a linear mixed-effects analysis using the `lmer()` function from the **lme4** package in R. The dependent variable was participants' rating of each scenario on a continuous 0–100 scale, reflecting

perceived "jerkiness." The main fixed effect predictor was point-of-view (POV), a categorical variable with three levels: first-person, second-person, and third-person.

Because each participant rated multiple scenarios and each scenario was presented across participants, the model included random intercepts for participant ID and trial item to account for repeated measures and item-level variability.

The full model was specified as:
```
model_full <- lmer(rating ~ POV + (1 | id) + (1 | trial_Q), data = df)
```

To test the overall contribution of POV to model fit, I performed a likelihood ratio test comparing the full model to a null model that excluded the fixed effect of POV but retained the same random structure:
```
model_null <- lmer(rating ~ 1 + (1 | id) + (1 | trial_Q), data = df)
anova(model_full, model_null)
```

Pairwise comparisons between POV levels were conducted using the `pairs()` function from the `emmeans()` package, which tests all pairwise differences between group means and tells you whether the pairwise differences are statistically significant, while adjusting for multiple comparisons.

All statistical analysis code and cleaned datasets are available upon request.
Please email jsk010@ucsd.edu.

Results

Behavioral
Participants (N = 187 after filtering junk data) rated 48 short stories for how much of a "jerk" the protagonist was, using a slider scale. Each participant was randomly assigned to read the stories in either first-, second-, or third-person perspective. Third-person stories received the lowest average jerk ratings, while first-person stories received the highest average jerk ratings. Contrary to our original hypothesis, second-person perspective did not produce the most "not a jerk" ratings.

Between-Participant Analyses
Each participant rated a set of 48 stories, all presented in either one of the three perspectives. To account for between-subject variability, we included random intercepts for participants (`id`) and for each unique story (`trial_Q`) in our linear mixed-effects model. This allowed us to isolate the effect of point-of-view from individual differences in overall rating style and item-level variation across stories.

Linear Modeling
We fit a linear mixed-effects model using the `lme4` package in R:

```
rating ~ POV + (1 | id) + (1 | trial_Q)
```

The intercept (mean rating for first-person) was estimated at 61.03. Third-person stories were rated 2.88 points lower on the scale than first-person stories, a marginally significant difference (p = 0.0309). There was no significant difference between first- and second-person nor between second- and third-person. A likelihood ratio test comparing this full model to a null model without POV yielded a marginal result ($\chi^2(2)$ = 5.22, p = 0.074), suggesting that perspective may have a weak but notable effect on moral judgment.

Pairwise comparisons using estimated marginal means showed no significant differences between any perspective pairs at p < 0.05, though the first- vs. third-person contrast approached significance. These results suggest a possible trend where third-person perspective leads to more "not a jerk" ratings, possibly due to decreased perceived self-justification or greater perceived objectivity/neutrality.

Compared to the reference level (first-person), third-person ratings were significantly higher by 2.88 points (p = 0.0309), while second-person ratings did not significantly differ (p = 0.51). A likelihood ratio test comparing the full model to a null model without POV was marginally significant ($\chi^2(2)$ = 5.22, p = 0.074), suggesting a trend toward POV affecting ratings.

Pairwise comparisons revealed no statistically significant differences between any POV pairs, though the first- vs third-person comparison approached significance, indicating that third-person narratives may lead to more "not a jerk" ratings than first-person ones.

The fixed effect of POV was tested with first-person as the reference level. Results indicated:
- Third-person stories were rated 2.88 points higher than first-person stories (p = 0.0309), suggesting a small but statistically significant effect.
- Second-person stories were rated only 0.39 points higher than first-person stories (p = 0.510), a non-significant difference.

A likelihood ratio test comparing the full model to a null model without the POV predictor was marginally significant ($\chi^2(2)$ = 5.22, p = 0.074), suggesting a trend towards an effect of perspectives on moral judgments.

Pairwise comparisons revealed no statistically significant differences between any individual POV pairs, although the first- vs third-person contrast approached conventional significance. These findings suggest that perspective may affect moral judgments slightly, with third-person narratives leading to more "not a jerk" evaluations.

The full linear mixed-effects model revealed a statistically significant effect of perspective on participants' ratings. The intercept (61.03) corresponds to the estimated mean rating for first-person scenarios, which served as the reference category.

- The second-person POV was rated 0.84 points higher than first-person, but this difference was not statistically significant:
  Estimate = 0.84, SE = 1.28, t(187.54) = 0.66, p = 0.510
- The third-person POV was rated 2.88 points higher than first-person, and this difference reached statistical significance:
  Estimate = 2.88, SE = 1.33, t(188.53) = 2.18, p = 0.0309

A likelihood ratio test comparing the full model to the null model showed that including POV improved model fit marginally:
- *χ²(2) = 5.22, p = 0.074*

Pairwise comparisons of estimated marginal means indicated the following:
- First-person VS Second-person**:** No significant difference
  p-value = 0.790
- First-person VS Third-person**:** Marginally significant difference
  p-value = 0.076
- Second-person VS Third-person**:** No significant difference
  p-value = 0.210

Overall, the data suggest a possible trend: participants rated characters in third-person stories more towards "not a jerk" than those in first-person stories, although this difference did not reach conventional significance thresholds in all comparisons. This trend may warrant further investigation in future work.

Discussion

Research in cognitive science and social psychology has shown that people explain behavior differently. The actor-observer bias (Jones & Nisbett, 1971) explains why individuals tend to attribute their own actions to situational constraints, while attributing others' actions to stable personality traits. Prior linguistic and cognitive science research (Brunyé et al., 2009; Trope & Liberman, 2010) has shown that pronouns and perspective affect embodied simulation, psychological distance, and attribution. We extend this work by showing that third-person perspective, contrary to our predictions, lead to the most "not the jerk" ratings, suggesting a possible role for pragmatic inference in evaluation: readers may scrutinize first-person accounts more as a jerk because they suspect alternative truths and hidden biases from the speaker, while interpreting third-person narratives as more neutral.

This study was designed to study the effect of pronouns and narrative perspective. However, there are several limitations. First, the "jerkiness" rating is subjective and somewhat ambiguous. It may vary in interpretation across participants. Second, the second-person condition, while theoretically promising for evoking embodiment, may have made some short stories feel unnatural or unrelatable to the reader, which could have weakened its hypothesized effect. Additionally, because each participant only experienced one perspective throughout the study, we were unable to test within-subject comparisons across perspectives. Lastly, although the trend in the pairwise comparison for first- and third-person perspective was marginally

significant, the overall effect sizes were small, and pairwise comparisons did not reach conventional significance levels after correction.

This study provides preliminary evidence that narrative perspective shapes moral judgment. Our results suggest that readers may judge third-person narrators more towards "not a jerk" because they are perceived as more objective. Future work could test whether pragmatic inference is causing this effect and test the stories in all three perspectives to control for between-subject variability. Moreover, as discussion is growing about Large Language Models (LLMs), like ChatGPT and Google Gemini, are sycophantic, future studies could apply this study on LLMs and see if the results significantly differ from human participants or if there is an interesting phenomenon among the findings.

Something as small as a pronoun affects how we judge others. Our findings suggest that narrative framing can affect the actor-observer bias. By studying how subtle language cues affect moral reasoning, we can better understand not only human cognition but also the broader effect of storytelling, biases, and judgments.

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