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# ACCOUNTABILITY AND SOCIAL COGNITION

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**Social cognition** The mental processes through which people come to understand and interpret social events and information. Social factors influence both what people think about and how they think.

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## Glossary

**Accountability** A universal feature of social interaction through which people hold other people implicitly or explicitly responsible for their actions. Although accountability is a universal feature of social systems, the specific norms to which people are held accountable vary from one culture and historical period to another.

**Cognition** Thinking processes through which persons achieve awareness or knowledge of the world.

**Heuristic** A problem-solving strategy or "rule of thumb" which has worked in the past and is thought likely to work again. A heuristic strategy is a cognitive short-cut (in contrast to more systematic, logically defensible but less time-consuming strategies).

**Integrative complexity** A measure of the multidimensionality of cognition. Complexity is defined in terms of two cognitive structural properties: evaluative differentiation and conceptual integration. Differentiation refers to the number of evaluatively distinct or contradictory dimensions of a problem an individual takes into account. Integration refers to the development of complex connections among differentiated characteristics.

**ACCOUNTABILITY** refers to the implicit or explicit expectation of decision makers that they may be called upon to justify their beliefs, feelings, and actions to others. Under Section I, we introduce accountability as a universal feature of social life that inevitably arises from the norm-enforcement needs of groups and organizations. How people cope with accountability is, however, a relatively new and growing area of study. Under Section II, we discuss the motivational and cognitive assumptions underlying this emerging literature. Under Section III, we draw on experimental research to explicate four major coping strategies activated by accountability demands. Under Section IV, we discuss when scholarly observers applaud these strategies as adaptive or criticize them as maladaptive, and comment on the complexities of making such determinations. Section V summarizes what we currently know about accountability and decision making, and what remains unanswered.

## I. THE FOUNDATION OF ACCOUNTABILITY

### A. Introduction to Accountability

Semin and Manstead propose that people inevitably create accountability systems to cope with common

problems of group life. Further, they assert that social order could not be maintained without accountability practices. Accountability, in this view, serves as a critical rule and norm enforcement mechanism—the social psychological link between individual decision makers on the one hand and social systems on the other.

Accountability rules and conventions vary dramatically from one culture and historical period to another. The underlying functions served by accountability arrangements are, however, remarkably similar. Specifically, accountability systems arise whenever two conditions are satisfied:

1. One group member acts in a manner that harms others.
2. Those harmed are sufficiently alarmed to incur the costs of monitoring and censuring the responsible party. In short, accountability is a universal feature of all known systems of social control, from economic markets to government bureaucracies to informal peer and community networks.

### B. Accountability and Decision Making

Expectations of accountability constrain virtually every decision people make. Whether one is an architect designing a building, a politician contemplating next year's budget priorities, or a research scientist preparing a manuscript for a peer-refereed journal, there is strong pressure to anticipate the objections of potential critics (what will I say if they advance this or that argument?). [See DECISION MAKING, INDIVIDUALS.]

Field studies underscore the ubiquity of accountability in decision making. Experimental studies shed light on the mechanisms underlying the effects of accountability on judgment and choice.

## II. ASSUMPTIONS UNDERLYING ACCOUNTABILITY RESEARCH

### A. Motivational Assumptions Underlying Accountability Research

Why do people generally seek the approval and avoid the disapproval of those to whom they feel accountable? Theorists offer three categories of answers:

1. Economic self-interest
2. Self-esteem needs
3. Impression management needs

The economic and self-esteem approaches view approval motivation as a means to ends, the ends being either material-enhancement or self-enhancement.<sup>1</sup> By contrast, impression management theories hold that people seek approval as an end in itself.

Although logically distinct, these three categories of motives are empirically intertwined. On the one hand, these motives are sometimes related in positive feedback loops: as one's material wealth increases, so too might one's status or esteem in which one is held by others. Similarly, purchasing particular possessions can be seen as the symbolic action of self-affirmation. On the other hand, these motives are sometimes in direct tension with each other. Conspicuous consumption can also lead to negative feedback from others.

### B. Cognitive Assumptions Underlying Decision-Making Research

Most researchers start from the premise that people are limited-capacity information processors who rely on simplifying heuristics to cope with an otherwise intolerably complex world. Perhaps the most influential framework to date has been the cognitive miser which depicts people as prone to a variety of judgmental failings. The miser attempts to minimize mental strain by employing simple heuristics, but

<sup>1</sup> Traditionally, theories explaining approval motivation have focused on the private self, explaining motives as a means to an end. Theories ranging from Freud's view of the unconscious all the way to current theories of self-schemata are examples of this "private self" approach. Typically, such theories explain approval motivation in terms of inner cognitions, traits, and emotions.

In economic theories of human behavior, assessing the costs and benefits of social action is an individual's main objective. In this view, the decision maker is an intuitive economist whose aim is to increase power while maximizing rewards and minimizing costs. A range of theories exist in terms of economic effectiveness. At one end, economic theories posit near perfect rationality on the part of the decision maker. At the other end, theories argue that decision makers are wired up in fundamentally wrong ways to be perfectly rational.

By contrast, symbolic interactionists have focused on the "public self." Symbolic theories assert that the trait attributions made by others are essential to the definition of the self. The "looking glass self," for example, represents the idea that a person's self-concept is actually a reflection of that person's perceptions of how he or she appears to others.

the price of cognitive economy is susceptibility to a host of errors, including being too quick to draw strong conclusions about others' personalities from fragmentary and unrepresentative evidence, too slow to revise hypotheses in response to new evidence, overconfident, and too quick to lose faith in genuinely diagnostic evidence when that evidence is embedded among irrelevant or distracter variables.

Recently, the cognitive miser framework has been challenged by a new generation of contingency theories of judgment and choice which rely instead on the "cognitive manager" metaphor. Central to these contingency theories is the assumption that people think in different ways in different situations. There is, moreover, considerable evidence that people can indeed shift from simpler to more complex cognitive strategies in response to situational demands.

In this article, we use the cognitive miser metaphor as a starting point; bounded rationality is a useful first approximation for predicting how people cope with accountability predicaments. All other things being equal, people do prefer least-effort solutions. But, all other things are not always equal. Under certain conditions, accountability can motivate substantial effort, sometimes with beneficial consequences, sometimes without.

### III. HOW PEOPLE COPE WITH ACCOUNTABILITY: STRATEGIES AND HEURISTICS

To recap, accountability is a universal feature of the natural decision environment; people are motivated to seek the approval and respect of those to whom they are accountable; and, people are capable of thinking critically or heuristically depending on situational factors. These assumptions lay the framework for introducing a social contingency model of judgment and choice.

#### A. Social Contingency Model of Judgment and Choice

Proposed by Tetlock, this model posits how motivational and cognitive dispositions of decision makers interact with the social context (especially accountability) to shape individual judgment and choice. Just as there are middle-range theories that depict people as more or less effective intuitive psychologists and economists, so one can imagine theories

that depict people as more or less effective politicians. This model of judgment and choice falls near the midpoint of the effectiveness continuum.<sup>2</sup>

#### 1. The Acceptability Heuristic

This low-effort solution to accountability predicaments is activated when the socially acceptable option is obvious, likely to come to mind quickly, and likely to be bolstered by supportive arguments readily available in the environment.<sup>3</sup> Under these conditions, people simply adopt positions likely to gain the favor of those to whom they feel accountable, thereby allowing them to avoid much "unnecessary" cognitive work (analyzing the pros and cons of alternative courses of action, interpreting complex patterns of information, making difficult trade-offs).

An example is strategic attitude shifting. Studies show that when subjects know the views of the audience and do not feel locked into any prior attitudinal commitment, they shift their views toward those of the prospective audience. Field studies tell a similar story of decision makers in business and politics often tailoring the message to the audience.

#### 2. Pre-Emptive Self-Criticism

The social contingency model posits, however, that the solutions to accountability predicaments are not always so straightforward. In some situations, the most acceptable option is not obvious. The model predicts that under conditions of normative ambiguity and pressure to justify future action, people abandon their cognitive-miserly ways and become relatively flexible, multidimensional thinkers.

To test these predictions, Tetlock *et al.* asked subjects to report their positions on controversial issues (capital punishment, affirmative action) under one of four conditions: expecting their positions to be confidential or expecting to justify their positions to an individual with liberal, conservative, or unknown views. In addition, subjects were asked to

<sup>2</sup> On one end of the continuum would be theories that posit Machiavellian levels of political cunning. People, in this view, are incessant schemers who actively seek out information about the expectations and preferences of others, carefully calculate the impact of possible decisions on others, anticipate potential objections, and craft accounts to preempt these objections. At the other end of the effectiveness continuum would be theories that portray people as hopelessly inept politicians who may try to maintain good working relations with important constituents, but who instead frequently wind up antagonizing them.

<sup>3</sup> This is especially true in group polarization and concurrence-seeking group situations.

TABLE I  
Integrative Complexity of Thought Varies in a Predictable Pattern According to Perceived Audience Characteristics

Strategy	Condition	Mean integrative complexity scores	
		Tetlock (1983)	Tetlock <i>et al.</i> (1989)
—	No accountability	1.83	1.56
Acceptability heuristic	Accountable to liberal audience	2.00	1.66
Acceptability heuristic	Accountable to conservative audience	2.06	1.76
Pre-emptive self-criticism	Accountable to unknown audience	2.61	2.05

Note: Higher scores indicate more complex responses. Ratings ranged from 1 to 7.

report their thoughts on each issue *prior* to committing themselves to a position. These thought protocols were then subjected to detailed content analysis to assess the integrative complexity of subjects' thinking on the issues.

Subjects who were accountable to an unknown audience employed a pre-emptively self-critical strategy; in their thought protocols, they displayed much more tolerance for evaluative inconsistency (recognizing both good and bad features of particular policies) and much more recognition of value trade-offs. This cognitive reaction can be viewed as an adaptive strategy to protect one's self- and social-image. Expecting to justify one's views to an unknown audience raised the prospect of failure: The other person might find serious flaws in the positions taken. To reduce the likelihood of such an esteem-threatening and embarrassing event, subjects demonstrated their awareness of alternative perspectives on the issues. The implicit goal was to justify the position taken by showing an understanding of the counter-arguments.

Recall that integrative complexity is a measure of the multidimensionality of cognition. Table I summarizes mean values of integrative complexity ratings that correspond to use of the acceptability heuristic and pre-emptive self-criticism. Presumably, accountability to an unknown audience induces more complexity because people try to anticipate arguments that potential critics might raise.

### 3. Defensive Bolstering

The model also identifies a third major coping strategy. When people have irrevocably committed themselves to a course of action,<sup>4</sup> accountability will

again motivate cognitive effort. The result will not, though, be self-critical, flexible, and complex thought. Rather, the result will be rigid, defensive, and evaluatively consistent thought. Accountability will prompt people to engage in *defensive bolstering*, that is, to generate as many reasons as they can why they are right and potential critics wrong.

Note the difference between predecisional versus postdecisional accountability. Tetlock *et al.* showed how a minor variation in the timing of an accountability manipulation can dramatically influence coping strategies. Subjects who felt accountable and reported their thoughts after making attitudinal commitments became much less integratively complex than accountable subjects who reported their thoughts prior to taking a stand.

Once accountable subjects had publicly committed themselves, the major function of thought became the generation of justifications for those stands. As a result, the integrative complexity of the thoughts reported plunged (subjects were less likely to see the other point of view), and the number of pro-attitudinal thoughts increased (subjects generated thoughts that were evaluatively consistent with their public attitudinal stands). Table II shows the systematic variation in integrative complexity according to the timing of accountability.

### 4. Decision Avoidance

Finally, the model predicts a fourth coping pattern. When people are accountable to conflicting audiences, when it is necessary to impose losses on a well-defined constituency in order to promote the general good, and when the risks posed by a decision are moderate to high, people are likely to engage in decision avoidance tactics. Under these conditions, people cope by buckpassing and procrastinating.

<sup>4</sup> Here we refer specifically to cases of postdecisional accountability

TABLE II  
Integrative Complexity Varies Systematically  
According to the Timing of Accountability

Condition	Mean integrative complexity scores
Accountable to unknown audience	
Predecisional accountability	2.01
Postdecisional accountability	1.4
Accountable to liberal audience	
Predecisional accountability	1.7
Postdecisional accountability	1.3
Accountable to conservative audience	
Predecisional accountability	1.8
Postdecisional accountability	1.5

Note: Higher scores indicate more complex responses. Ratings ranged from 1 to 7. Data drawn from Tetlock *et al.* (1989).

To test these predictions, Tetlock and Boettger conducted a laboratory simulation of Food and Drug Administration decisions to admit new drugs onto, or keep old drugs on, the United States pharmaceuticals market. Specifically, the study assessed: (a) the degree of risk the drug subjects were willing to tolerate; (b) the tendency to blame by buckpassing or procrastinating; and (c) the degree of conflict or ambivalence experienced in decision making.

After subjects received information about the likely risks and benefits of the drug, they made decisions under either total anonymity or public accountability conditions. Results indicate that accountable subjects focused on the relative ease of justifying choices in setting levels of acceptable risk. All subjects were more accepting of a drug the lower the anticipated risks and the greater the anticipated benefits. Accountable subjects were especially unwilling to accept risk when the drug was not yet on the market and posed moderate or high risk. Under these conditions accountable subjects procrastinated (sought to delay decision making until further evidence was available) and buckpassed (passed responsibility for decision making onto another governmental agency).

In summary, the model posits that the social context of decision making can activate qualitatively distinct strategies of coping with accountability demands: the acceptability heuristic; pre-emptive self-criticism; defensive bolstering; and decision avoidance tactics (Table III).

### B. Cognitive Implications of Coping Strategies

One possible objection to the foregoing research is that accountability merely affects response thresh-

TABLE III  
Primary Strategies Used to Cope with Accountability Demands  
and the Activating Situational Conditions

Coping strategy	Situational conditions	
	Perceived audience motives	Temporal factors
Acceptability heuristic	Known	Predecisional accountability
Pre-emptive self-criticism	Unknown	Predecisional accountability
Defensive bolstering	Unknown or known	Postdecisional accountability
Decision avoidance <sup>a</sup>	Conflicting <sup>b</sup>	Predecisional accountability

<sup>a</sup> Tactics such as procrastination and buckpassing are activated when subjects want to avoid decision making responsibility.

<sup>b</sup> Evidence also indicates that the necessity of imposing losses on a well-defined constituency in order to promote the general good activates decision avoidance.

olds, not how people actually reason their way through problems of judgment and choice. If so, then accountability manipulations should be equally effective whether they are introduced before or after people are exposed to the evidence on which they must base their judgments and decisions.

Contrary to this prediction, accountability is much more effective in preventing than in reversing judgmental biases. Once subjects have assimilated or integrated information into their impressions of a person or event, they have a hard time reinterpreting that information. Accountability has a marked impact on the initial impression-formation process (it places subjects in a vigilant mental set that confers some protection from inferential biases), but it has little impact after the initial processing has occurred. Accountability cannot undo biased thinking at earlier processing stages. [See IMPRESSION FORMATION.]

### C. Individual Differences in Coping with Accountability

Although most work has focused on situational determinants of thinking strategies, some studies have looked at individual differences in relation to accountability. Though individual differences have not appeared as a locus for explaining variance, there are significant cognitive style and social motivational

correlates of coping responses. Key findings include the following.

### 1. Dogmatism

Dogmatic subjects tend to be less complex in their thinking. This suggests that high scorers on the dogmatism scale are less likely than low scorers to adopt a pre-emptively self-critical strategy, but are equally likely to adopt the acceptability heuristic.

### 2. Social Anxiety

Anxiety plays a limited but significant role by moderating the activation of pre-emptive self-criticism; subjects high in social anxiety report more integratively complex thoughts in response to predecisional accountability. High social anxiety subjects are also more likely to engage in defensive bolstering than low social anxiety subjects. Overall, social anxiety and need for approval help predict how motivated people are to gain the approval of prospective audiences as well as the strategies they use to achieve that goal.

## D. Boundary Conditions on Accountability Effects

There are noteworthy cases in which accountability fails to motivate changes in cognitive effort, suggesting boundary condition on its effects. As expected, when accountable to someone believed to be a legitimate judge, people are more likely to engage in analytic thought and to be able to describe their judgment policies after a judgment task. On the other hand, when accountable to someone without a perceived legitimate right to judge, people are less accurate at describing their policies, and they engage in more intuitive, rapid thinking.

Furthermore, accountability is not effective in reducing decision errors when the correct response is unknown and is not likely to be revealed with more thorough processing of information. In contrast to recency bias (which accountability does eliminate), accountability is ineffective with the curse of knowledge. The curse of knowledge exists when individuals are influenced by outcome knowledge that is irrelevant to the decision at hand. Kennedy suggests that this is due to the fact that curse of knowledge is due to the way data are used by the decision maker rather than insufficient attention or effort.

## IV. EVALUATION OF COPING RESPONSES

Conventional wisdom tells us that increasing accountability promotes effective decision making.

Experimental inquiry and political case studies, on the other hand, suggest that increasing accountability can trigger a variety of both welcome and not-so-welcome responses. We have seen, for example, that accountability can motivate cognitive effort which can take the form of either pre-emptive self-criticism, on the positive side, or increased buck-passing and procrastination and susceptibility to judgmental biases, such as dilution,<sup>5</sup> on the negative side. These findings suggest that accountability is no social panacea; there is often a trade-off between costs and benefits involved.

We now probe beyond these generalizations and develop a more nuanced understanding of accountability's benefits. The key questions are: When do these coping strategies lead to behavioral outcomes that scholarly observers applaud as adaptive or deplore as maladaptive? And, what standards should we use to make such determinations? In the next section, we proceed strategy by strategy (with reviews and comments on the existing literature) to answer these questions. [See COPING.]

## A. Acceptability Heuristic

Motivating adherence to social norms is the primary effect of this strategy. Results from considerable research allow us to explore both its micro- and macro-implications.

### 1. Advantages

The acceptability heuristic is a stabilizer; it turns social interaction into social order. Because people are concerned with what others will deem acceptable behavior, people are less likely to transgress important social and cultural norms. Indeed, accountability is a vital component of the social matrix; no social order can survive for long if its members do not recognize the legitimacy of its rules and accountability procedures.

The acceptability heuristic is a cognitive shortcut that sometimes serves us well. For example, when subjects believe that ignoring sunk costs<sup>6</sup> would appear more rational to an audience, the acceptability heuristic improves decision making.

Another advantage is promoting creativity. All creative acts depend on risk taking and some evi-

<sup>5</sup> Tetlock and Boettger (1989) documented increased susceptibility to the dilution effect, but also questioned whether this same effect is profitably considered a bias or a normative response.

<sup>6</sup> Sunk cost bias is the tendency to consume an object after sinking money in it because people anticipate feeling regret later for having wasted resources on something they left unconsumed.

dence suggests that collective accountability increases risk seeking in groups. On the other hand, there is evidence that accountability reduces the amount of risk groups are willing to take. One possibility is that accountability will magnify risk taking only if individual group members sense that riskiness is valued by the group.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. Disadvantages

By motivating decision makers to adopt the least objectionable course of action, the acceptability heuristic can lead individuals into decision traps. Research on bargaining has documented entrapment in groups. Several studies have found that accountability to constituents leads to tough, contentious bargaining, with a relatively high probability of deadlocks. Similarly, Adelberg and Batson found that accountability impaired rather than enhanced the effective use of resources by decision makers. When resources were insufficient, accountability made subjects award all applicants equally small and insufficient grants. The desire for social approval/acceptability shifts the decision-maker's focus away from the potential effectiveness of outcomes to the justifiability of actions.

## B. Defensive Bolstering

This strategy directs decision makers to devote the majority of their mental effort to justifying whatever position they feel committed to.

### 1. Disadvantages

Defensive bolstering can lead to a host of problems, including overconfidence in the correctness of decisions, discounting contradictory evidence, denying difficult value trade-offs, and susceptibility to entrapment. As already discussed, when decision makers are accountable for past commitments, they are more likely to up the ante. For example, research reveals that people who are personally responsible for an investment decision that produces bad results are more likely than people not personally responsible to pursue a failing policy instead of choosing a new course of action that would prevent further

losses. Personal responsibility also causes groups to perceive successive decisions as more strongly related and to feel more confident about those decisions. Moreover, individual accountability fails to stimulate entrapment *only* when decision makers can shift to alternative options that are not associated with a loss of prestige.

### 2. Advantages

Of course, it is not always a good idea to abandon a policy at the first sign of trouble. Decision makers who practice defensive bolstering as opposed to preemptive self-criticism are more likely to stick with a fundamentally good policy that has recently run into serious short-term difficulties. There is a fine, normative line between principled determination to "stay the course" and stubborn refusal to "acknowledge the facts."

## C. Pre-Emptive Self-Criticism

Predecisional accountability to unknown audiences directs people to anticipate objections that others might raise and to incorporate those objections into their own position.

### 1. Advantages

#### a. Improves Social Judgment

Many psychologists believe that there is a systematic bias in the person perception process: a pervasive tendency among observers to overestimate personality or dispositional causes of behavior and to underestimate the influence of situational constraints on behavior. Indeed, this behavior is referred to in the literature as the fundamental attribution error.

To examine this "error" in the context of accountability, Tetlock conducted an essay attribution experiment that explicitly manipulated whether subjects felt accountable for their attributional judgments and when they learned of being accountable. The classic overattribution effect was replicated when subjects did not feel accountable for their attributional judgments or when subjects learned of being accountable only after exposure to all the evidence. However, subjects who learned of being accountable prior to exposure to the evidence successfully resisted the overattribution effect. The effects suggest that the accountability manipulation encouraged people to consider the empirical facts presented rather than to rely on top-down interpretations.

<sup>7</sup> To qualify this finding, we note that Weigold and Schlenker (1991) found that accountability only reduced risk avoidance for individuals who had characterized themselves as low risk takers. Subjects who rated themselves as high risk takers were not affected by accountability in their preference for risk. According to Weigold and Schlenker, accountability made subjects rely on their own ideas about what kind of behavior would be socially appropriate.

The perseverance of first impressions, otherwise known as the primacy effect, is another bias that can be reduced by accountability. Using evidence from a criminal case, Tetlock found that having to justify one's impressions to others leads people to process information more vigilantly, and, as a result, reduces the undue influence of early formed impressions on final judgments. Accountability *prior to the evidence* also improved free recall of the case material, presumably because accountability affects how people initially encode and process stimulus information.

Similarly, Kennedy found that recency bias, the tendency to overweight evidence received later in a sequence, was reduced by accountability. Also in this study, however, Kennedy found that the curse of knowledge is not mitigated by accountability.

#### **b. Induces Appropriate Confidence**

A substantial literature indicates that people are often excessively confident in the correctness of their factual judgments and predictions. Yet, accountability can attenuate or eliminate overconfidence. Tetlock and Kim demonstrated that accountability reduces overconfidence in a personality prediction task. When people learn of the need to justify their responses *before* seeing the personality test responses of others, they form more integratively complex first impressions of people's personalities, make more accurate behavioral predictions, and report more appropriate confidence in those predictions. Observers who learn of the need to justify their responses *after* seeing the test takers' responses show no improvement in performance.

This debiasing effect has many potential applications. For example, evidence that accountability elicits confidence estimates from eyewitnesses that are more predictive of accuracy may be used to improve legal proceedings. Contrary to conventional wisdom, an individual's confidence about an identification is often only weakly related to the accuracy of an identification. But, if accountability is introduced in the proper way, this correlation should improve.

#### **c. Stimulates Bottom-Up Rather Than Top-Down Information Processing**

Several studies indicate that accountability stimulates data-driven as opposed to theory-driven information processing. We know, for example, that accountability leads decision makers to employ more consistent patterns of cue utilization. Similarly, a combination of accountability and forewarning in a

memory based interpersonal judgment task induces people to store and review all relevant information prior to making a judgment. By contrast, when not otherwise prompted, people tend to base interpersonal judgments on previous decisions and stored beliefs or inferences about someone.

There is also evidence that accountability can encourage data-driven and discourage theory-driven information processing. Previous work on person perception has shown that characteristics of the *perceiver* are frequently more important determinants of person perception than are characteristics of the person being judged. Perceivers tend to offer undifferentiated descriptions of stimulus persons (a given perceiver tends to see different stimulus persons as similar to each other) as well as idiosyncratic descriptions of stimulus persons (little overlap exists in the descriptions that different perceivers offer of the same stimulus person). This pattern is exactly what one would expect if people were theory-driven (top-down) thinkers who rely on their own implicit theories of personality and give little weight to actual properties of the persons being judged.

Under high importance and high accountability conditions, however, experimenters found a reversal of the typical finding: (1) differentiated perceiver descriptions of stimulus persons and (2) substantial agreement among judges in the descriptions offered of the same stimulus persons. In short, accountability appeared to sensitize perceivers to "what was actually out there."

#### **d. Improves Human Performance**

Accountability leads to more analytic choice strategies and greater investments of time and effort in decision making. This increase in investment helps explain why accountability reduces social loafing in groups. To test the effect of accountability, researchers manipulated whether subjects were accountable for their individual performance in a group task by telling subjects that the experimenter either would or would not be contacting them later to ask further questions. Mathematical models of subjects' judgments indicated that subjects who were not held accountable for their group work used less complex judgment strategies than those working alone. But, they also found that this kind of social loafing could be significantly reduced by holding members responsible for their individual performance. [See SOCIAL LOAFING.]

#### **2. Disadvantages**

##### **a. Induces Excessive Searches for Meaning**

Increased integrative complexity increases the tendency to make inappropriately regressive predic-



tions when diagnostic evidence is accompanied by diverse bits of nondiagnostic information (what has been called the dilution effect). In one scenario, Tetlock and Boettger asked subjects to predict the grade point averages of target students. Subjects received either only diagnostic evidence (number of hours studied per week) or diagnostic evidence plus a host of irrelevant information (tennis playing habits, dating patterns). Accountable subjects tried to be "good," complex information processors and to integrate both the diagnostic and nondiagnostic evidence in making predictions about grade point average. In short, pre-exposure accountability to an unknown audience motivated subjects to be more integratively complex thinkers, but it did not make them wiser—it did not make them more discriminating consumers of the information at their disposal.

#### **b. Increases Susceptibility to Status Quo Bias and Sensitivity to Risk**

Another example of the arguably maladaptive effects of integrative complexity comes from a Tetlock and Boettger study that examined judgments of the acceptability of a drug on the United States pharmaceutical market. As noted earlier, accountable subjects were much more responsive to the level of risk posed by the drug, and especially so when they believed the drug had not yet been admitted into the market. Analysis of covariance indicated that subjects who thought about the issues in more integratively complex ways were largely responsible for the three-way interaction between the status quo manipulation, the accountability manipulation, and the level of risk manipulation. Examination of the thoughts reported by these subjects revealed a preoccupation with worst-case scenario thinking and explicit concern for what they would say to those who would be injured by their decisions. There is, of course, nothing immoral or irrational about such concerns. It is noteworthy, however, that these subjects were much more tolerant of risk created by a drug that was already on the market (the status quo effect). Removing a drug with a high benefit-cost ratio from the market would antagonize those constituencies who currently benefit from it. Introducing a drug with an equally positive benefit-cost ratio focuses attention on those constituencies who would be hurt. In short, accountability pressures that motivate integrative complexity make people reluctant to put themselves out on a limb and take stands that require painful trade-offs.

#### **D. Determining the Value of Strategies**

Having considered numerous cases in which the literature presents each coping strategy as either adap-

tive or maladaptive, we return to an earlier question: What standards are appropriate to determine the appropriateness of each strategy? Here we urge caution. There are many possible standards and a lack of clear guidelines. For example, when does the desire of good team players to do what is most acceptable stimulate mindless conformity and groupthink as opposed to much needed enthusiasm and unity of purpose? Is the dilution effect better thought of as a cognitive bias or a prudent response to the conversational norm "assume the information people give you is relevant to the task at hand?" Response tendencies that look like judgmental flaws from one perspective frequently look quite reasonable from other perspectives (see Tetlock, 1992, for several examples).

Before labeling a response tendency a cognitive flaw, we should consider the interpersonal, institutional, and political goals that people are trying to achieve by making judgments of a particular type: Do people seek to achieve causal understanding or to express their moral approval/disapproval? Do people attempt to maximize expected utility or to minimize risk of serious criticism?

### **V. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

Accountability is an inevitable feature of decision environments—it is the social psychological link between individual decision makers on the one hand and social systems on the other. Nevertheless, its effects have been largely overlooked by psychologists. Only recently are some psychologists beginning to systematically study the strategies people develop for coping with this ubiquitous problem of social life.

Research to date identifies four major coping strategies for dealing with accountability: the acceptability heuristic, defensive bolstering, pre-emptive self-criticism, and decision avoidance tactics. Our analysis of the pros and cons of each strategy lead us to conclude that each of the coping responses is appropriate under some circumstances and inappropriate under others. We argue that the criteria for assessing utility of a strategy must factor in the social context in which that strategy operates. For example, labeling the dilution effect a cognitive error fails to take into account the conversational norms operating in the social context. Such a label downplays the adaptive value of sensitivity to conversational norms.

Although the number and diversity of field and laboratory studies on this topic are growing, numer-

ous gaps exist in the literature. There is little work on accountability to self, to conflicting audiences, and to challenging (rather than threatening) audiences. We also need comparative ethnographic studies of organizational culture to document the diverse forms that accountability relationships take and the style of decision making associated with these relationships. People do not make decisions in a social vacuum. It is crucial, therefore, that we expand our investigation of accountability and social cognition through complementary research programs of experimentation and field study.

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