ACCOUNTABILITY:

THE NEGLECTED SOCIAL CONTEXT OF JUDGMENT AND CHOICE

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ABSTRACT

The last decade has witnessed a dramatic increase in experimental studies of the cognitive processes underlying judgment and choice behavior. Although this cognitive research program has certainly increased our understanding of how people make up their minds in laboratory settings, the research program has virtually ignored the social and organizational context of judgment and choice. The information processor image of human nature underlying the cognitive research program provides at best an incomplete picture of how people think in the social and organizational settings in which they live and work. A pervasive feature of natural decision environments—but not of laboratory experiments on cognitive processes—is the fact that people are potentially accountable for the judgments and decisions they express. A need exists for a complementary research program—premised on a view of the person as politician—that focuses on the wide variety of strategies people develop for coping with demands for accountability in everyday life. Empirical and theoretical implications of the proposed politician research program are sketched.

Few fields of psychological research have expanded as rapidly as laboratory studies of judgment and decision-making. In the last ten years, there has been an explosion of interest in the basic cognitive strategies people use to interpret events and to choose among alternative courses of action. The enormity of the research effort is reflected in the size of the bibliographies of recent reviews of the literature. Since 1973, there have been well over 1000 experimental studies of social cognition and causal attribution (Hastie, 1983; Kelley & Michela, 1979; Nisbett & Ross, 1980; Taylor & Fiske, 1978). There has been a comparable growth of work in behavioral and psychological decision theory (Abelson & Levi, in press; Einhorn & Hogarth, 1981; Kahneman, Tversky & Slovic, 1982; Slovic, Fischhoff, & Lichtenstein, 1977).

Laboratory studies of cognitive processes do not, however, represent the only possible approach to the study of judgment and choice behavior. One can explore these topics from the perspective of a variety of different disciplines and levels of analysis. For instance, many social psychologists have focused on the impact of interpersonal and small group processes on decision-making (Bales, 1970; Janis, 1982; Moscovici, 1981; Shaw, 1980). Most important decisions are not, after all, the product of isolated information processors; they are the product of intensive interactions among members of groups. Working at a still higher level of analysis, many investigators in organizational behavior, political science and economics have preferred a bird's eye social system perspective on decision-making. Both individuals and small groups of individuals are constrained by the norms, procedures, and resources of the institutions in which they live and work (Allison, 1971; March & Simon, 1958; Katz & Kahn, 1978; Lindblom, 1959). Investigators in this tradition often view experimental studies with skepticism; they feel we need to study decision-making "in vivo"—in the actual institutional settings in which it occurs.

One's choice of level of analysis has profound consequences for how one conceptualizes decision-making. Using a metaphor drawn from general systems theory, Hogarth (in press) has compared the different levels of analysis to looking through a microscope at various levels of magnification. At the most intense level of magnification—such as provided by laboratory experiments of cognitive processes—one can see the phenomenon in detail. The price of the ability to see detail is, however, the inability to see the phenomenon within a broader systems context. At less intense levels of magnification—such as provided by field studies of organizational decision-making—one gains the ability to see context, but only at the cost of not seeing subsystem detail. Not surprisingly, communication across levels of analysis is both difficult and rare. What excites the attention of investigators at one level of analysis may well be invisible to investigators at other levels. One can study decision-making at a purely

cognitive level of analysis without ever referring to research on group dynamics, role theory or bureaucratic politics. Conversely, one can study bargaining, coalition formation and incrementalism in organizations without ever referring to cognitive research on knowledge structures or judgmental heuristics.

My most general goal in this chapter is to encourage communication across levels of analysis. Despite substantial advances in cognitive and social psychology, group dynamics and organizational behavior, the linkages among these traditions are still primitive. A major challenge still confronting decision theorists is the creation of conceptual frameworks which bridge the traditionally separate cognitive, small group and institutional levels of analysis (cf. George, 1980a; Holsti & George, 1975; Staw, Sandelands, & Dutton, 1981).

I have divided the chapter into two sections. The first section provides a broad overview of experimental research on cognitive processes underlying judgment and choice behavior. Drawing on the writings of the philosopher of science Imré Lakatos (1970), I use the concept of "research program" as a framework for organizing my discussion of this literature. Little doubt exists that the cognitive research program has stimulated significant theoretical and empirical advances in our understanding of human thought. These successes of the research program should not, however, blind us to its limitations. "Contextualist" critics have made a strong case for reducing the reliance on highly controlled laboratory experimentation and in favor of studying information processing in more ecologically representative situations. The search for completely context-free laws of information processing may often (although *not always*) be misguided.

In the second section, I advance a social psychological version of the contextualist critique. The "isolated information processor" image of human nature underlying the cognitive research program is too restrictive as a basis for a comprehensive theory of judgment and decision-making. People typically make up their minds in rule-governed social and organizational settings in which they feel personally accountable or responsible for the stands they take. We need an alternative research program that builds upon the cognitive tradition by placing the information processor in social context. The guiding metaphor I suggest for this alternative research program is that of the politician whose primary goal is to maintain the positive regard of important constituencies to whom he or she feels accountable. A major empirical goal of the politician research program is the identification of the cognitive, social, and political strategies that people use for coping with demands for accountability from significant others in their lives.

THE CURRENT STATE OF THE COGNITIVE RESEARCH PROGRAM

Implicit or explicit assumptions about human nature underlie virtually all empirical work in psychological and social science. These assumptions profoundly influence how we design, execute, and interpret research (cf. Deutsch & Krauss, 1965; Kendler, 1981; Shaw & Costanzo, 1982).

Imré Lakatos (1970) has advanced an insightful analysis of how underlying assumptions influence the conduct of scientific research. According to Lakatos, the most natural unit for describing scientific progress is not the isolated hypothesis or even theory, but rather the research program. Research programs can extend over decades (even centuries) and inspire an enormous number of hypotheses and empirical studies. Underlying all of the activity inspired by a research program is, however, a "hard core" of basic, unmodifiable assumptions about the subject matter. This hard core gives coherence, impetus, and direction to the research program. It specifies the ground rules for theory formulation and empirical work. The primary objective of the scientific community is to develop and test theories compatible with the hard core. And the defining characteristic of a mature research program is the emergence of consensus among investigators on the most effective theoretical and methodological strategies for achieving that objective (cf. Kuhn, 1970; Royce, 1976).

Viewed in the above light, the dominant research program on judgment and decision-making has clearly been the cognitive or information processing approach. The hard core of this now well-established program consists of two central philosophical ideas that have a long and distinguished history in psychology (a history that can be directly traced to Descartes and Kant) (Russell, 1945). The first is mentalism: a belief in the primacy of the cognitive structures and processes of the knowing subject. Our knowledge of the world is not direct, but mediated through these cognitive structures and processes. The second is individualism: a belief in the primacy of the thinking and reasoning processes of the *individual* knower. Thought and action are seen as products of the cognitive operations of the individual thinker, rather than as products of the social, organizational and technological settings in which the individual is embedded. Together, the mentalist and individualist elements of the hard core define the natural unit of analysis for the cognitive research program: the information processor in experimental isolation from the social world he or she normally inhabits (cf. Sampson, 1981).

The hard core assumptions of the research program are not directly testable; they have the status of "ontological axioms" (Lakatos, 1970). However, the assumptions are not empirically inconsequential. The hard core provides the conceptual starting point for most psychological theory

and research on judgment and decision-making. The hard core directs investigators to develop theories that take for granted the adequacy of the isolated information processor image of human nature. The central questions for empirical inquiry become: What type of information processor is the average person? How well does the average person perform the information processing tasks widely regarded as crucial for arriving at valid causal interpretations of events (e.g., estimating the degree of covariation among events, recalling evidence accurately, generating alternative hypotheses, testing these hypotheses in an unbiased fashion, adjusting prior beliefs in response to new evidence)? How well does the average person perform the information processing tasks widely regarded as crucial for making optimal or utility-maximizing decisions (considering the full range of options, accurately estimating the likelihood of occurrence of possible consequences of these options, assessing in an unbiased way the positive or negative value of each consequence, confronting difficult value trade-offs)?

A staggering body of research has addressed these challenging issues. The vast majority of this work consists of well-controlled laboratory experiments in which researchers systematically manipulate independent variables that they believe to be important determinants of judgment and choice behavior. The rationale for the heavy reliance on experimentation has been clear-cut: researchers have sought to identify basic psychological principles underlying judgment and choice behavior (e.g., information processing heuristics, knowledge structures). The laboratory experiment appears to provide the ideal means of studying these basic processes in pure or isolated form (cf. Hogarth's, in press, microscope analogy). Assuming that a small number of basic processes exist, and that they do not interact with the laboratory setting, it makes eminent sense to capitalize on the well-known internal validity advantages of experiments for testing and refining basic-process theories (Aronson & Carlsmith, 1969).

The current chapter is not the appropriate place to review the experimental literature on judgment and choice. This literature has been thoroughly reviewed elsewhere (Abelson & Levi, in press; Einhorn & Hogarth, 1981, Kelley & Michela, 1979; Nisbett & Ross, 1980; Payne, 1982; Slovic, Fischhoff & Lichtenstein, 1977). It is worth noting, however, that a sense of progress and guarded optimism does exist within much, if not all, of the research program. Many feel that the program is advancing satisfactorily. The most frequently mentioned sign of progress is the growing consensus on the nature of the human information processor. It is increasingly common to see people characterized as fallible information processors who are susceptible to a depressing number of errors and biases. People apparently do not think as normative models say they should think (e.g., Bayes' theorem for adjusting opinions in response to

new evidence, expected utility theory for choosing among multi-attribute options). In summarizing the relevant evidence, some reviewers have gone so far as to describe people as cognitive misers (Taylor, 1980) or lazy organisms (McGuire, in press) who avoid mental procedures that require sustained attention, comprehension, or computing power. People, it is maintained, seek inferential shortcuts or heuristics (e.g., availability) which permit them to make up their minds quickly, easily, and with excessive confidence in the correctness of their decisions. People are also characterized as predominantly theory-driven (as opposed to data-driven) information processors who accept belief-supportive information uncritically, but are slow to acknowledge disconfirmatory evidence (Nisbett & Ross, 1980). Sometimes, people even see belief-supportive evidence where it simply does not exist (Chapman & Chapman, 1969). In brief, far from being maximizers—relentlessly searching for the best possible solutions to the problems confronting them—people seem to be chronic satisficers, frequently unwilling or unable to perform the demanding cognitive tasks that normative models specify as essential to good decision-making.

The sense of progress in the research community is not, however, universal. A number of writers have begun to question the fruitfulness of an exclusively laboratory-based research program on information processors who have been isolated from the everyday environments in which they normally function. The grounds for the rising skepticism are many and varied, including: (1) methodological concerns for external validity; (2) mounting empirical evidence of the context-specificity of laboratory findings; (3) philosophical (functionalist) arguments on the need to understand the information processing environments with which people must deal on a daily basis.

Methodological concerns. We know little about the generality or robustness of most experimental findings reported in the literature (Borgida & Howard-Pitney, 1983; Ebbesen & Konecni, 1980; George, 1980; Jenkins, 1981; Katz & Kahn, 1978; O'Reilly & Anderson, 1982; Tetlock, 1983b). Laboratory experiments differ in multifarious ways from decision-making episodes in everyday life: the types of tasks presented to subjects, how the tasks are presented to subjects, subjects' goals in performing the tasks and the importance of the tasks. It is only prudent to ask whether these many differences make a difference—whether major dissimilarities exist between how people process and analyze information in the laboratory and in less artificial settings (cf. Brunswik, 1956).

Context specificity of findings. The concerns for external validity are greatly aggravated by the mounting evidence from experimental work of the context-specificity of many findings. Information processing in judg-

ment and decision-making, as in other areas of cognitive psychology (Jenkins, 1981), appears to be highly contingent on the demands of the task. In their authoritative review of work on behavioral decision theory, Einhorn and Hogarth (1981) declared:

> The most important empirical results in the period under review have shown the sensitivity of judgment and choice to seemingly minor variations in tasks.

They also explicitly warned us to be cautious in accepting broad-brush portraits of the human information processor such as the cognitive miser, portraits that, they suggested, "are often painted to be interesting rather than complete." Ebbesen and Konecni (1980) and Payne (1982) have been even more skeptical. These writers suggested that the dominant conception of decision-making as controlled by a few basic cognitive processes which can be discovered via artificial tasks is seriously flawed; people generate different decision rules and processes to deal with each particular task.

Ecological and functionalist arguments. Partly in response to the mounting evidence on the context-specific nature of experimental findings and partly in response to functionalist arguments on the need to understand the environments that information processors must understand in order to survive, many prominent cognitive psychologists have begun to have second thoughts about the hard core underpinnings of the research program. It is not unusual now to see appeals for a significant redirection of effort within the research program—a shift away from the study of information processing in "artificial laboratory settings" and toward the study of information processing in more ecologically representative situations. Neisser (1976), for example, argued that the revolution in computer technology and simulation has spurred the development of an excessively intrapsychic cognitive psychology that is concerned only with modeling inside-the-head data processing rules.

> We have been lavishing too much attention on hypothetical models of the mind and not enough on analyzing the environment that the mind has been shaped to meet.

Many writers have echoed this theme (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Gibson, 1966; Jenkins, 1981). For instance, Jenkins (1981) strongly urged investigators to adopt a "contextualist" model of human information processing. According to Jenkins, the search for *the* information processing rules which people *always* use to interpret events and make choices is misguided. The appropriate question is not, "What kind of machine is the human information processor?", but rather, "What kinds of machines do people become when confronted with various types of tasks in various

types of environments?" (See also Ebbesen & Konecni, 1980; Payne, 1982). Shaw and Bransford (1977, p. 6) have stated the general case for a reassessment of the objectives of the cognitive research program forcefully:

> the nature of humans is inextricably intertwined with the nature of the world in which they live, move, and have their being . . . the ecological approach germinates in the minds of theorists who come to the stark realization that humans, as must all living things that survive, depend on their natural and cultural environments for knowledge as well as victuals. For such theorists it is impossible to accept any longer models of man whose only virtue is that they were contrived to function efficiently in artificial (laboratory) contexts.

These contextualist critiques challenge one of the basic elements of the hard core of the cognitive research program: the usefulness of studying individual information processors in isolation from the world in which they normally function. The research implications of the critiques are also not difficult to discern. We must pay much more systematic attention to the everyday environments in which people think and act. Laboratory experiments may reveal only a very restricted range of the cognitive strategies that people employ in less artificial and contrived situations. The primary objective of research should be a functionalist one: careful, systematic description of how people cope with the diverse decision problems they face in their natural habitats.

Who is Right?

In closing this section, it is appropriate to ask who is right: the defenders or critics of the cognitive research program? My position is that each side possesses, in Rapoport's (1964) phrase, a "region of validity." It is not self-contradictory to believe both that the cognitive research program has made important contributions to our understanding of judgment and choice behavior and that the contextualist critics have identified serious limitations to the cognitive research program. Defenders of the research program may well be correct in insisting that some highly abstract, context-free laws of information processing do, indeed, exist. Contextualist critics may well be correct in insisting that the research program provides us with a very incomplete picture of how people think and leads us to underestimate the situation-specificity of information processing. Available evidence suggests that the truth does, in fact, lie somewhere between the two positions. Different components of judgment and choice processes appear to be under *varying degrees* of personal control (Abelson & Levi, in press; Atkinson & Shiffrin, 1968; Schneider & Shiffrin, 1977). Especially relevant here is the distinction between structural and control pro-

cesses. Structural processes are assumed to be "wired into" the organism and very difficult to change. Examples include the well-known limits on short-term memory holding capacity and basic laws of perception and attention (e.g., a fundamental assumption of Kahneman & Tversky's, 1979, prospect theory is that our perceptual systems are designed to detect changes in the status quo, not absolute magnitudes, and that we encode the outcomes of decisions as gains or losses relative to some neutral reference point). By contrast, control processes are assumed to be much more modifiable and subject to conscious direction. Examples include decision-makers' ability to monitor and determine the number of options, consequences, and values they consider in the deliberation process and the temporal sequence in which they consider these factors (e.g., Svenson, 1979, on breadth-first versus depth-first search strategies). Obviously, it is an empirical issue whether any given finding is rooted mainly in structural or control processes. People may be cognitive misers due to built-in structural limitations, highly context-specific control processes or (most likely) some combination of structural and control processes (Abelson & Levi, in press; Payne, 1982).

The important point here is not the exact mix of structural and control processes in producing a given effect, but rather that the contextualist critiques (except in their most radical form—Sampson, 1981) do not automatically negate the value of all empirical work inspired by the cognitive research program. For certain purposes, it is useful to focus on the isolated individual information processor. The critiques do, however, help to put the research program in perspective by underscoring its limitations and blind-spots. In so doing, the critiques serve a crucial knowledge-advancing function. They point to ways of formulating theories and doing research outside of the dominant cognitive research program. It is in this spirit that in the next section of this chapter I propose an alternative "social contextualist" research program—an alternative that is intended to complement rather than negate the cognitive research program.

AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE COGNITIVE RESEARCH PROGRAM: THE DECISION-MAKER AS POLITICIAN

Investigators should not allow the impressive achievements of the cognitive research program to blind them to insights that can be gained by exploring alternative images of human nature and functioning in the world. Feyerabend (1970) stated the general argument (against limiting empirical work to dominant research programs) persuasively in his response to the question, "How can one be a good empiricist?"

A good empiricist will not rest content with the theory that is in the center of scientific attention and with those tests of the theory that can be carried out in a direct manner. Knowing that the most fundamental and the most general criticism is criticism produced with the help of alternatives, he will try to invent such alternatives. It is, of course, impossible at once to produce a theory that is formally comparable to the main point of view and that leads to equally many predictions. His first step will therefore be the formulation of fairly general assumptions which are not yet directly connected with observations: this means that his first step will be the invention of a new metaphysics (Author: a new hard core). This metaphyics must then be elaborated (p. 338).

The Politician Research Program and Its Hard Core

On what image of human nature (metaphysics) should the alternative research program be built? My nomination is that of the person as politician. In its pursuit of highly abstract, context-free laws of information processing, the cognitive research program has ignored the social and organizational environments in which people make the overwhelming majority of decisions. Subjects in laboratory studies of cognitive processes rarely feel accountable or responsible for the positions they take. Subjects function in a social vacuum (or as close an approximation to a social vacuum as can be achieved) in which they do not need to worry about the interpersonal consequences of their conduct (How will others react if I do this? How effectively can I justify my views to others if challenged?). Such issues are simply seen as irrelevant to the explanatory goals of the cognitive research program.

The politician research program begins where the cognitive research program leaves off. The starting point for analysis is the information processor—with whatever general cognitive limitations and biases he or she possesses—in an environment structured by the complex social and organizational systems to which the individual belongs. Whereas the central objective of the cognitive research program is to identify fundamental or invariant laws of human information processing, the central objective of the politician research program is to identify the behavioral strategies that people have developed for coping with fundamental or invariant features of natural decision environments (features likely to be present at least to some degree in all social and organizational settings).

Like the cognitive research program, the politician research program rests on two hard core assumptions concerning its subject matter. Given the crucial role that hard core assumptions play in guiding empirical work (especially in the early stages of a research program—Royce, 1976), these assumptions deserve to be spelled out in detail. The first assumption deals with the nature of the real-world decision settings in which people make up their minds; the second, with the goals and motives that drive the decision-making process.

Accountability of conduct as a universal feature of natural decision environments. Attribution theorists have long noted that in everyday life people are presumed to be agents of their actions, i.e., they are responsible for what they do (cf. Heider, 1944). It makes sense to ask people for the reasons underlying their actions because it is assumed that people possess the "power" of monitoring and controlling their conduct in accord with self-generated plans of action (an assumption that, incidentally, is no longer controversial in social and personality psychology—Bandura, 1977; Carver, 1979; Gergen, 1971; Schlenker, 1980, 1982; Semin & Manstead, 1983; Suls, 1981; Wicklund, 1980). Shotter (1981) made this critical point in the following way:

> in our ordinary, everyday, common-sense view of people as autonomous, we assume people know how to make their actions conform to something in their common-sense, and furthermore, we also assume that they are able, potentially at least, to report upon, or to account for, how they made themselves so conform. In a moral world, self-regulation and accountability are inextricably interlinked (p. 279).

The accountability of conduct is an inevitable sociocultural adaptation to the problem of how to organize and coordinate the interrelationships among individuals who are capable of monitoring and controlling their own actions (Semin & Manstead, 1983). From this perspective, accountability is a necessary part of the solution to the classic Hobbesian riddle of how society is possible (cf. Scott & Lyman, 1968). Organized social life cannot exist without some degree of regularity. This regularity is provided by shared rules, norms, and social practices (Weick, 1979). Accountability is a critical rule and norm enforcement mechanism: the social psychological link between individual decision-makers on the one hand and the social systems to which they belong on the other. The fact that people are accountable for their decisions is an implicit or explicit constraint upon all consequential acts they undertake (If I do this, how will others react?). Failure to behave in ways for which one can construct acceptable accounts leads to varying degrees of censure—depending, of course, on the gravity of the offense and the norms of the organization (cf. Pfeffer, 1981; Schlenker, 1980; Scott & Lyman, 1968; Tetlock, in press).

An important qualification should, however, be added to the above analysis. Although a powerful case can be made for the trans-historical and cross-cultural invariance of accountability (Semin & Manstead, 1983), the specific norms, values and ideologies to which people are held accountable differ dramatically from one situation to the next. The sociologist C. Wright Mills (1940) noted that when people leave groups and join new ones, they must learn new "vocabularies of motives"—in other words, new rules for generating socially acceptable explanations of be-

havior. These vocabularies of motives vary in content and structure as a function of a variety of social contextual factors, ranging from the macro to the micro (Beyer, 1981; Haberstroh & Gerwin, 1972). "Macro-contextual" factors refer to "cultural system" ideologies and values (e.g., science, Protestantism, capitalism, Marxism) and societal ideologies and values (e.g., nationalism). "Micro-contextual" factors include ideologies and values that characterize distinctive organizations within societies (e.g., IBM, Antioch College) and roles within organizations (e.g., occupants of boundary roles such as union negotiators who must be responsive to the expectancies of conflicting constituencies). An important empirical task within the politician research program is systematic ethnographic work designed to describe the normative beliefs and values (vocabularies of motives) that define the standards of accountability in particular decision-making settings (cf. Pepitone, 1976). The emerging body of research on organizational culture represents a step in this direction (Martin, 1982; Martin et al., 1983).

People as approval- and status-seekers. There are many reasons why people seek the approval and respect of those to whom they are accountable, including both symbolic psychological and tangible material rewards and punishments. Theories of impression management and self-esteem maintenance have emphasized symbolic motives (e.g., Baumeister, 1982; Blumer, 1969; Greenwald, 1980; Schlenker, 1980; Stryker & Gottlieb, 1981). Especially important here are:

1.   The motivation to protect and enhance one's social image or identity. One of the most influential motivational assumptions in social science is that people seek the approval and respect of others as ends-in-themselves. In the words of the cultural anthropologist Linton (1945, p. 9):

> The need for eliciting favorable responses from others is an almost constant component of personality. Indeed it is not too much to say there is very little organized human behavior which is not directed towards its satisfaction in at least some degree (cf. Hogan, 1982; Parsons, 1951; Schlenker, 1980).

Zetterberg (1957, p. 189) proposed that "The maximization of favorable attitudes from others [is] the counterpart in sociological theory to the maximization of profit in economic theory." A warehouse of findings in experimental social psychology attests to the influentiality of the approval- and status-seeker view of human nature, including work on ingratiation (Jones & Wortman, 1973; Wortman & Linsenmeier, 1977), conformity (Hare, 1976; Paulus, 1980), and strategic attitude shifts (Cialdini, Petty, & Cacioppo, 1981).

2.   The motivation to protect and enhance one's self-image. This assumption has an equally venerable status in social and personality psy-

chology (Allport, 1937; Greenwald, 1980; Sherif & Cantril, 1947). From this perspective, people do not seek the approval and respect of others as ends-in-themselves, but rather as means of bolstering their confidence in their own internalized estimates of self-worth on important dimensions of evaluation (e.g., intelligent, conscientious, likable, mature). A substantial literature exists in social psychology on the "ego-defensive" behavioral tactics that people use to disassociate themselves from negative outcomes and to associate themselves with positive outcomes (Greenwald & Ronis, 1978; Schlenker, 1980; Tetlock & Levi, 1982).

3.   Social exchange theorists (e.g., Blau, 1964) have emphasized a third source of motivation for maintaining the approval and respect of others: the desire to gain control of desirable material resources (e.g., promotions, office space, budget allocations, authority over staff). Researchers in organizational behavior have tended to be most sensitive to this motivational dimension of human nature: decision-makers in organizational settings can be fruitfully viewed as actors in competition for scarce resources within a rule-governed political contest for power (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Much of what people in organizations do can be understood as tactical maneuvers designed to "legitimize" their claims to scarce resources (Pfeffer, 1981).

Any complete analysis of the decision-maker as politician should take all three of the previously mentioned sources of motivation into account. Unfortunately, we do not have a good understanding of the relative importance of these motives or of the conditions under which one versus another becomes dominant. Attempts to disentangle motives will, moreover, prove frustrating. In most situations, the three motives are closely intertwined; for example, creating favorable impressions on others will not only enhance one's social-image, but also one's self-image (as advocates of the looking-glass self hypothesis would argue—Shrauger & Schoenemann, 1979) and one's material standing in the world (one's social image largely determines one's interpersonal "market value"—Blau, 1964). Conversely, improvements in one's material standing will tend to enhance both one's self- and social-image (as observers of "conspicuous consumption" have long been aware—James, 1910; Veblen, 1899).

Strategies for Coping with Accountability

To summarize, the politician research program rests on two hard core assumptions: the first posits that the accountability of conduct is a universal problem of social life with which people must deal; the second posits that people are generally motivated to maintain the approval and respect of those to whom they are accountable. These hard core postulates

direct empirical work in radically different directions from the cognitive research program. The central question becomes: What type of politician is the average person? What judgment and decision-making strategies do people use to cope with demands for accountability from the various constituencies in their lives? What are the basic "types" or "dimensions" of accountability relationships? What are the consequences of these relationships? How do personality and situational variables affect coping responses to accountability?

The politician research program obviously raises many unanswered questions—certainly far more than can be addressed in this chapter. The major point I wish to make in the following sections is that the effects of accountability are likely to be highly variable. There are as many different types of accountability as there are distinct types of relationships among people (Stryker & Gottlieb, 1981). Furthermore, there are good reasons for suspecting that different types of accountability have markedly different effects on judgment and choice behavior. Accountability can be highly oppressive as in groupthink (Janis, 1982) when members of policy-making groups exert great normative pressure on each other to arrive at unanimous recommendations. Accountability can be highly threatening as in situations in which decision-makers feel their jobs and reputations hinge on their ability to justify past actions to superiors (Fox & Straw, 1979). Accountability can even be conducive to complex and self-reflective information processing as in situations in which people know in advance that they will be called upon to explain their stands on controversial issues to unknown others (Tetlock, 1983a). The common theme running through these examples is, of course, the fact that people need to justify their judgments and decisions to others. However, people generate dramatically different strategies for coping with this problem depending on the nature of the accountability relationship (who is accountable to whom and under what ground rules?) as well as cognitive and motivational predispositions of the individual decision-maker (e.g., cognitive style, interpersonal needs, self-esteem, security of position).

In the following discussion, I propose that the cognitive miser image of the information processor provides a useful initial basis for predicting how people cope with accountability predicaments. All other things being equal, people prefer "least effort" solutions: They simply adopt positions likely to gain the favor of those to whom they feel accountable (a coping strategy that I have called the acceptability heuristic). Unfortunately for cognitive misers, the solutions to accountability predicaments are not always straightforward. In some situations, it is not at all obvious what the most acceptable response option is. Demands for accountability in these contexts appear to motivate cognitive work: *Vigilant information processing is necessary to identify the most defensible policy*. In other

situations, people have already irrevocably committed themselves to a course of action. Accountability here may motivate people to devote considerable cognitive effort not so much to identifying optimal future courses of action as to developing cogent rationalizations for past courses of action.

The Acceptability Heuristic: The Cognitive Miser in Social Context

The simplest way of coping with accountability is by making decisions that one is reasonably confident will be acceptable to others. This coping strategy is obviously compatible with a view of people as cognitive misers who avoid mental calculations that require sustained attention, effort or computing power. Often the most socially acceptable option is obvious, likely to come to mind quickly and likely to be bolstered by supportive arguments readily available in the environment (especially true in group-think situations). The acceptability heuristic allows one to avoid much "unnecessary" cognitive work (analyzing the pros and cons of alternative courses of action, interpreting complex, often contradictory, patterns of environmental information, making difficult value trade-offs). All one needs to do is to adopt the salient "acceptable" option.

Evidence from both laboratory and field studies indicates that people frequently do adopt this straightforward tactic. They choose the most clearly defensible course of action open to them. For instance, several experiments on negotiation behavior have found that negotiators who expect to justify bargaining outcomes to the groups they represent have much more difficulty arriving at mutually beneficial compromise agreements than do negotiators not under such pressure (Benton, 1972; Gruder & Rosen, 1971; Klimoski, 1971; Lamm & Kogan, 1970; Pruitt, 1981). The most plausible explanation for these findings is that accountability to constituents (who presumably favor tough negotiation stands) induces concern for appearing strong by refusing to make concessions. People respond by employing competitive bargaining tactics that, while obstacles to resolving conflicts of interest, are quite effective in protecting their images in the eyes of constituents. Experimental work on ingratiation also reveals the willingness of people to tailor their opinions to those of others—especially high status others (Jones & Wortman, 1973; Wortman & Linsenmeier, 1977). People view opinion conformity as a reliable means of gaining approval and respect, and available evidence suggests that they are generally correct. Although limiting conditions exist (one should avoid appearing too sycophantic—Jones, Stires, Shaver, & Harris, 1968), we generally evaluate others more positively to the degree they express attitudes similar to our own. We see similar others as more likable and

intelligent than dissimilar others (Byrne, Nelson, & Reeves, 1966) as well as more deserving of promotion (Baskett, 1973).

Adelberg and Batson (1978) conducted an interesting experiment that demonstrated some of the dysfunctional consequences of reliance on the acceptability heuristic in a particular type of organization: social welfare agencies. They hypothesized that accountability would impair effective helping whenever agency resources were inadequate to assist everyone in need and difficult choices were necessary. Accountability would do so by distracting help-givers away from problems they were supposed to be addressing and focusing their attention on the need to justify what they were doing. Accountable help-givers would be more likely to avoid hard-to-justify, but necessary decisions on which applicants for aid (in this case, student loans) would receive assistance. The results supported this prediction. Accountable subjects made a much higher proportion of wasteful decisions (giving ineffectively small amounts of money to large numbers of students).

The acceptability heuristic is not limited to laboratory experiments; it also operates in high-level policy-making settings. The political necessity of defending one's conduct is an important constraint on how policy-makers choose among the options confronting them. As C. Wright Mills (1940) argued:

> Often anticipations of appropriate conduct will control conduct. ("If I did this, what could I say? What would they say?") Decisions may be, wholly or in part, delimited by answers to such queries.

The political scientists Snyder, Bruck, and Sapin (1962) took a similar stand in their pioneering analysis of the foreign policy-making process:

> The decision to perform or not to perform a given act may be taken on the basis of available answers to the question "what will be said?"

Consistent with these positions, historical case studies of important governmental decisions abound with references to policy-makers assessing possible lines of defense (accounts) against critics and opponents (Anderson, 1981; Bennett, 1980; Graber, 1976). For instance, after Egypt nationalized the Suez Canal in 1956, British leaders tried to avoid open collusion with Israel because they thought it could not be justified to their constituents. The British therefore delayed the Franco-British invasion until after the initial Israeli strike into Egypt when they thought (erroneously) that they could assume the role of peacemaker. In Goldman's (1970) words: "The British searched for an acceptable justification. Having found one, actions were modified accordingly." Similarly, Kennedy rejected direct American participation in the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion

because he felt it would be "very awkward" to justify after he had pledged abstinence from such a conflict. This decision meant that air cover for the invasion would be inadequate and would contribute to the failure of the mission. These examples illustrate what Snyder et al. (1962, p. 183) called "the continual interaction between considerations of what to do, and what to say. . . . Statecraft, from this point of view, is the art of combining the desirable and the justifiable."[1]

In a similar vein, Pfeffer (1981) stressed the importance of "justifiability" of policy options in managerial decision-making. He argued that the primary task of managers "is making what is going on in the organization meaningful and sensible to the organizational participants, and furthermore, developing a social consensus and social definition around the activities being undertaken" (p. 21). A critical determinant of managerial success is the ability to convince both internal (within-organization) and external observers that the operations of the organization are consonant with prevailing social values and the larger social system. Management involves more than labeling and making sense of the world—it requires developing social support for the labels and policies that management endorses.

Over time, policy-makers' search for courses of action that can be readily justified to important constituencies may become "scripted" (Abelson, 1981) or ritualized (Starbuck, 1983), thus requiring even less cognitive effort. For instance, Meyer and Rowan (1977) argued that the formal structures of many organizations in postindustrial society reflect the "justificatory myths" of their institutional environments, not the "rational demands" of their work activities as Weber's (1930) classic analysis of bureaucracy suggests. One way in which organizational decision-makers demonstrate to significant others that they are acting on collectively valued purposes in a proper manner is by designing a formal structure for the organization that conforms to the normative expectancies of those significant others. Meyer and Rowan (1977, pp. 349–350) wrote:

Vocabularies of (organizational) structure which are isomorphic with institutional rules provide prudent, rational, and legitimate accounts. Organizations described in legitimated vocabularies are assumed to be oriented to collectively defined, and often collectively mandated, ends. The myths of personnel services, for example, not only account for the rationality of employment practices but also indicate that personnel services are valuable to an organization. Employees, applicants, managers, trustees, and governmental agencies are predisposed to trust the hiring practices of organizations that follow legitimated procedures—such as equal opportunity programs, or personality testing—and they are more willing to participate in or fund such organizations. On the other hand, organizations that omit environmentally legitimated elements of structure or create unique structures that lack acceptable, legitimated accounts for their activities . . . are more vulnerable to claims that they are negligent,

irrational or unnecessary. Claims of this kind, whether made by internal participants, external constituents, or the government, can cause organizations to incur real costs.

In overview, the acceptability heuristic complements and fleshes out the cognitive miser characterization of the decision-maker. The most salient consideration in many decisions is the justifiability of policy options to others. The cognitive research program tells us that people often use a very small number of items of information in making up their minds; the politician research program tells us that decision-makers' estimates of the probable reactions of those to whom they are accountable will be prominent among the few items of information considered. The cognitive research program appears to focus primarily on process (how people think), the politician research program, primarily on content (what people think). Although this may seem to be a natural division of labor, the distinction is far from airtight. Demands for accountability not only effect *what* people think; demands for accountability also affect *how* people think.

Motivating Cognitive Misers to be Thoughtful

The acceptability heuristic is a cognitively economical and socially adaptive strategy for making decisions in many experimental and real-life contexts. The usefulness of this heuristic is, however, limited to settings in which one can discern relatively quickly the expectations of the constituencies to whom one is accountable. The question arises: How do people cope with accountability in normatively ambiguous situations in which it is not obvious what the most socially acceptable response is?

Available evidence indicates that under these conditions accountability can be a potent inducement to getting people to abandon their cognitively miserly ways. Accountability to others of unknown views has been found in a number of studies to "motivate" people to become more vigilant, complex, and self-critical information processors (Chaiken, 1980; Cvetkovich, 1978; Hagafors & Brehmer, 1983; McAllister, Mitchell, & Beach, 1979; Rozelle & Baxter, 1981; Tetlock, 1983a, 1983b). Below I briefly review the research evidence indicating what accountability to unknown others can lead to:

1. the utilization of more cognitively complex judgment and decision strategies;
2. greater awareness among decision-makers of their own cognitive processes;
3. less theory-driven and more data-driven processing of evidence in forming impressions.

Inducing complex information processing. A study by Tetlock (1983a) provides the most direct evidence that people cope with accountability in normatively ambiguous situations (i.e., when the policy preferences of others are unknown) very differently from the way they cope with accountability in normatively unambiguous situations (i.e., when the policy preferences of others are obvious). He hypothesized that when people know the views of those to whom they are accountable, they rely on the acceptability heuristic and simply shift their views toward those of others in the situation ("strategic attitude shifts"). By contrast, when people do not know the views of the individual to whom they are accountable, they need to think through the issue much more carefully in order to arrive at a defensible position. Accountability to unknown others motivates people to consider arguments and evidence on both sides of issues in order to prepare themselves for a wide variety of possible critical reactions to their views. To test these hypotheses, Tetlock asked experimental subjects to report their positions on controversial policy issues (capital punishment, defense spending, affirmative action) under one of four conditions: expecting the positions they took to be confidential or expecting to justify the positions they took to an individual with liberal, conservative, or unknown views. In addition, he asked subjects to report their thoughts (confidentiality always guaranteed) on each issue *prior to* committing themselves to an attitudinal position. These thought protocols were then subjected to detailed content and structural analysis designed to assess the complexity of subjects' thinking on the issues (How many aspects or dimensions of each issue did they distinguish? Did they interpret issues in dichotomous, good-bad terms or did they recognize positive and negative features of stands on both sides of the issues?).

The data indicated that subjects coped with pressures to justify their opinions on controversial policy issues in two qualitatively distinct ways: strategically shifting their public positions on the issues (thus making the task of justification easier) and thinking about issues in more complex, multidimensional ways (thus preparing themselves for the various arguments that could be raised against their positions). Subjects relied on strategic attitude shifts (the acceptability heuristic) when they felt accountable to an individual with well-defined liberal or conservative views. Not surprisingly, subjects accountable to a liberal expressed more liberal views; subjects accountable to a conservative expressed more conservative views. Accountability to an individual with well-defined views had no impact on the complexity of subjects' thinking on the policy issues. The reverse pattern of findings emerged among subjects who felt accountable to an individual with unknown views. Here accountability had no effect on the liberalism-conservatism of the policy stands taken, but had a pronounced effect on the complexity of subjects' thinking on the

policy issues. Subjects displayed much more tolerance for cognitive inconsistency (recognizing good features of rejected policies and bad features of accepted policies) and much more recognition of the need to confront difficult value trade-offs (e.g., the need to deter crime and protect the lives of the innocent, the need to remedy past racial injustices without creating new ones). Subjects accountable to an individual with unknown views appeared to engage in "preemptive self-criticism." They attempted to anticipate the counterarguments that potential critics could raise to their positions. Tetlock proposed that this cognitive reaction could be viewed as an adaptive strategy on the part of decision-makers for protecting both their self-esteem and social images. Expecting to justify one's views to an unknown individual raised the possibility of failure: The other person might have found serious flaws in the positions taken. In order to reduce the likelihood of such an esteem-threatening and embarrassing event, subjects sought to demonstrate their awareness of alternative perspectives on the issues to be discussed. ("You can see I am no fool. I may believe this, but I understand the arguments on the other side.")

Several other studies—in which subjects have felt accountable to an individual with unknown or, at least, difficult-to-guess policy preferences—have reported effects similar to those reported in the Tetlock research. For instance, McAllister, Mitchell and Beach (1979) performed a series of business simulation experiments in which subjects were asked to recommend strategies for solving financial problems facing corporations. McAllister et al. manipulated three independent variables designed to affect subjects' willingness to employ cognitively complex strategies for choosing among courses of action. The decisions subjects had to make were either *significant* or *insignificant* (in terms of potential financial impact on the company) and *reversible* or *irreversible*. In addition, decision-makers either *were* or *were not* personally accountable for the stands they took. As predicted, subjects employed more analytic and complex judgment strategies the more accountable they felt for their decisions and the more important and less reversible they perceived the decisions to be.

Chaiken (1980) reported evidence on the power of accountability to motivate cognitive work in attitude change situations. She performed two experiments to test the hypothesis that subjects who believed they would have to justify their opinions would process persuasive arguments on those topics more "systematically" than subjects who did not expect to justify their opinions. Accountable subjects, she argued, would actively try to comprehend and evaluate the arguments contained in persuasive messages whereas unaccountable subjects would rely on "lazier" strategies of assessing the validity of messages such as source evaluation (Does the speaker appear honest? smart? likable?) The results supported these predictions. Accountable subjects were unaffected by an experimental

manipulation of the likableness of the sources of the persuasive messages they read (the messages were on technical topics so that source likableness could not be plausibly construed as informationally relevant). Accountable subjects were, however, strongly affected by an experimental manipulation of the number of arguments contained in the messages. Unaccountable subjects showed the opposite pattern of results. They were strongly influenced by the likableness of the message sources but uninfluenced by the number of arguments contained in the messages. In short, the data pointed to two different methods of dealing with incoming information: one method required no more than superficial, top-of-the-head reactions to the communicator, the other required thoughtful analysis of message content. The social context determined which mode of information processing was activated.

Inducing awareness of the cognitive strategies one uses to make decisions. A number of experimental psychologists have argued that people lack awareness of their own cognitive processes. The cues that people think are important determinants of their judgments are often not the same cues that statistical analyses of experimental data reveal to be important (cf. Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). Although the "awareness issue" is by no means resolved within the cognitive research program (Ericsson & Simon, 1980), I will comment here on the role that social context plays in determining the "degree of awareness" people display into their own cognitive processes.

Cvetkovich (1978) reported two experiments that explored the ability of subjects to report accurately on the strategies they used in making gambling decisions on a "duplex-bet" task that Slovic (1967) developed. The game consisted of 27 gambles. For each gamble, the experimenter presented information on the probability of winning (.2, .6, or .8), the amount of the win ($1, $2, or $4), the probability of losing (.2, .6, or .8) and the amount of the loss ($1, $2, or $4). Since the occurrence of win and loss values was determined independently and no relationships existed between each of the four task dimensions (uncorrelated cue structure), it was possible to win and not lose, both to win and to lose, to lose and not win, and neither to win nor to lose. After subjects completed the 27 gambles, they reported the decision strategy they used. The experimenter asked them to distribute 100 points among the four task dimensions according to how important they thought each was as a determinant of their decisions. Cvetkovich then compared these subjective importance weights to "objective" importance weights derived from multiple regression analysis of each person's betting decisions on each of the four task dimensions across the 27 gambles. The comparison revealed that subjects who felt accountable for their betting decisions reported subjective

weights that were significantly closer to the objective weights than subjects who did not feel accountable. These findings suggest that when people are made "self-conscious" via an accountability manipulation, they shift to analytic, effort-demanding cognitive strategies that increase their awareness of the determinants of their decisions.

Hagafors and Brehmer (1983) found compatible results in a "multiple-cue probability learning task." They presented subjects with a medical diagnosis problem in which the task was to predict the level of a disease (the outcome variable) from the amount of two substances in the bodies of the patients (the cue variables). Both cues were linearly related to the outcome and uncorrelated with each other. The researchers manipulated three independent variables: low or high outcome predictability ($R = .60$ vs. $R = .98$), presence or absence of feedback to subjects on the accuracy of their judgments, and presence or absence of accountability. A complex, but interpretable, interaction emerged. Accountable subjects had much more consistent patterns of cue utilization (judgment policies) than unaccountable subjects, but only under conditions of low outcome predictability and no accuracy feedback. These findings were consistent with the authors' hypothesis that accountability would induce people to process information more "analytically" in ambiguous problem environments (environments that are obviously common in daily life). Anticipating the need to offer coherent explanations for the judgments they expressed, accountable subjects paid more careful attention to the rules they used in generating predictions and applied these rules in a more consistent manner.

Inducing responsiveness to evidence.   The prevailing view of the person within the cognitive research program is that of a theory-driven information processor who relies heavily on existing knowledge structures in interpreting new information. A good deal of evidence buttresses this conception. Work on belief perseverance and primacy effects in judgment indicates that people are sometimes extremely slow in revising their initial impressions of events, even in the face of information that directly contradicts those initial impressions (e.g., Jones & Goethals, 1971; Nisbett & Ross, 1980).

Belief perseverance is not, however, an immutable law of human information processing. Tetlock (1983b) found that accountability can—under certain conditions—be extremely effective in preventing first impressions from dominating final judgments. He presented subjects with a long list of evidential arguments from a murder trial: half of the arguments cast doubt on the defendant's guilt and half suggested that the defendant was indeed guilty. He also varied the order in which subjects received the evidence: an exonerating/incriminating, an incriminat-

ing/exonerating, or a randomly alternating order of presentation. Subjects who did not expect to justify their judgments of the defendant's guilt showed a substantial primacy effect: Early-presented information had a significantly greater impact on subjective probability ratings of guilt than later-presented information. Subjects who expected to justify their judgments of the defendant's guilt before viewing the evidence were, however, immune to the primacy effect: Order of presentation made no difference. Accountability did not, moreover, eliminate the primacy effect by merely affecting the types of judgments subjects were willing to express (e.g., accountability did not turn people into "fence-sitters" who were unwilling to commit themselves to any position). Two lines of evidence argued strongly against such a response bias artifact. First, accountability per se was not sufficient to eliminate the primacy effect. Tetlock found that subjects who realized they were accountable *only after* exposure to the evidence displayed primacy effects comparable in magnitude to those of unaccountable subjects. Only accountability prior to exposure to the evidence destroyed the primacy effect. Second, subjects who realized they had to justify their views prior to exposure to the evidence recalled significantly more case information than subjects who felt unaccountable or accountable only after exposure to the evidence. A response bias interpretation cannot explain these effects on memory. Taken as a whole, the data strongly suggest that preexposure accountability induced people to become more thorough and vigilant information processors—willing to revise initial impressions of the case in response to changing evidence.

Rozelle and Baxter (1981) reported evidence consistent with the position that accountability can encourage data-driven and discourage theory-driven information processing. They noted that previous work on person perception had shown that characteristics of the perceiver are frequently more important determinants of the descriptions offered of stimulus persons than are characteristics of the stimulus persons 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 information-processors who rely on their own implicit theories of personality and give little weight to actual properties of the persons being judged (cf. Bourne, 1977).

The earlier work was conducted in settings in which people did not believe their judgments would have important consequences for either themselves or others. Rozelle and Baxter explored the impact of two (conceptually interrelated) social context variables on the person perception process: whether perceivers felt their decisions would be impor-

tant (i.e., their decisions would influence applicants' admission to graduate school) and whether perceivers believed they would later have to justify their decisions to a faculty review committee. Under conditions of high decision importance and high accountability, they found a reversal of the typical finding of undifferentiated and idiosyncratic descriptions of stimulus persons. These perceptual patterns emerged: (a) differentiated perceiver descriptions of different stimulus persons (low within-judge-overlap of descriptive characteristics assigned to others); (b) substantial agreement among judges in the descriptions offered of the same stimulus person. In brief, accountability appeared to sensitize perceivers to "what was actually out there."

The theoretical significance of the above findings should not be understated. The findings directly support contingency models of judgment and decision-making which challenge the universality of the cognitive miser portrait of how people think (Beach & Mitchell, 1978; Jenkins, 1981; Payne, 1982). Contingency models emphasize the capacity of people to adopt different strategies and styles of information processing in response to changing circumstances. As Beach and Mitchell (1978) stated, people "decide how to decide." In any given situation, people may choose—consciously or unconsciously—from a wide variety of possible strategies for making up their minds—strategies that range from the highly analytic (maximization of expected utility) to the highly intuitive (repeating previous responses, acting on impulse, flipping a coin). Two considerations are of paramount importance in this "meta-decision-making" task: (1) the amount of time and cognitive effort required to use a strategy (which, as cognitive misers, people seek to minimize); (2) the likelihood that the strategy will lead to the identification of an optimal response (which people naturally seek to maximize). From a contingency theory perspective, accountability can increase decision-makers' willingness to employ cognitively demanding strategies in two basic ways: by decreasing the perceived likelihood that less demanding strategies such as the acceptability heuristic will lead to the identification of the optimal response and by increasing the importance of identifying the optimal response. The available evidence suggests that both processes are operating.

The practical implications of the findings should also not be understated. As Weick (1979) noted:

> It is not evident that cognitive organizational theory is best served by yet one more documentation of the phenomenon of simplification. What we need instead is to cultivate sensitivity to thinking practices that complicate rather than simplify the world.

Accountability does—under certain conditions—cultivate sensitivity to complex thinking practices. A promising direction for empirical work is the assessment of the effectiveness of different organizational norms of

accountability in promoting complex thought (cf. George, 1980a; Tetlock, 1983c). Alexander George's (1980a) multiple advocacy proposals for the design of organizational systems of accountability are particularly worthy of investigation. The central goal of multiple advocacy is to make "good use" of inevitable intraorganizational conflict by creating a normative framework for *structured, balanced* debate (mutual accountability) among policy advocates drawn from different parts of the organization. One of the crucial ingredients that George specified for the success of multiple adovcacy is the willingness of top leadership to avoid partisan engagement in this debate process (i.e., the views of top leadership—to whom all participants in the debate are ultimately accountable—should be unknown).

The Rationalization Heuristic: The Cognitive Miser on the Defensive

The previous section focused on situations in which the desire to maintain the approval and respect of others encouraged complex, vigilant information processing. In all of these situations, people had no basis for confidently inferring the policy preferences of those to whom they were accountable, thus greatly reducing the usefulness of the low-effort acceptability heuristic. Another critical ingredient was also present. People realized that they would need to explain their conduct to others before they had committed themselves to a course of action. Predecisional accountability—combined with normative ambiguity—promoted what Staw (1980) has termed "prospective rationality." Under these conditions, people devoted substantial cognitive effort to identifying the most defensible response options.

Other combinations of circumstances can trigger very different coping responses. For instance, imagine a situation in which people are accountable not for decisions they have yet to make, but for decisions they have already made. Imagine, moreover, that these decisions have led to questionable or undesirable consequences (lower profits, bad publicity, employee dissatisfaction, etc.,). Under these conditions, the same basic motive—the desire to maintain the approval and respect of those to whom one is accountable—is likely to lead not to "prospective rationality" but rather to "retrospective rationality"—a defensive search for ways of rationalizing past conduct. The primary concern of decision-makers is likely to be with portraying earlier actions in the best possible light (as sensible, rational, moral. . .).

A growing body of research exists in social psychology on the "accounting tactics" people use to extricate themselves from such image-threatening predicaments (Schlenker, 1980, 1982; Scott & Lyman, 1968; Semin & Manstead, 1983; Tedeschi & Reiss, 1981; Tetlock, 1981, in

press). These tactics take many forms. The simplest—but often most implausible—defense is that of innocence. Individuals maintain that the image-threatening event did not occur ("I did not make the decision to invest in that firm, X did"). When simple denials of association with the undesirable act do not seem likely to work, however, people turn to more sophisticated lines of defense. The best known of these are justifications and excuses. Justifications are accounting tactics in which individuals accept responsibility for their conduct, but deny that the act in question provides grounds for attributing negative traits or characteristics to them. Examples of justifications abound. People can argue, for example, that the apparently harmful consequences of their actions are really not that harmful (e.g., "We may be losing money now, but things are going to turn around." "Our business practices are no more unethical than those of our competitors.") Unlike justifications, excuses are accounting tactics in which individuals acknowledge that their past decisions were somehow bad, wrong or inappropriate, but try to minimize their responsibility for them. Excuses invoke mitigating circumstances (e.g., "The FBI entrapped our executives into the price-fixing scam"; "Even the best financial analysts could not have foreseen the economic events which produced last year's record losses"). Social psychological research on these accounting tactics is reviewed in Semin and Manstead (1983), Schlenker (1980), Tetlock (in press) and Weary and Arkin (1981).

For our purposes, the key point is that people have invented an impressive array of accounting tactics for minimizing damage to their social images in embarrassing predicaments. A major effect of accountability—especially for poor decisions that people have already made—may simply be to focus people's attention on identifying the best available accounting tactic (a type of retrospective political rationality). Schlenker (1980) has actually developed a formal expectancy-value analysis of this account-selection process. People, he proposed, choose accounting tactics that maximize their "reward-cost ratios" in the situation. Reward-cost ratios are a function of both the desirability of the identity one claims through one's account and the likelihood of the account being accepted (believed) by important constituencies or audiences. For instance, consider a manager called upon to account for the poor sales performance of his district. The most self-flattering accounts are ones that cast no aspersions on his character or competence (e.g., overwhelming foreign competition, deep economic recession). Unfortunately for him, the most self-flattering accounts often lack plausibility or credibility. To protect his social image (not to mention his job), he needs to find the optimal combination of plausibility and self-enhancement in the account he offers. According to Schlenker, the expected value (EV) of any given account can be computed using the following formula:

EV = probability (image claimed via account accepted) × (desirability of claim being accepted) + probability (image claimed via account rejected) × (undesirability of consequences of rejection)

This analysis suggests that people devote considerable cognitive effort to identifying the best possible accounts for themselves in image-threatening situations. This analysis also suggests that the types of accounts people ultimately offer depend on a number of specific features of the social context in which they find themselves. People will offer self-flattering (blame-denying) accounts if they perceive little danger that others will reject these accounts. This tends to be true to the degree: (1) self-flattering accounts are highly plausible (cogent justifications or excuses exist); (2) decision-makers believe that those to whom they are accountable are highly sympathetic. People will become increasingly self-critical to the degree they believe that others will not honor or accept self-flattering accounts (i.e., the opposites of the above two propositions hold true). Schlenker (1980) has reviewed considerable evidence consistent with these hypotheses.

It is tempting to downplay the practical importance of post-decisional accounting tactics. The image-saving maneuvers in which people engage might be dismissed as inconsequential for future policy. The work of Staw suggests that this is not true. Postdecisional accounting goes beyond mere verbal rationalizations. The need to justify policies that have worked out badly can place great pressure on decision-makers to increase their behavioral commitments to these failing policies (a prediction that follows from both cognitive dissonance and impression management theories—Schlenker, 1980; Wicklund & Brehm, 1976).

In a series of business simulation experiments, Staw has clearly documented this point. Pressures to account for poor past decisions can reinforce decision-makers' commitments to these earlier lines of action, increasing the rigidity and inflexibility of the policy-making process. For instance, Staw (1976) experimentally studied the tendency for decision-makers to escalate commitments to a policy following the receipt of disappointing feedback on the policy's effectiveness. One group of business school students (the personally responsible group) was instructed to allocate research and development funds to one of two operating divisions of a company. They were then given the results of their initial decisions (successful or unsuccessful) and asked to make a second allocation decision. Another group of students (the not personally responsible group) received the same information, but did not make the initial allocation decision themselves (this decision had supposedly been made earlier by a financial officer of the firm). The results revealed a significant interaction

between the success-failure and personal responsibility manipulations. Subjects allocated the most money to the failing division of the company when they felt personally responsible for having directed funds to that division in the initial allocation decision. These findings are consistent with the hypothesis that subjects sought to justify an ineffective course of action by escalating their commitment to it.

Staw's earlier work—inspired by cognitive dissonance theory—treated justification as an intra-individual process (people are concerned with protecting their self-images as competent and rational beings). A later simulation experiment by Fox and Staw (1979) explicitly focused on the impact of social-political pressures for accountability on the decision process. In this simulation, subjects were placed in an administrative situation in which they possessed high or low job security and in which they believed that the Board of Directors (to whom they were accountable) was receptive or unreceptive to the policies they had been pursuing. Fox and Staw hypothesized that decision-makers would feel the greatest need to engage in justificatory escalation of their commitment to a failing policy when decision-makers were most vulnerable (low job security and a skeptical Board of Directors). The results supported these hypotheses. Decision-makers who were worried about keeping their jobs and fending off high-level critics within the organization were most likely to escalate their commitment to their initial decision and most inflexible in their defenses of the positions they took.

There are reasons to suppose, then, that post-decisional accountability—far from encouraging complex, self-critical thinking practices—actually exacerbates many of the judgmental biases and defects of the cognitive miser. Demands for accountability may sometimes motivate people to "bolster" previous decisions, to be overconfident in the correctness of those decisions, to "over-assimilate" new evidence, and to deny difficult value trade-offs, particularly when the trade-offs require acknowledging flaws in past decisions and judgments (cf. Festinger, 1964; Kiesler, 1971).

Hybrid Responses to Accountability

The discussion up to this point has identified a variety of ways in which people cope with accountability, including mindless endorsement of organizational rituals, myths, and mind-sets, thoughtful and vigilant analysis of available evidence and response options, and the rigid defense of previously chosen courses of action. The antecedent conditions hypothesized to activate each of these coping strategies are not however likely to appear in pure form, but rather in varying degrees and combinations in any given situation. The coping strategies are thus not as mutually exclusive as

presented here. In many situations the views of those to whom one is accountable may be neither perfectly obvious nor completely unknown. We may have suspicions (held with varying degrees of confidence) about what others want to hear. We may also be accountable not to one but to many individuals whose views may be either harmonious or in conflict. These forms of accountability will probably trigger multiple coping responses, including both a search for a "least common denominator" acceptable policy and vigilant information processing to anticipate possible objections to that policy. In other situations, we may be called upon to account both for actions we have already performed and for decisions we have yet to make. The views of those to whom we are accountable may be only partly known. Again, multiple coping responses will probably be activated: for instance, a search for a policy acceptable to key constituencies in conjunction with vigilant information processing and the development of rationalizations for earlier decisions that render those decisions consistent with the new policy.

We should also not fall into the trap of only emphasizing situational determinants of how people cope with accountability. Cognitive stylistic and motivational differences among decision-makers may influence responses to accountability. Personality variables such as social anxiety, public self-consciousness and need for approval are likely predictors of how motivated people will be to gain the approval and respect of those to whom they are accountable (cf. Buss, 1980). Cognitive style variables such as dogmatism, integrative complexity and need for cognition are likely predictors of coping response "thresholds" (e.g., of when decision-makers engage in flexible, self-critical information processing as opposed to rigid bolstering of preferred options). A comprehensive theoretical analysis of how people deal with accountability will undoubtedly have to incorporate individual difference as well as situational and contextual variables.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The major theme of this chapter can be stated simply: experimental cognitive research on judgment and decision-making has adopted a misleadingly narrow focus on its subject matter and needs to be broadened to take into consideration the impact of social and organizational context. Enormous room exists for an expansion of theoretical and empirical work on the role of contextual variables—in particular, accountability—in shaping what and how people think. People are, in a fundamental sense, politicians who need to achieve and maintain the good will of the constituencies to whom they are accountable. The strategies people develop

for coping with this ubiquitous problem of social existence merit much more systematic attention than has thus far been accorded them.

The politician research program proposed here does not map neatly into any of the traditional levels of analysis: the individual, the small group of the organizational level. The unit of study is the *individual in relation to the social and organizational systems to which he or she belongs.* The program as such is an eclectic interdisciplinary creation. It possesses the conceptual flexibility to incorporate insights drawn from research on basic cognitive processes, interpersonal behavior in small groups and organizational structure and functioning. The program borrows, qualifies, and elaborates upon the cognitive miser image of the thinker that prevails in experimental cognitive/social psychology. The program adopts the approval- and status-seeker image of human nature that has been so influential in role theory, symbolic interactionism and impression management theory. The program draws on sociological and anthropological theory on the necessary conditions for social order in positing accountability to be a universal feature of natural decision environments. Taken together, these disparate conceptual themes define a distinctive approach to the study of judgment and choice.

The politician research program is also not tightly linked to any particular empirical methodology (in contrast to the cognitive research program, which is closely tied to laboratory experimentation). The theoretical eclecticism of the program demands a corresponding commitment to methodological eclecticism in research. Controlled laboratory experimentation can play a key role by clarifying situational determinants of the strategies people adopt for coping with accountability. Investigators can isolate the effects of independent variables (e.g., pre- versus post-decisional accountability, knowledge of the views of those to whom one is accountable), systematically assess interactions between independent variables, and test detailed models of the processes mediating relationships between independent and dependent variables. But laboratory experimentation by itself is inadequate. Other methodologies are equally crucial. Self-report personality questionnaires and interviews are needed to assess individual differences in propensities to adopt coping strategies and the possible interactive effects of personality and situational variables. Field experiments are needed to assess the generality and robustness of laboratory findings as well as the effects of normative interventions such as multiple advocacy on organizational decision processes. Comparative (cross-sectional and historical) ethnographic studies of organizational culture are needed to document and organize the diverse forms that "accountability relationships" take and the styles of decision-making associated with these relationships. To state an often-violated dictum, one's choice of methodology should be tailored to the theoretical problem

at hand. The politician research program poses problems that cross many disciplinary boundaries and that require a plurality of methodologies.

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NOTES

1. Practitioners of foreign policy echo this theme. Henry Kissinger states of American foreign policy: "The acid test of a policy is its ability to obtain domestic support. This has two aspects: the problem of legitimizing a policy within the governmental apparatus . . . and that of harmonizing it with the national experience" (quoted in George, 1980b).

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