Who Is Responsible? Toward a Social Psychology of Responsibility Attribution*

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The currently dominant psychological model of responsibility attribution is criticized and expanded upon from a sociological perspective. It is argued that responsibility judgments entail consideration of both what the actor did and what the actor was supposed to do: i.e., both physical deeds and social roles. Including roles in a responsibility attribution model provides: (1) a coherent account of alternative meanings of responsibility itself; (2) a social psychological approach that is congruent with rules actually followed in adult sanctioning judgments; and (3) an opportunity for social psychologists to study the crucial dichotomy of authoritative versus subordinate roles. Roles are interpreted attributionally as normative contexts within which actions are evaluated, rather than as external or situational constraints on action. In general, it is suggested that accepting a role demand as normative may evoke a purposive attribution process, labeled here as "motive grammar"; rejecting the role demand may be accompanied by a social attribution process, "consequence grammar." The paper concludes with suggestions for future research possibilities.

The most far reaching consequence . . . is that a man feels responsibility to the authority directing him but feels no responsibility for the content of the actions that the authority prescribes. . . . (Milgram, 1974:146)

Responsibility is a central issue in law, in the organization of social groups, and in everyday life. Social psychologists since Heider (1958) have begun to investigate how responsibility is attributed, concentrating primarily on two areas of experimentation: exploration of Heider's proposed developmental stages of responsibility attribution (e.g., Shaw and Sulzer, 1964); and assessment of responsibility attributed for an accidental occurrence (e.g., Walster, 1966; Shaver, 1970). Throughout a long series of such studies, Heider's basic framework has remained unchallenged. In contrast, the present paper introduces an alternative framework for the understanding of responsibility judgments in an attempt to provide a more adequately social psychological approach to the topic.

The psychological literature on responsibility attribution emerged from roots in cognitive psychology and gestalt approaches to perception. This intellectual framework, for all its richness, provides an incomplete picture of the major determinants of responsibility judgments. In its most common usage, responsibility refers to a decision about liability for sanctions based on a rule. The sanctions are usually negative ones. According to the perspective I wish to propose, the inputs to the decision are the rule itself, the actor's deeds, and the expectations of others regarding what the actor should do. In other words, an actor is judged on the basis of causality (what was done) and expectations (what should have been done). For adults, the key issue in causality is intent, what the actor meant to do (cf. Piaget, 1965). Psychological attribution research has focused heavily on degree of intent and on severity of consequences of action as empirical determinants of responsibility. Yet the other determinants, the expectations of others for one's actions, have been neglected by psychologists, though they have a long and honorable history in sociology. Such expectations are defined by the actors' social roles, and the present

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Beyond Heider: Toward a Role-based Conception of Responsibility

Because Heider’s (1958) model is central to the responsibility attribution literature, it is useful to summarize it and note its limitations. Omissions from the model are pointed out by considering legal analogs as examples of actual sanctioning rules used by adults. Ambiguities in the model are highlighted by linguistic analysis of meanings of responsibility, in order to illustrate potential problems in interpreting experiments in the area. For understanding both legal rules and linguistic usage, I will consider how roles influence judgments about responsibility.

Heider does not directly define what he means by responsibility, but instead points out what does and does not lead to attributions of responsibility:

It has already been stressed that intention is the central factor in personal causality . . . People are held responsible for their intentions and exertions but not as strictly for their abilities . . . Personal responsibility . . . varies with the relative contribution of environmental factors to the action outcome; in general, the more they are felt to influence the action, the less the person is held responsible. (Heider, 1958:112–113)

Although Heider seems to be referring primarily to general liability for blame or punishment, his examples indicate that he also includes eligibility for praise in his understanding of the concept. Two factors are theoretically central in determining responsibility according to this model: the extent to which the actor intended, or personally caused, the effect; and the extent to which the action was caused by environmental forces or pressures.

The Heiderian model of the interplay between intention and environmental pressure includes five stages or levels, summarized in Table 1. Responsibility is supposed to increase from level I to level IV, and then to decrease at level V.

Table 1. Heider’s Stages of Responsibility Attribution, their Definitions, and Corresponding Legal Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level*</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Approximate Legal Equivalent</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. Association</td>
<td>A person is &quot;held responsible for each effect that is in any way connected with him or that seems in any way to belong to him&quot; (Heider, 1958: 113).</td>
<td>Vicarious responsibility</td>
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<tr>
<td>II. Commission</td>
<td>Anything &quot;caused by [a person] p is ascribed to him. Causation is understood in the sense that p was a necessary condition for the happening, even though he could not have foreseen the outcome however cautiously he proceeded . . . The person is judged not according to his intention but according to the actual results of what he does&quot; (Heider, 1958: 113).</td>
<td>Strict liability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Foreseeability</td>
<td>Here &quot; . . . p is considered responsible, directly or indirectly, for any aftereffect he may have foreseen even though it was not a part of his own goal and therefore still not a part of the framework of personal causality&quot; (Heider, 1958: 113).</td>
<td>Negligence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. Intention</td>
<td>At this stage &quot;only what p intended is perceived as having its source in him&quot; (Heider, 1958: 113).</td>
<td>Criminal responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. Justification</td>
<td>In this final stage &quot; . . . even the p/s own motives are not entirely ascribed to him but are seen as having their source in the environment.&quot; The &quot;responsibility for the act is at least shared by the environment&quot; (Heider, 1958: 114).</td>
<td>Legal justifications, excuses, mitigations of III or IV (e.g., duress)</td>
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* Labels initially applied by Shaw and Sulzer (1964).
Heider's own discussion of these levels leaves it unclear whether he considered them to be a developmental stage sequence, or whether adults could and would use different levels of judgment in different situations. The subsequent psychological literature in the area has also assumed that variation in responsibility attributions across Heiderian levels had to do with either the development of individual cognitive understanding of causality (e.g., Shaw and Sulzer, 1964), or with situational differences in causality, or with both (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1973).

It is useful to consider legal responsibility rules as analogs to the Heiderian stages, for such rules provide initial evidence that responsibility judgments by adults entail considerations beyond intent and environmental force. As Table 1 illustrates, each of the first four Heiderian levels has a legal analog which is a set of rules for attributing responsibility. Association responsibility in the legal realm can be found in vicarious liability rules, such as regulations that tavern owners are responsible if liquor is served to minors by anyone on the premises, with or without the owner's knowledge or consent. Commission responsibility is represented in strict liability rules, such as workmen's compensation for industrial accidents irrespective of the company's good intentions or ability to prevent the occurrence of the accident. Foreseeability responsibility is found in both civil and criminal statutes concerning negligence. Intention responsibility—what Heider and other

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1 It is unclear to what extent Heider intended his scheme as a "true" stage model. To the extent that it is, each stage should supersede and incorporate prior stages (cf. Kohlberg, 1969). Thus, given Heider's definitions, one could plausibly argue that an individual at Level II would attribute responsibility only under conditions satisfying at least Level II criteria; an effect "in any way connected with" another person (i.e., satisfying Level I criteria) would not elicit responsibility attribution. Tests on Heider's developmental model have incorporated a loose rather than strict interpretation of what he meant by his stages or levels. They in fact provide evidence against a strict interpretation of Heider's model, since the same individuals give variable, but nonzero, responses across story levels. The most recent treatment of the Heiderian model, Harris (1977), explicitly recognizes the ambiguity in Heider's original stage description.

2 A legal justification implies that one is not legally responsible because one has done something that was the correct thing to do (e.g., self-defense); an excuse involves something that was an understandable thing to do (e.g., duress) (cf. Austin, 1961). Punishment can be lessened or mitigated even if one's justification or excuse is not adequate for a full defense.

3 Vidmar and Crinklaw (1974) make a similar point about Heiderian responsibility levels as different rule sets, although they refer to them as potentially qualitatively different in meaning. The present paper describes the Heiderian levels as rule sets related or linked by intent, and reserves notions of qualitative difference to apply to other meanings of responsibility not incorporated in the Heiderian scheme at all.
orders. What the law appears to reflect in these rule sets is the relation between the actor’s deeds and the actor’s role. Any actor, behaving badly enough and intentionally enough, can be liable under Intention responsibility rules. But only certain actors in certain roles and behaving in certain domains may be liable according to Association responsibility rules. Thus legal Association responsibility rests on occupancy of specific roles; legal Intention responsibility, on deeds irrespective of one’s social role. The intermediate rule sets reveal intermediate emphasis on the two.

Legal rules need not fully reflect or be reflected in everyday life. Yet the law codifies the normative structure of a society by indicating how wrongdoing is defined, how specific instances of wrongdoing are assessed, and how wrongdoing is to be punished. And examination of these legal rules as analogs to Heiderian levels suggests that the present perspective for understanding adult responsibility attribution is an appropriate one. Liability for formal sanctions is determined by socially learned rules that incorporate both what the actor did and what the actor was supposed to do. Liability for informal sanctions may well be similarly determined.

A further indication of how responsibility is actually conceptualized in everyday life can be found in the English language itself. Prior psychological studies have generally assumed that the dependent variable, a responsibility judgment, has a single and unambiguous meaning. In contrast, examination of the linguistic roots and common usage of “responsibility” reveals that it has multiple meanings that reflect the role and deed aspects of sanctioning as well as sanctioning itself.

As both Shaver (1975) and Hart (1968) note, the term responsibility can refer simply to causality. In this usage, to be responsible means to have caused, without implication of liability. Hart further emphasizes that the potential confusion between meanings—causality versus liability—is maximal when one uses the past tense wording, that someone “was responsible for” something. It is noteworthy that this is the wording of the dependent variable in almost all research on responsibility for accidents. Recently, Vdmar and Crinklaw (1974) have noted that subjects in accident studies may take the dependent variable to mean simply causality. In addition, Brewer (1977) recently interpreted responsibility to mean causality in an information-processing interpretation of these studies. Thus it is not entirely clear what responsibility means to the subjects (or to the investigators) in accident studies.

Hart’s (1968) linguistic analysis of meanings of responsibility also includes another major use of the term which he in fact calls “role responsibility.” He defines it as follows:

... whenever a person occupies a distinctive place or office in a social organization, to which specific duties are attached to provide for the welfare of others or to advance in some ways the aims or purposes of the organization, he is properly said to be responsible for the performance of these duties, or for doing what is necessary to fulfill them (Hart, 1968:212).

Hart also broadens this bureaucratic focus to include such notions as “responsible citizen” and “behaving responsibly” in the role responsibility category. His con-
cern with liability for punishment, however, leads him to de-emphasize the positive connotations of this usage of responsibility: reliability of role performance and enactment of social obligations. Both refer to fulfilling others' expectations for one's actions.

The definition of role involves the expectations of others for one's behavior. The reliable performance of a social role is often described in terms of responsibility, as when we speak of a person as a "responsible—" or an "irresponsible —" (naming some role such as citizen, worker, or safety patrol). Reliability refers to the performance of explicit expectations of others, explicit obligations held by the occupant of a social role. Obligation, however, has a broader scope than performance of explicitly delineated tasks. It is also possible to speak of relatively diffuse obligations, of the positive or affirmative standards or "responsibilities" of a social role. The notion of obligation normally implies that failure to perform will be blamed or punished, while performance will not be praised (cf. Flathman, 1970). Diffuse obligations or responsibilities, however, shade over into what philosophers commonly refer to as a morality of aspiration: standards to which individuals should aspire rather than standards to which they must be held (e.g., Fuller, 1964). For simplicity, here I shall use reliability to refer to specific performance requirements and obligation to refer to more diffuse requirements that may embody others' aspirations as well as their expectations. Both of these role-related meanings of responsibility—both reliability and obligation—refer to standards for behavior, to "shoulds" rather than deeds.

The assessment of role responsibility, of the fulfillment of social expectations, is a contribution to both positive and negative sanctioning processes. Just as negative sanctions rest on falling below the expectations of others for one's behavior, positive sanctions depend on fulfilling or exceeding those expectations.

In summary, Anglo-American common law and common language appear congruent with what might be labeled a roles-and-deeds perspective on responsibility, a perspective in which liability for sanctions rests on a combination of physical deeds and social expectations. Adult judgments within the law reflect both assessment of levels of causality and consideration of the defendant's role obligations. Adult users of English can employ responsibility to mean liability for sanctions, or to mean either of the two hypothesizes inputs to sanctioning: physical causality and role expectations. The dominant psychological model of responsibility attribution has focused on causality and ignored roles. In contrast, the alternative model suggested here attempts to make social psychological sense of both the variety of coherent legal standards for responsibility and the linguistic ambiguity in uses of responsibility. It would appear that no perspective can do so without including social roles.

The Attributional Status of Social Roles

Roles may be a necessary component of responsibility judgments, but the discussion so far has not demonstrated that they are necessarily anything new under the attributional sun. For example, it is possible that roles as determinants of responsibility might be adequately accounted for by attributionists through the notion of external or environmental force. Although the traditional Heiderian attribution dichotomy between internal and external sources of action has received recent criticism (e.g., Kruglanski, 1975; Monson and Snyder, 1977), Ross (1977) has suggested that it is still a useful distinction if we take external sources of action to be those that most people would respond to similarly. In Jones' attribution model, roles are taken into account explicitly in this manner: Behaviors which fall within the bounds of social role expectations are seen as essentially uninformative regarding underlying personal dispositions (Jones and Davis, 1965; Jones and McGillis, 1976). This model suggests that role can simply be treated as an external force determining action.

However, the notion of external force is an awkward way of conceptualizing roles. A role is not necessarily something the actor puts on when entering the room, like a tie at a posh restaurant, nor is it some-
thing which has the compelling force of a gun held at the head. Instead, a role is typically conceptualized as more lastingly attached than the tie and less compelling than the gun. The simplest way of capturing this tension is to say that behaving in-role is normative: It is what one ought to do.

As Heider's (1958) own discussion of ought makes clear, oughts are neither internal nor external sources of action; instead, they are internal manifestations of an external social or moral order. This perspective on society's demands is not new, as Heider indicates by reference to Mead's (1962) notion of the generalized other in this context. Both Mead and Freud (1966), for example, conceptualize the development of conscience as the incorporation of the moral commands of the community. Thus to praise people for acting against their self-interests in doing what they ought to do is to praise the control that one part of them (e.g., Freud's superego) has over another part (e.g., Freud's id). A dichotomous attribution to self or environment, in contrast, assumes that we either want to do things or have to do things, without taking into account the possibility that sometimes we ought to do things.

Thus what is missing from the view of role as an external force is precisely what makes us fully human: society acting in us, as well as on us. The concept of a role is a sociological way of incorporating and potentially studying this normative order. Not all roles are alike, of course. Some are more reminiscent of the tie in the restaurant; others, the gun at the head. But conceptually, roles occupy a middle ground between hedonism and compulsion as sources of action. To understand many of the behaviors of socialized selves—ranging from going to the store for one's spouse to dying for one's cause or country—requires that we somehow incorporate oughts as motives for voluntary action. From the standpoint of Mead, Freud, or Heider, role-related oughts are neither internal nor external: They are internalized.

In a roles-and-deeds model of responsibility attribution, roles can best be conceptualized as a normative context within which the actor is judged. In making sanctioning judgments, different roles appear to call forth differing criteria of strictness in terms of level of intent necessary for "guilt." More colloquially, it's not what you did, but what you did given who you are, that determines which sanctioning rules apply. If the informal sanctions of everyday life prove to follow patterns similar to those outlined in discussing Table 1—if everyday responsibility represents an interplay between roles and deeds—then roles can be modeled in formal terms as specifying conditions for the Heiderian stages. Let us now turn to the question of whether there is any sensible social structural account of what may underlie the use of different sanctioning rules for occupants of different roles.

Roles and Rules for Responsibility

One universal characteristic of human societies is the existence of hierarchies of authority—subordination. In such hierarchies, authorities have both the power and the acknowledged right to control the action of subordinates (cf. Peabody, 1968). Weber (1947) argued that authority in modern societies was increasingly vested in bureaucratic structures which rested on rational–legal bases of legitimacy. Blau's (1968) modification of Weber's argument stressed that authority in a rational–legal system can involve professional expertise as well as bureaucratic control. In short, some modern authorities guide behavior through their expertise; others control behavior through their bureaucratic position; still others combine these two bases of authority. Since Hart (1968) discusses "role responsibility" largely in terms of bureaucratic obligations, it would appear fruitful to search through the social structure for the presence of authority to find role-related differentiation of sanctioning rules.

A modern industrialized society contains a bewildering array of possible roles, even within the arena of the workplace alone. The workplace is a convenient domain to examine for evidence of different responsibility rules, however, because of the importance and relative clarity of the roles involved. In addition, the relative
prestige of occupations appears quite consistent across persons, across time, and across cultures (e.g., Duncan, 1961; Hodge et al., 1964). And occupational prestige, although a concept traditionally distinct from authority, can be used as a rough indicator of whether or not one is in a position of authority. The highest prestige jobs are high in professional authority (e.g., physician) or bureaucratic authority (e.g., top managerial position); medium-prestige jobs involve some professional training or bureaucratic control (e.g., sales or clerical positions); low-prestige jobs tend to require little formal training and typically involve being ordered or supervised by another (e.g., manual laborer, janitor). Having a high-prestige job generally requires more education and returns more income. The issue is whether it alters the rules according to which one may be sanctioned.

Consider three common versions of what responsibility means: blame (liability) for rulebreaking, reliable performance in role, and diffuse obligation to act. Social roles of differing prestige can be seen as embodying different mixtures of these principles or versions of responsibility. Low-prestige jobs are conceived of and administered in terms of compliance with minimal job standards; the major feedback provided to occupants is punishment after the fact for deviations from rules. Medium-prestige jobs involve a web of expectations and feedback focused on reliable performance. High-prestige jobs—those with major "responsibilities"—entail expectations that the occupant fulfill diffuse and internalized obligations to act or to oversee others' actions. (See also Fox, 1974, and Kohn, 1969, for similar arguments.)

The pattern of legal parallels to Heiderian stages in Table 1 then becomes sensible in terms of the notion that roles include liability for one's obligations. The most extreme version of such liability rests on the obligation to oversee others' actions. Military law is just one arena in which the doctrine of respondeat superior is relevant. Discussions of former President Nixon's responsibility for Watergate reflected a similar consideration; he was effectively liable for what his subordinates did, whether he made it happen or only allowed it to happen. Even parents supervising children share in this sort of liability. It is typically superiors in authority hierarchies who can be treated legally according to vicarious liability doctrines, the Association responsibility of the legal world. Such superiors are in a sense held to more "primitive" Heiderian standards. But this obviously does not mean that society is less moral in the way it treats superiors. Instead, it means that society is responsive to the fact that different roles may necessitate different standards of accountability.

Similar concerns can be found in somewhat diluted form for professional authorities, in the notion of obligation to advise or guide others' actions. Doctors are expected to try to cure patients; lawyers to acquit clients; teachers to teach students. Even psychologists in their laboratories have a web of obligations toward experimental subjects, complicated by the potential conflict between scientific advance and subjects' well-being. In all of these professional relations, the "subordinate" is expected to take the advice or follow the instructions of the authority. The authority, in turn, is liable for loss of control over the situation.

In summary, whether the source of authority is predominantly bureaucratic or professional, the occupant of a high-prestige job appears to be liable for certain relatively diffuse obligations to act, to exercise foresight, and to oversee or advise others' actions. I hypothesize that in general higher prestige is associated with greater liability for such obligations. Further, it appears reasonable to argue that such liability may extend beyond explicitly work-related incidents, because of the diffuseness of the obligations themselves. Another way of stating such expectations is to argue that self and role are more closely merged in high-prestige roles, such that to escape the role altogether is more difficult.

It should be stressed, however, that stringency in standards of liability is not necessarily accompanied by actual stringency in sanctioning. Although high bureaucrats and professionals may be normatively bound to higher, obligation-
Based standards, there is an escape-hatch involved in such standards. Just as it may be difficult to say when they have been met, it is correspondingly difficult to say when they have been seriously violated. High-prestige jobs may be accompanied by a great expansion in autonomously controlled time, in the sense of time before one is called on the carpet for nonperformance. Further, such jobs are accompanied by diffuse, occupant-controlled boundaries between work time and "time off." Finally, the standards themselves may be the inherently slippery ones of a morality of aspiration, such that we are more comfortable in praising clear achievement than in blaming failure. What higher-prestige roles thus guarantee is increased freedom of action rather than improved behavior by actors. The powerful may eventually hang, but in the meantime they are given a great deal of rope.

Society's defense against self-congratulatory, golf-playing incompetence in high places rest in part on socialization strategies. There is a suggestive parallel between three versions of responsibility—liability, reliability, and obligation—and Kelman's (1958) three processes of social influence—compliance, identification, and internalization. To avoid overt wrongdoing, one generally needs merely to comply with rules. To fulfill role expectations, one may need to identify with the role. And to enact diffuse obligations, it is desirable to have internalized the values embodied in the act. Socialization to roles of differing prestige may involve differing emphases on compliance, identification, and internalization as influence strategies. These reflect increasing autonomy and differentiation of self from externally imposed rules and rule-givers. Evidence concerning adult job socialization and job experiences suggests that higher-status role occupants both possess and highly value professional autonomy and job "responsibilities" (e.g., Kohn, 1969), potentially reinforcing prior class differences in socialization toward autonomy (e.g., Kerckhoff, 1973). Thus one way to ensure that high and vague standards are met is to ensure that the occupant holds them firmly and internally. To the extent that this works, the slippery sanctioning procedures need not be employed. To the extent that it fails, the unfortunate high-status role occupant who is caught can expect to answer for both deeds committed and obligations omitted.

To date, sociological interest in socialization to occupational roles and in occupational prestige itself has not spurred social psychologists toward an interest in how variation in roles may affect crucial cognitive judgments. Direct evidence concerning the impact of actors' social roles on responsibility attributed to them is scanty, as previous social-psychological studies of responsibility attribution have been relatively sociologically "naked." The stimulus person in developmental studies has characteristically been a child; in accident studies, most frequently an automobile driver. Only rarely in relevant studies have actors' status or roles themselves been treated as experimental manipulations, as in Chaikin and Darley (1973).

Given a roles-and-deeds perspective on responsibility attribution itself, however, it would appear natural for social psychologists to begin exploring just how roles can alter the rules under which responsibility is judged.

**On Individual Differences: How Social Structure May Affect Attribution Processes**

One final issue must be faced. So far I have described the impact of role on responsibility and differences between actors' roles as if all perceivers were interchangeable and in agreement on how to assess the impact of role. Yet the focus on authority as a central determinant of role-based responsibility judgments suggests that potent individual differences may exist, for authority-subordination is a central feature of social conflict in modern society as well as of its social organization (cf. Dahrendorf, 1959). It is a fundamental feature of modern bureaucratized society that the bulk of jobs involve subordination to one or more authorities; in the majority of occupations, people are not allowed the degree of self-determination of activity enjoyed by the writer of this sentence and by
the professorial reader of this sentence. Thus if role is a normative context, and if norms entail the possibility of conflict as well as consensus, the relation of subordinate to authority may be a good starting point for the search for individual differences among perceivers.

Perceivers are not likely to disagree if presented with a situation in which a subordinate independently breaks a rule or law. Such rules are likely to be clear, and the consequences of breaking them well-known, in comparison with the more diffuse standards to which superiors may be held. In contrast, keeping within the bounds of normal role behavior is generally sufficient for a subordinate to keep out of trouble. In-role behavior generally does not impose liability even when it is morally repugnant. (For example, executioners commit executions, not murders.) Role hierarchy makes this absence of liability even more explicit. Part of the effective contract or “deal” between authorities and subordinates involves responsibility: in exchange for controlling or commanding outcomes, the authority is liable for their consequences. In other words, as the quote from Milgram (1974) at the outset of this paper indicated, the subordinate’s activities are dominated by a responsibility (i.e., obligation) to the authority rather than a responsibility (i.e., liability) for the outcomes of action.

Although obeying authorities is a normal and expected part of subordinate roles, obedience provides a potential ground for normative conflict. If any authority’s instructions themselves exceed normative bounds, the subordinate is potentially caught in a dilemma, faced with doing wrong either by carrying out the directive or by disobeying it. Both external compulsions from the authority and internalized obligations to the authority would typically lead the subordinate in the direction of obedience. The result of that obedience, however, is a genuine anomaly: potentially sanctionable wrongdoing committed while carrying out one’s role obligations. By examining such acts—which have elsewhere (Hamilton, 1978) been labeled “crimes of obedience”—it may be possible to find conflicting interpretations of the normative demands of social role among actors themselves as well as among the observers who judge them.

First it is useful to ask what the unlucky actor who has committed such an act is likely to say about it—to self or to others. The moral account that is likely to be given of the action would have to do with the obligations of role: “It’s your duty to follow orders,” “the experiment had to go on,” and the like. (See also Scott and Lyman, 1968, on the general topic of accounts.) In Mills’ (1940) terms, the “vocabulary of motive” that is likely to be used to persuade self or others that the action was appropriate is quite literally that. The actor is likely to refer to the normative motive for action, the role or its attendant obligations. The rare actor who resisted authority’s demands, in contrast, would be likely to focus on the expected consequences of obedience: on the innocent persons killed, the other experimental subject harmed, and the like. Not carrying out such an action would be justified in terms of concerns about outcome superseding the demands of role itself.

Observers of wrongdoing committed in role must resolve a parallel dilemma in judging the actor. Should one focus on the blameworthy consequences of action and hold the actor responsible? Alternatively, should one focus on the actor’s motives, on the obligation to obey, and deny that the act is blameworthy? Actors deciding whether to obey and observers judging obedience that went haywire both have potential alternative frames of reference, either emphasizing the role as a normative context or denying it that status.

An example of this potential divergence in attributions among observers was found in a study of public reactions to the trial of Lt. Calley for the My Lai massacre (Kelman and Lawrence [Hamilton], 1972). The trial had excited great public interest and conflict. Survey responses concerning it revealed two major groups in the national population, distinguished by their disagreement over whether Calley should

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6 Nor are they likely to disagree if the situation is described without reference to roles, or merely with reference to widely available and undifferentiated roles such as “automobile driver” or “citizen.”
have been tried. One group approved of the trial on the grounds of upholding individual responsibility for the consequences of actions; one group disapproved on the grounds that subordinates have a duty to obey. From the present point of view, these approvers were focusing on consequences, exhibiting what we might call causal reasoning. The disapprovers were focusing on motives, exhibiting what we might call purposive reasoning. It would appear that acceptance of role as a normative context for action is accompanied by motive-based judgment of the actor, while rejection of the role is accompanied by consequence-based judgment of the deed.

True normative conflict also leads deeper than simple evaluation of what happened, for focusing on the consequences versus the motives of action can produce different definitions of what happened. For example, there may be two ways of describing the events at My Lai. One could say that unarmed human beings were shot and killed. One could also say that orders to kill suspected enemy were followed. Intent can also be described according to different grammars: one could say that Calley intended to kill people, or that Calley intended to follow orders. Neither statement is necessarily false. The first sort of description reflects use of what might be called a "consequence grammar" in describing the situation itself. The second reflects use of what might be called "motive grammar" instead. The tension between these two perspectives was put more rhetorically in the title of one popular press book about My Lai: Calley: Soldier or Killer? The answer clearly lies in the eye—and mind—of the beholder.

Identifying an area of perceiver conflict over the normative meaning of role thus reveals that roles pervade the description of action itself, insofar as they inspire use of what I have called motive grammar. This grammar of description may prove to be particularly likely when an action that might have another more negative social meaning is being performed as part of a role expectation. For example, I have already noted that executioners do not commit murder (act-plus-wrong); they also do not commit killings (act-plus-effect); they commit executions (act-plus-motive). Appropriately, the most common meaning of "to execute" is "to carry out." Milgram's (1974) subjects similarly described their action as "going on" with the experiment, not as administering severe shock. The same physical activities can be described in dramatically different ways depending on whether the role is accepted or rejected as a normative context. These different descriptions then prove to be congruent with quite different judgments of responsibility for the "same" event.

These different interpretations would appear to split actors into those who obey and those who refuse, and observers into those who condone and those who condemn. Recent evidence also makes it appear likely that the perceiver's own position in the social structure would influence the judgment made. For example, the key demographic determinants of opinion about Calley in the Kelman-Lawrence study were social class, education, and occupation: lower-status respondents were significantly more likely to hold to a "subordinate's duty" or motive grammar orientation. Such results are consistent

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7 This distinction between motives and consequences as bases of judgment resembles the old philosophical distinction between reasons and causes (cf. Harré and Secord, 1972). This distinction may also be relevant to the debate within attribution between the Heiderian attribution theorists and Kruglanski's (1975) approach. Kruglanski's fundamental argument that humans explain behavior by its purposes may be particularly relevant to behaviors for which a role provides the purpose.

8 Kruglanski (1975) has touched on the ambiguity in describing action in discussing what he called the issue of identity: how an effect is conceptualized. Pitkin (1966) has made a similar point in discussing the concept of obligation. Fundamentally, even very simple descriptions of action can embed interpretations of the act, its effects, or the actor's motives.

9 Each of these modes of reasoning is more general in scope than the examples used here might indicate. A causal grammar can obviously be used for outcomes other than negative ones; similarly, a purposive or motive grammar can be used for motives other than role obligations. Here it is simply suggested that role as a normative framework leads to use of motive grammar to describe actions carried out in role, and particularly to describe those with real or potential negative consequences.

10 The original Kelman and Lawrence (Hamilton) (1972) report presented only simple cross-tabulations
with the notion that being in a subordinate or lower-prestige life slot can fundamentally mold one’s cognitions about self and others (cf. Kohn, 1969). In this case, one is molded into both doing one’s duty and accepting duty as a moral relief from responsibility for consequences.

Individual differences among perceivers thus appear likely in situations of normative conflict. Here I have focused on a particular sort of conflict involving authority and subordination. Conflicting interpretations of the authority–subordinate contract emerge as bases for different judgments of responsibility, and even different descriptions of the events themselves. In general, I have suggested that accepting a social role as a normative context for action is associated with a motive grammar, and rejection of the role with a consequence grammar.

Overview and Conclusions

Responsibility is a core concept of social life. Like other core concepts, it is difficult to define adequately and even trickier to study appropriately. The present paper has argued that the model of responsibility attribution in the prior social-psychological literature should be modified to include the potential impact of social roles on responsibility. According to the present model, responsibility as liability for sanctions rests both on causation of effects and on the social expectations of others for one’s action. These expectations are determined heavily, albeit not entirely, by social roles. A roles-and-deeds conception of responsibility proves to make sense of adult sanctioning rules as summarized by law. It also proves congruent with linguistic usage, for responsibility’s multiple meanings include both

of demographics with orientation toward the trial. Subsequent analyses (monograph in preparation) showed that education, social class (as measured by ratings of the house and household durables), and occupation contribute interactively to explaining trial orientation. More education, higher social class, and more prestigious occupation are each associated with a consequence grammar orientation. Each variable augments the other in a stairstep fashion, however, such that the effect of education is more striking within higher categories of class or occupation, and vice versa.

liability for sanctioning and the two inputs to sanctioning, causation and role expectations. Thus to study the determinants of adult responsibility attribution it appears necessary to incorporate social roles into one’s attribution model.

Attributionally, roles can best be viewed as normative contexts that determine the standards of accountability of the actor, rather than as external compulsions imposed upon the actor. I have suggested that authorities are held to more stringent standards of accountability, and that occupational prestige can serve as a rough index across various occupations of whether the actor is or is not in a position of authority. It appears that the accountability of high-prestige actors rests on the notion of liability for relatively diffuse obligations to act, to exercise foresight, and to oversee others. Thus, according to this model, different roles can lead to different rules for determining responsibility, and high-prestige roles invoke more stringent rule sets.

Individual differences among perceivers appear likely when conflict exists over whether an in-role behavior is normative. Given the centrality of authority–subordination as a dimension of roles, I examined a potential normative conflict over wrongdoing committed by subordinates under orders. Two ways of judging the situation—and indeed of describing the situation—were identified. One focused on the actor’s causation of blameworthy consequences, the other on the actor’s motive of obedience. The potential generality of these patterns remains to be tested.

Most of this discussion has, of necessity, occurred in a remarkable vacuum. Very little published research on responsibility has dealt with roles at all. Yet a natural complementarity exists between the interests of psychological and sociological researchers who begin to look at responsibility in terms of roles. Psychological researchers can find out about how cognitions differ if one is judging persons in different social structural positions; about how perceivers’ own social structural positions may alter their cognitions; and about how role may provide a unifying thread between two distinct foci for
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attrition processes, motives versus consequences. Sociological researchers can also benefit from systematic experimental attention to the relationship between social structure and cognition, as the link between the two has been more often assumed than measured in sociology. If research in responsibility attribution moves toward the consideration of roles as well as deeds, it will move toward the interface between cognition and social structure, between psychology and sociology. A truly social psychology of responsibility attribution could enrich both disciplines.

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1940 "Situated actions and vocabularies of mo-
Can You Create Structural Differentiation in Social Power Relations in the Laboratory*

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In 1976 Gray and von Broembsen developed a formal typology of social power structures in groups. Embarking from this point, a formal theory is developed for predicting differentiation in social power structures as a consequence of environmental contingency. A series of hypotheses generated from the theory are tested, with results generally supporting the theory's predictions. Future research directions are discussed.

Introduction

Gray and von Broembsen (1976) develop a mathematical model which they claim represents a social form of the law of effect (cf. Herrnstein, 1970; Skinner, 1938; Thorndike, 1911). This model is particularly well suited to the study of social power and related phenomena and, in fact, constitutes the refinement of a basic law of social power relations (cf. Gray et al., 1968; Mayhew et al., 1969; von Broembsen et al., 1969). The model, as presented by Gray and von Broembsen, appears as

$$ c_i = (S-1)^{D-1} \left[ \frac{a_i}{1-a_i} \right]^D $$

where $S$ indicates the numerical size of the

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