TOWARD AN INTUITIVE POLITICIAN MODEL OF ATTRIBUTION PROCESSES*

Philip E. Tetlock  
University of California, Berkeley

The last fifteen years have witnessed an explosion of social-psychological interest in attribution theory. Broadly construed, the domain of attribution theory is that of common-sense psychology or lay epistemology (Heider, 1958). Attribution theory deals with the rules and standards of evidence that ordinary people rely upon in explaining and drawing causal inferences (attributions) from behavior. How, in other words, do people answer questions of the form: Why did person X do that?

Most attribution theorists work from the premise that people are active information processors—intuitive scientists—whose primary goal in explaining behavior is to “attain cognitive mastery of the causal structure of the environment” (Kelley, 1967, p. 193; see also Heider, 1958; Jones & Davis, 1965; Nisbett & Ross, 1980; Ross, 1977). People make causal inferences or attributions for the purpose of developing an organized and coherent view of the social world that enables them to anticipate future events. A natural focus for research is on the data-analysis strategies of intuitive scientists. What information-processing rules do people use to infer the causes of behavior? To what extent do these strategies resemble formal procedures of statistical inference (Bayes’ theorem, analysis of variance) as opposed to more informal judgmental heuristics (cf. Kelley, 1967; Nisbett & Ross, 1980; Taylor & Fiske, 1978)?

The intuitive scientist framework is not, however, the only possible way of thinking about attribution processes. People may not always explain behavior with the cold, emotionless objectivity of intuitive scientists. As many writers

*I appreciate the helpful comments of Barry Schlenker, Tony Manstead, and Don Forsyth on an earlier version of this chapter. Preparation of this chapter was assisted by NIMH Grant RO3 MH35907. Correspondence address: Philip E. Tetlock, Department of Psychology, 3210 Tolman Hall, University of California, Berkeley, CA, 94720.
have noted, the attributions people offer for behavior may serve important psychological and social functions in addition to establishing cognitive mastery of the environment. For instance, people often explain events that have major implications for how they think of themselves (their self-images) and for how others see them (their public or social images). Why did you fail at that task? Why did your competitor succeed? Why did you act that way toward your wife? Why did she act that way toward you? In such cases, people may frequently offer explanations for behavior designed to protect or enhance their sense of self-worth (Stephan & Gollwitzer, 1981; Zuckerman, 1979) or to protect or enhance their social images (Bradley, 1978; Orvis, Kelley, & Butler, 1976; Scott & Lyman, 1968; Schlenker, 1980, 1982; Tetlock, 1981; Weary & Arkin, 1981). Attributions, like attitudes, may serve multiple, interrelated functions (Forsyth, 1980; Katz, 1960).

I shall argue in this chapter that the intuitive scientist framework is, indeed, too restrictive. The vast majority of theoretical and empirical work has been directed toward developing increasingly sophisticated models of how people (intuitive scientists) analyze stimulus information in arriving at causal attributions. To be sure, this work has yielded very important insights into the nature of human social judgment. However, social psychologists should not allow their commitment to the intuitive-scientist image of human nature to obscure the insights that can be gained from pursuing the research implications of alternative images of human nature.

The chapter is divided into two sections. In the first section, I propose an alternative to the intuitive-scientist image of human nature: that of the person as intuitive politician who seeks to convince both real and imaginary audiences that he or she possesses desired characteristics. I argue that, just as the intuitive-scientist image has stimulated and guided a dynamic research program on the cognitive processes underlying attributional judgments, the intuitive-politician image has the potential to stimulate a similarly dynamic research program on the interpersonal determinants and consequences of attributional judgments. In the second section, I explore specific research implications of the intuitive-politician image of human nature. Within this conceptual framework, the key theoretical question becomes: What type of politician is the average person? I examine theory and research relevant to this question and point to gaps in our understanding that advocates of the intuitive-politician research program need to resolve. I conclude by considering some fundamental conceptual issues that the proposed research program raises.

THE LOGIC OF RESEARCH PROGRAMS ON ATTRIBUTION PROCESSES

Implicit or explicit assumptions about human nature underlie virtually all empirical work in social psychology. These assumptions exert a profound impact on how we design, execute, and interpret research (c.f. Deutsch & Krauss, 1965; Kendler, 1981; Shaw & Costanzo, 1982).

Imré Lakatos, a philosopher of science, has offered an insightful analysis of how underlying assumptions influence the actual conduct of scientific research. According to Lakatos (1970), the "most natural" unit for describing scientific progress is not the isolated hypothesis or even theory, but the research program. Research programs can extend over decades (even centuries) and inspire enormous numbers 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 the development of theories. 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, 1978).

Viewed in the above light, the dominant research program on attribution processes has clearly been the cognitive or information-processing approach. The hard core of this now fairly well-established program is the earlier-mentioned assumption that people are intuitive scientists whose sole motive in explaining behavior is to achieve a better understanding of the "causal structure" of the social world. This assumption provides the conceptual starting point for most social-psychological theory and research on everyday explanations of behavior. It directs investigators to develop theories that take for granted the veridicality of the intuitive scientist image of human nature. The central question for empirical inquiry is: What type of intuitive scientist is the average person? How well does the average person perform the information-processing tasks widely associated with making reasonable causal inferences (e.g., detecting relationships among events, recalling evidence, explaining why events occur, adjusting prior beliefs in response to new evidence)?

An enormous body of theory and research has addressed these challenging issues. It is very important to note, however, that advocates of the cognitive research program by no means agree on all issues. The cognitive research program contains a potentially infinite number of specific models and theories. Different theorists have painted markedly different portraits of the intuitive scientist. For instance, theorists have proposed that people employ a wide variety of inferential rules in their search for causal understanding. At one extreme are models that posit complex and rather sophisticated rules of social data analysis—for example, correspondent inference (Jones & Davis, 1965; Jones & McGillis, 1976), the discounting and augmentation principles (Kelley, 1971, 1972), the covariation principle (Kelley, 1967) and Bayes' theorem (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1975). Here the intuitive-scientist metaphor is taken literally. Perceivers use informal versions of basic logical and statistical principles to make sense of behavior. Confronted by an event they wish to explain, people carefully assess the plausibility of each potential explanation and methodically eliminate those explanations that are inconsistent with the evi-
What, then, is to be done? Should social psychologists be content with working primarily, or even exclusively, within the guidelines of the cognitive research program? For many, this option possesses considerable appeal; the cognitive research program has stimulated many of the most important advances in the field in the last 15 years (cf. Kelley & Michela, 1979; Nisbett & Ross, 1980). However, the successes of the cognitive research program should not blind social psychologists to the insights that can be gained by exploring alternative images of human nature. Although the intuitive-scientist image has provoked much theory and research, it also severely constrains the types of theories and research that social psychologists pursue. Following Feyerabend (1970), I see “theoretical pluralism” (not crucial experiments) as the best means of overcoming the severe constraints that hard-core assumptions place on our theories and research. Specifically, we must be willing to study the attribution process from more than one (the intuitive scientist) underlying point of view. We must be prepared to entertain seriously the possibility that alternative hard-core images of human nature will illuminate aspects of the attribution process that would have been neglected or ignored had we confined our attention to a single, dominant hard-core image. In essence, the argument for theoretical pluralism is an argument for open-mindedness, or—as Feyerabend puts it—“a plea for tolerance in matters epistemological.” To my mind, it is a compelling plea.¹

On what image of human nature should this alternative research program be built? My nomination is the “intuitive politician.” Just as politicians must deal with many, sometimes contradictory, demands from special interests and constituencies, so people in their everyday lives must deal with many, sometimes contradictory, demands from other people in their psychological environment. Some of these demands are internal (“I feel I should say no to this illegitimate request” or “The people whose opinion I value most would want me to say no”); other demands are external (“The person or group I am dealing with right now wants me to say yes”). Occasionally, the cross pressures are extremely intense and complex (various internal and external audiences arguing both for and against complying with the request). At other times, the decision process may be

¹As Tompkins (1981) warns, we should beware of “cognitive imperialism”—the temptation to reduce all psychological events to information-processing terms.

²The position that I have taken here is similar to McGuire’s (1983) recent advocacy of a “contextualist” philosophy of science for social psychology. McGuire notes that social psychology has “for the last generation been dominated by a Logical Empiricist epistemology which takes for granted that our field progresses by our having a theory from which we derive testable hypotheses which are then put in jeopardy by an empirical test, and the hypothesis or theory from which it is derived are accepted or rejected depending on the outcome of this test” (p. 20). He argues that the shortcomings of this view are “with increasing uniformity distorting the way we think about and describe our work” (p. 21) and proposes an alternative “contextualist” epistemology. “In contrast to Logical Empiricism’s contention that some theories are right and others wrong and that the function of the empirical work is to test which of several different theories is right, contextualism asserts that each of the several different theories is right and that the empirical work is conducted in order to reveal the conditions under which each of the complementary theories obtain” (p. 21). I have little doubt that both the intuitive-scientist and politician research programs capture important aspects of psychological functioning. I do, though, have serious reservations about the usefulness of portraying our research efforts as if they were means of identifying the “true theory.”

dence. At the other extreme are models that identify less rigorous and normatively acceptable rules of inference. These models depict sloppy intuitive scientists who rely heavily on the most salient information in the situation and settle for the first adequate (satisficing) explanation that comes to mind (e.g., the availability and representativeness heuristics—Nisbett & Ross, 1980). In short, theoretical diversity within a research program is not at all uncommon. To belong to the same research program it is necessary only that the diverse formulations share a common cluster of hard-core assumptions.

If the cognitive research program does contain a potentially infinite variety of portraits of the intuitive scientist, some important conclusions follow. It becomes possible to explain virtually any conceivable event in terms of the hard-core principles of the research program. And it becomes impossible to achieve decisive empirical tests of the adequacy of the program. These conclusions are consistent with Lakatos’ (1970) position. In his historical case studies of scientific progress, Lakatos argues that research programs are not falsifiable. Advocates of a program are often willing to cling tenaciously to hard core assumptions in the face of difficult-to-assimilate evidence (cf. Kuhn, 1970).

For instance, what evidence would it take to convince a committed advocate of the cognitive research program that the intuitive scientist image of the attribution process is flawed or incomplete—that the explanations people offer for behavior serve important noncognitive or motivational functions such as protecting people’s self-images or social images? In their review of the controversy over cognitive versus motivational explanations of attribution processes, Tetlock and Levi (1982) conclude that a committed advocate of the cognitive research program can reconcile virtually any “inconsistent” evidence with the intuitive-scientist hard core of the program. They note that specific portraits (theories) of the intuitive scientist may be shown to be incorrect. People in everyday life are not, for example, “perfect” scientists. They are too slow to revise beliefs in response to disconfirming evidence. They often attach too much importance to logically irrelevant information and too little importance to logically relevant information in drawing conclusions about other people or groups. However, the intuitive-scientist hard core lives on. All that need be conceded is that we are imperfect or biased intuitive scientists. The overall research program is extraordinarily flexible and resilient. As Tetlock and Levi (1982, p. 74), state:

As it now stands, the cognitive research program requires no more than that people offer what seem to them to be the most plausible explanations for behavior, where plausibility is some unspecified combination of formal and informal rules of judgment and relevant knowledge structures.

From this perspective, the frequently ingenious search for crucial experiments to distinguish cognitive and motivational explanations is misguided. The cognitive research program has reached a stage in its development at which it can mimic the predictions of any viable motivational theory.
much less conflict-ridden, all pressures pointing to one line of action. The essence of the analogy is that, like politicians, people try to strike viable compromises between the demands of these various constituencies: compromises that permit them to maintain or enhance their self-esteem (their self-images as morally worthy and competent beings), their social-esteem (their social images as morally worthy and competent beings) and, finally, their strategic or material positions in the world. (Because other people control desired resources such as money, promotions, sexual favors, etc., people often have strong ulterior motives in seeking to impress them in particular ways.)

The intuitive-scientist and intuitive-politician images highlight very different aspects of how human beings function in and cope with a complex social world. Whereas the central motive for intuitive scientists is the quest to achieve causal understanding and reduce uncertainty, the central motive for intuitive politicians is the quest to convince both themselves and others that they possess desired traits or characteristics. I shall refer to these twin objectives as personal-identity motives (What type of person do I seek to be?) and social-identity motives (What type of person do I want specific others to believe me to be?). The intuitive politician image thus subsumes two types of motivational determinants of attributions that theorists often prefer to distinguish: ego-defensive or self-esteem needs and social-esteem or impression-management needs. No doubt, there are important distinctions to be drawn here—to which I shall return later. But the differences should not be allowed to obscure a fundamental similarity in the logic of the two types of motivational explanations (cf., Carson, 1969; Mead, 1934; Sullivan, 1953). In both cases, theorists posit that people “use” explanations of behavior to establish or maintain desired images in the eyes of an audience, which may exist either “in the head” of the individuals advancing the explanations (an internalized or imaginary audience) or in the external world (the actual presence of other persons). Attributions serve, in the most general sense, identity maintenance and enhancement functions (Schlenker, 1980, 1982; Scott & Lyman, 1968). They assist us in living with both ourselves and others.8

The intuitive-politician hard core of the incipient research program provides a valuable starting point for understanding motivational determinants of how people explain and interpret behavior. The central questions for empirical inquiry now become: What type of politician is the average person? What types of personal or social identities do people seek to create and maintain? Why? In what ways do the processes of creating and maintaining personal identities differ from those of creating and maintaining social identities? What attributional strategies do people use to achieve desired personal or social identities? In short, the intuitive-politician image raises an enormous array of issues that would simply have gone unnoticed if speculation had been confined to the intuitive-scientist image.

In comparison to the empirical base for cognitive theories of attribution, the amount of research on the impact of personal and social identity needs on attributions is modest indeed. I shall refer to some of this literature in the next section of this chapter. Now, however, it is important to recognize that just as advocates of the cognitive research program disagree on exactly what types of intuitive scientists people are, so advocates of the motivational research program do not have to agree on exactly what types of politicians people are. (If anything, the smaller data base means that there are even fewer constraints on advocates of a motivational research program.) We should expect healthy disagreements to arise on such issues as the relative importance of personal versus social-identity motives (When are people more concerned with maintaining or furthering their personal as opposed to their social identities?), the nature of personal and social identity motives (What types of personal or social identities do people try to create? What types of audiences do they seek to impress?), and the degree to which people are aware of the impact of personal- and social-identity motives on the attributions they offer for behavior (When are people deceptive as opposed to honest intuitive politicians?). There is no limit, in principle, to the range of portraits of the intuitive politician that theorists may sketch.

Finally, and as a corollary to the last point, it should be emphasized that the intuitive-politician research program is no more falsifiable than the intuitive-scientist research program. It is not at all clear what evidence would be needed to convince a committed advocate of the intuitive-politician program that the politician image of human nature is flawed or incomplete. In moving from one research program to another, we substitute one all-encompassing set of philosophical assumptions (“blinders”) for another. The key point to bear in mind is that these assumptions, although not directly empirically testable, sensitize us to very different types of research questions and issues. It is not particularly useful to think of one research program as more correct or in tune with reality than the other (at least in our current state of knowledge). The real test of the merit of the politician research program will lie in its ability to stimulate the discovery of facts and relationships that otherwise would have gone undiscovered.

BUILDING AN INTUITIVE POLITICIAN RESEARCH PROGRAM

Research programs appear to have life cycles. In the beginning, there is only the hard core: basic philosophical assumptions about the nature of the subject matter. Over time, the framework of the research program begins to take shape as models and theories are developed and tested. At this stage, the research program begins to attract more participants, both as researchers and as contributors of data. As the research program grows, it begins to divide into subfields, each with its own set of assumptions and methods. This division leads to specialization, and with specialization comes specialization. As specialization increases, the research program begins to split into still smaller subfields, each with its own set of assumptions and methods. This splitting continues until the research program has divided into so many subfields that it is no longer possible to say what it is all about. At this point, the research program has reached its peak, and it is time to look for new paradigms that can provide a new framework for understanding the subject matter.
chapter 8: toward an intuitive politician model of attribution processes

This wide variety of identity objectives reflects the wide variety of underlying “needs” that may motivate intuitive politicians. Do people seek the approval and respect of others as an end in itself or as a means of satisfying “deeper” motives such as gaining public validation for their self-concepts (Swann & Read, 1981), increasing their bargaining power in interpersonal relationships (Jones & Pittman, 1981) or even acquiring material possessions (Jellison & Gentry, 1978)? When does one or another motive become “dominant”? Different theorists may well choose to sketch different motivational portraits of the intuitive politician.

whom do people seek to impress?

We have seen that the intuitive-politician metaphor places virtually no constraints on the types of identities people may wish to claim. The politician metaphor also places virtually no constraints on the types of audiences (constituencies) people may wish to impress on or on the relative importance people attach to impressing different audiences.

For instance, intuitive politicians may be principled (primarily concerned with adhering to the standards of internalized audiences) or pragmatic (primarily concerned with establishing and maintaining good working relationships with whomever they are dealing at the moment). Both personality and situational variables seem to exert an important influence on the degree to which people are pragmatic as opposed to principled in a given context. Thus, investigators have discovered that people who are above average in their concern for how they are perceived and evaluated by others (as indicated by high scores on measures of social anxiety, public self-consciousness, need for approval or self-monitoring) are more likely to tailor their conduct to audiences of the moment than are people less concerned with the reactions of others (e.g., Arkin, Appelman, & Burger, 1980; Buss, 1980; Crowne & Marlowe, 1964; Schlenker, 1982; Snyder, 1979).

Situational factors can also have an important effect. The relative importance of internal versus external audiences depends, for example, on whether people believe their behavior will be anonymous (only subjects themselves will know how they acted) or public (other people will know about subjects’ behavior). Investigators often ascribe differences in private and public behavior to the activation of social-esteem or impression-management needs in public (Baumeister, 1982). Much also depends on subjects’ beliefs concerning the importance or status of the audience, or the values of the audience (Gergen & Taylor, 1969; Schlenker, 1980; Tetlock & Fleisher, 1981). It may well be harder to “ignore” the views of an important or high-status audience with well-defined preferences or opinions.

People vary not only in the importance they attach to internal and external audiences, but also in the importance they attach to specific internal or external audiences. One individual may highly value living up to religious standards (What would my minister say if I did that?), another may value familial

what types of identities do people seek?

It is tempting to assume that people seek “socially desirable” identities—that is, to convince target audiences that they possess culturally valued traits or characteristics (e.g., likeable, friendly, honest, compassionate, intelligent, mature). The intuitive-politician metaphor superficially seems to support this assumption. The term “politician” (at least to an American audience) evokes images of the electioneering role in which every act appears carefully calculated to persuade others to ascribe culturally valued traits to the candidate.

Without question, people do often seek culturally valued identities (Alexander & Rudd, 1981; Schlenker, 1980; Tedeschi, 1981). This statement is, however, too sweeping and simplistic. For one thing, what counts as a desirable identity varies sharply from one cultural-historical setting to another. One need only think of a Red Guard revolutionary in China during the ”Cultural Revolution,” a Nazi party official in Hitler’s Germany, and an aspiring presidential candidate in contemporary America to realize that the types of images politicians attempt to project depend profoundly on the prevailing social system and values. Second, even if we restrict discussion to one social system at a given time, we will find that politicians may not always find it advantageous to claim culturally valued identities. On occasion, one may wish to intimidate rivals or opponents by emphasizing one’s rigidity, toughness, and perhaps even irrationality (cf. Jones & Pittman, 1981; Schelling, 1966; Schlenker, 1980). On other occasions, one may wish to emphasize one’s weakness and dependency, such as when one seeks the protection of another more powerful individual or group (cf. Jones & Pittman, 1981; Schlenker, 1980). In brief, there seems to be little, if any, limit to the range of identities people may try to establish and maintain.
What Attributional Tactics Do People Use to Achieve Personal or Social-Identity Goals?

The use of attributions to claim desired identities, or to avoid undesired ones, is no where more obvious than in the political arena. The outcomes of political conflicts (elections, revolutions, diplomatic confrontations) often hinge on how the participants define or interpret key actions. Debate over what constitutes an adequate explanation for conduct is a ubiquitous feature of the political scene. The labor leader charges that the businessman refuses to give his workers a raise because he is greedy; the businessman responds that he needs the money to pay off debts and invest in plant equipment in order to remain competitive. The government official condemns attacks by an antigovernment organization as bloodthirsty terrorism; the antigovernment organization portrays the same attacks as valiant attempts to secure basic human rights and justice. Anti-abortionists view pro-abortionists as morally callous and insensitive to the unborn infant's right to life; pro-abortionists view themselves as defenders of women's rights and freedom of choice. As C. Wright Mills (1940, p. 905) pointed out, "What is reason for one man is rationalization for another." Success in politics often depends on persuading others to accept one's attributional definition of the situation.

In both politics and everyday life, people use attributions defensively (to protect their claims to desired identities) and offensively (to claim even more desirable identities). People use attributions defensively to extricate themselves from what Schlenker (1980) has called predicaments. A predicament, in essence, is any event that casts unwanted aspersions on the character of an actor. As such, predicaments can take diverse forms. Predicaments can be private affairs (only the actor is aware of the identity-threatening event) or public affairs (others are aware of the identity-threatening event). Predicaments can also cast aspersions on a wide array of traits or characteristics that people may wish to claim. For instance, telling a lie casts doubt on one's trustworthiness or honesty, failure to complete an ability-demanding task casts doubt on one's competence or industriousness; harming another individual casts doubt on one's self-control or concern for the well-being of others.

We are all familiar with the types of predicaments from which politicians often struggle to extricate themselves. Many journalists try to formulate the questions they pose to politicians to make this task as difficult as possible: "Why did you claim that the government should do X at time 1 and Y at time 2?"

"Why did individuals acting under your authority perform this act?" "How can you defend the 'immoral' conduct of some other individual, group or government?" A classic example of a political predicament was the Watergate crisis during the Nixon administration. Suspicions mounted throughout 1973 that President Nixon had attempted in 1972 to cover up connections between his administration and a burglary of Democratic party offices. As calls for public release of secret tape recordings of confidential Nixon conversations grew, Nixon needed a politically powerful explanation for refusing to release the tapes. The explanation he offered was "executive privilege." Nixon could argue that he was not stonewalling investigation of illegal activity; he was upholding the Constitutional doctrine governing the confidentiality of presidential communications and, in the process, preserving the separation of powers between the legislative and executive branches of government. Ultimately, Nixon's attribution for refusing to release the tapes failed because it was simply not sufficiently persuasive. The Supreme Court ordered Nixon to release the tapes, and the evidence contained in the tapes was so difficult to explain away that Nixon's political position became untenable and he was forced to resign to avoid impeachment.

Less well-known are the predicaments that social psychologists have ingeniously created for their experimental subjects. One common method of creating predicaments is the "forced-compliance paradigm." Forced-compliance experiments are studies in which experimenters persuade subjects to behave in ways that contradict subjects' beliefs or preferences, such as lying to others, advocating unpopular positions (protest increase, antitoothbrushing) or working on tedious tasks (Wicklund & Brehm, 1976). These experiments can cast aspersions on such typically desired identity characteristics as honesty, good sense, intelligence, and maturity (Alexander & Rudd, 1981). Another common method of creating predicaments is by providing false feedback to subjects about their performance on ability-demanding tasks. For instance, experimenters have led subjects to believe that they are poor or excellent teachers of a young pupil, competent or incompetent psychotherapists, socially sensitive or insensitive, and skillful or inept problem solvers. (For reviews, see Bradley, 1978; Tetlock & Levi, 1982; Zuckerman, 1979.) Still other types of experimentally induced predicaments are discussed in Schlenker (1980) and Tedeschi and Riordan (1981).

In general, the more severe a predicament, the greater is the need to use attributions to protect one's personal or social identity. I shall emphasize three key determinants of the severity of predicaments: (1) the undesirability of the event that triggered the predicament, (2) the actor's apparent responsibility for the event, and (3) the importance the actor attaches to creating desired impressions on real or imaginary observers of the predicament. For instance, consider the predicament created for a subject (call him John) in a forced-compliance experiment. John has agreed to a request to deliver an antitoothbrushing speech which the experimenter will record. In itself, this act may create a modest predicament. John may feel that most people he knows would
disapprove of the position he has taken in the speech. However, the experimenter can increase the severity of the predicament by manipulating a variety of specific features of the experimental situation and instructions. Thus, the predicament will be more severe to the degree that the situation suggests that John freely chose to make the antitoothbrushing speech (e.g., if the experimenter had emphasized that, while he wanted John to make the speech, John was free to choose). Freedom of choice increases responsibility for the identity-threatening event. The predicament will also be more severe if foreseeable negative consequences follow from John’s making the speech (e.g., if John believes the speech is to be used to encourage junior high school students not to brush their teeth). Foreseeable negative consequences increase the undesirability of the event. Finally, the predicament will be more severe to the degree John believes other people will associate him with the speech and to the degree that John values the good opinion of those particular people.

Previous writers have identified a variety of attributional tactics that people use to defend themselves in predicaments (Austin, 1961; Schlenker, 1980, 1982; Scott & Lyman, 1968; Tedeschi & Riess, 1981). Perhaps the simplest is that of innocence. The person maintains that the identity-threatening event did not occur (“I don’t believe there was any attempt to cover up connections between key figures in my administration and the Watergate burglary.”), or that, if the event did occur, that he or she was in no way causally linked to it. (“If there was a so-called cover up, I certainly knew nothing of it.”) Unfortunately—at least for perpetrators of predicaments—the defense of innocence is often not credible and therefore likely to be ineffective. To return to the predicament that John faced in the forced compliance experiment, he can hardly deny having delivered the antitoothbrushing speech if he did so in front of several witnesses.

People, can, however, turn to more sophisticated attributional defenses. The best known of these are justifications and excuses. Justifications are explanations in which individuals accept responsibility for their conduct, but deny that the act in question provides grounds for ascribing negative traits or characteristics to them. (See Schonbach, 1980; Tedeschi & Riess, 1981, for detailed taxonomies of justifications.) Usually, justifications refer to some salient norm or standard (e.g., self-defense, equity, equality, reciprocity, honesty) that is widely shared in the culture and that explains the conduct in question so as to minimize its negative connotations. Examples of justifications abound in political discourse. Indeed, dispassionate observers often feel politicians “overjustify” or engage in “belief system overkill” (Jervis, 1976). It is not enough to say that, “On balance, my policy is better than my opponent’s policy”; many politicians insist (publicly and sometimes privately) that their policy is superior to rival policies in all possible respects: “Not only will my policy save the world from nuclear war, it will reduce defense spending, increase international cooperation, and promote human rights abroad.” “Not only will my policy reduce taxes, it will eliminate government budget deficits and inefficiency, lower interest rates, cut unemployment and inflation, and stimulate productivity.” In the words of Merelman (1966, p. 559),

Most major political conflicts within any policy area can be seen as the attempt by partisans to attach the available legitimacy (justificatory) symbols to policies they advocate and to sever the relationship between these symbols and the policies of their opponents.

Social psychologists have studied justifications most intensely in the context of the forced-compliance paradigm. In these experiments, subjects often appear concerned with justifying their counterattitudinal behavior by shifting their attitudes in the direction of the behavior (e.g., our hypothetical subject John might assert that he really does doubt the wisdom of regular toothbrushing). Subjects are especially likely to engage in “justificatory attitude change” when (a) they believe they freely chose (or that others think they freely chose) to perform the counterattitudinal behavior, (b) they believe their counterattitudinal behavior will have negative consequences for themselves or others, (c) the negative consequences were—at least in hindsight—foreseeable (e.g., Calder, Ross, & Insko, 1973; Collins & Hoyt, 1972; Goethals, Cooper, & Nath, 1979; Schlenker, 1982; Wicklund & Brehm, 1976). Such results make good sense from a theoretical perspective that emphasizes the impact of personal and social identity needs on attributions. Subjects who feel personally or socially responsible for conduct with foreseeable, negative consequences have few options other than to try to justify their conduct—to argue that the behavior was “really not so bad after all.”

Excuses are another important attributional line of defense. Excuses are explanations in which individuals acknowledge that their conduct was somehow bad, wrong, or inappropriate, but attempt to minimize their personal responsibility or culpability for it. Excuses occur frequently in political discourse: “I have not been able to fulfill that campaign promise because I didn’t realize how badly my opponents had messed up the economy, because the Congress was uncooperative, and because several unforeseeable events occurred.”

The most infamous political excuses were, perhaps, those that Nazi war criminals offered to explain why they organized or participated in mass murders of millions of Jewish and other European civilians. The standard excuse was, “I was just obeying orders.” Individuals attempted to deflect blame by denying that they were “free agents” and depicting themselves as mere cogs in a complex social machine. Many more everyday examples exist of people offering excuses to dissociate themselves from identity-threatening events. According to both self-esteem and impression management interpretations of attitude shifts in forced compliance experiments, subjects feel little need to justify their counterattitudinal behavior (via attitude change) when they have had little or no choice about performing the behavior. This is because subjects in the “low choice” condition can plausibly deny responsibility for the counterattitudinal act (i.e., offer an excuse). Subjects who appear to have freely chosen to perform the counterattitudinal act do not have a plausible excuse and must therefore justify their behavior. Subjects also frequently try to excuse poor performance on ability-demanding tasks (Bradley, 1978; Darley & Goethals, 1980; Zuckerman, 1979). These excuses take diverse forms: “The task was too difficult,” “I was too
tired to give the task my full attention and effort," "I am feeling 'under the weather,'" "I was distracted by family problems," and "I was just plain unlucky" (Darley & Goethals, 1980). They appear well designed to forestall or prevent attributions of lack of ability.

All of the attributional tactics considered up to this point—protests of innocence, justifications, excuses—are defensive attempts to minimize damage to one's personal or social identity. Intuitive politicians are not, however, always on the defensive. They may also use attributions "offensively" by offering identity-enhancing explanations for positive events and behavior (Schlenker, 1982). Thus, people try not only to de-emphasize their responsibility for negative events (excuses), but also to emphasize their responsibility for positive events (entitlements). Similarly, people try not only to minimize the negative implications of undesirable events linked to them (justifications), but to maximize the positive implications of desirable events linked to them (enhancements). Political debates often focus on entitlement and enhancement claims. Politicians in power stress their role in bringing about positive events (e.g., the end of wars, improvements in the national economy) as well as the importance and significance of these accomplishments ("Let's consider the wonderful consequences that flow from my having solved this problem"). Politicians in opposition attempt to refute these claims. Entitlement and enhancement claims also occur with some frequency in everyday life (e.g., "I volunteered to help this charitable cause because I thought it the right thing to do—not because of social pressure—and because I get a lot of satisfaction out of giving happiness to desperate and needy persons").

In sum, people have invented an impressive array of attributional tactics to protect or promote their claims to desired personal or social identities. I have only sketched the surface of this complex topic. It is not enough, though, simply to say that people are inventive intuitive politicians. We need to know what criteria or decision rules people employ in selecting attributional tactics to achieve personal or social identity objectives.

Our understanding of how people choose attributional tactics is highly incomplete. We do know, though, that one important constraint on the selection process is the plausibility of the explanation or attribution advanced for behavior. If people are to use attributions effectively in achieving identity goals, they should not offer attributions that are implausible or incredible to the target audience. There are many ways in which attributions can be implausible. One requirement is that an attribution should be consistent with widely accepted cultural assumptions concerning the causes of behavior (what C. Wright Mills termed the prevailing "vocabulary of motives" in a culture). An explanation that is plausible in one societal or historical context (e.g., witchcraft, demonic possession) may be mocked in other societal or historical contexts. A second requirement is that an attribution should be consistent with available information on the social situation in which the behavior in question occurred. Who was involved in the incident? What types of people are they? What circumstances exist that mitigate or exacerbate the severity of the predicament? For instance, a student may be tempted to attribute her poor performance on an exam to the unfairness of the exam and to the ineptitude of the instructor. The plausibility of this explanation may, however, be undercut by the large number of other students who performed well on the exam. In Kelley's (1967) terms, consensus information points to a dispositional, not a situational, cause of the student's poor performance. Or, consider another example. A husband attributes his failure to help with household chores to the particularly stressful demands that his job has recently placed on him. The plausibility of this explanation is, however, undercut by his unwillingness to help with chores at virtually all other times and on virtually all other occasions in his relationship with his wife. Again in Kelley's (1967) terms, consistency and distinctiveness information point to a dispositional, not a situational cause.

This discussion highlights an important connection between the intuitive-scientist and intuitive-politician research programs. The intuitive-scientist program focuses exclusively on the cognitive processes by which people assess the plausibility of possible explanations and interpretations of behavior. The intuitive-politician program begins, in a sense, where the intuitive-scientist program ends. People use attributions to protect and reinforce their claims to desired personal or social identities, within plausibility or cognitive constraints. In a nutshell, the key distinction between the two research programs seems to boil down to whether people seek only plausible explanations for behavior (intuitive scientists whose objective is causal understanding) or seek both plausible and identity-satisfying explanations for behavior (intuitive politicians whose objective is to lay credible claim to desired personal or social identities).

A largely unmet challenge for the intuitive-politician research program is to clarify how people cope with the tension between the conflicting goals of explaining conduct in both plausible and identity-satisfying ways. Schlenker (1980) has offered an interesting expectancy-value analysis of this issue. He proposes that people choose attributional tactics that they believe will 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 attributions and the likelihood of the explanation being accepted by a salient audience (self included). For instance, consider again the example of a student—call her Mary—who feels a need to explain her poor performance on an exam. The most self-flattering explanation might be to attribute her failure to the unfairness of the exam and the ineptitude of the instructor. If believed, Mary would be totally successful in protecting her social identity as both intelligent and hardworking. Let's assume Mary rates these consequences highly positively (+3 on a -3 to +3 scale). However, the probability (P) of the explanation being accepted is rather low (say, only .20). Moreover, the social consequences of the explanation being rejected (an event with probability .80) are very unpleasant. Others will view Mary as defensive, brittle, and immature. Let's assume Mary rates these consequences highly negatively (-3 on a +3 to -3 scale). According to Schlenker's model, the expected value (EV) of the account can be computed using the following formula:
EV = (probability that identity claim is accepted) (desirability of consequences of acceptance) + (probability that identity claim is rejected) (undesirability of consequences of rejection) 

In this case, EV = (.2)(3) + (.8)(-3) = -1.8.

The expected value of advancing a highly favorable, but implausible, identity claim is quite negative. The expected value of advancing a more plausible, but self-critical, explanation may well be substantially higher. (E.g., “I have been having family problems and had trouble concentrating; I just couldn’t get motivated to study.”)

Schlenker’s model leads us to expect that people will offer largely self-flattering explanations when they perceive little or no danger of such explanations being rejected. However, people will become more self-critical when they have reason to suspect that others will not honor or accept self-flattering attributions. A substantial amount of evidence appears consistent with this hypothesis. For instance, a number of personality and situational variables play a role in determining how self-critical or counterdefensive people become in a given context. Thus, persons with low self-esteem (who presumably view self-critical explanations as more plausible than self-flattering ones) tend to attribute their failures on experimental tasks to lack of ability (Fitch, 1970) and to deny credit for success (Maracek & Mettee, 1972). Persons high in social anxiety (who presumably are especially concerned with loss of social approval and rejection) are prone to be self-critical, especially when they believe that their task performance and the explanations they advance for it will be scrutinized and evaluated by a high-status audience (Arkin, Appelman, & Burger, 1980). Situational factors also exert an important influence. Thus, persons offer more self-critical explanations for performance on ability-demanding tasks when they believe they will be subjected to further testing (Wortman, Costanzo, & Witt, 1973) or that the attributions they make for their performance may be invalidated by others’ present or future assessments of the same performance (Beckman, 1973; Bradley, 1978; Feather & Simon, 1971; Ross, Bierbrauer, & Polly, 1974).

Overall, Schlenker’s expectancy-value model of how people choose attributional tactics depicts people as highly rational, intuitive politicians who carefully assess the relative plausibility and favorableness of possible explanations and then advance the explanation with the largest expected value. Sometimes this explanation will be self-flattering; sometimes it will be self-critical. The validity of the expectancy-value model is still, however, to be established. The model may, for example, exaggerate the rationality of the tactic selection process. People may rely on simple “satisficing” rules (offer the first explanation that comes to mind, that is believable, and that is at least minimally compatible with personal- and social-identity objectives). There may also be personality and situational variations in the importance or emphasis people place on different components for calculating the expected value of an attribution. Some people may be oblivious to the possibility that their attributional claims will be rejected; others may be obsessed with this possibility. Different types of situations may have the same effect. In some situations, we may never even think of the possibility of our claims being rejected; in other situations, we may be extremely self-conscious and concerned with rejection.

Are People Successful Intuitive Politicians?

The expectancy-value model of the intuitive politician asserts that people try to claim personal or social identities with the highest expected values. The model does not, however, assert that people are always successful. Do people typically select attributional tactics well designed to achieve important personal- or social-identity goals? Or, are people prone to certain characteristic errors and biases in selecting attributional tactics?

It is important to distinguish here between effectiveness in achieving personal-identity objectives (gaining the approval and respect of internalized audiences: “Most people whose opinion I value would approve of how I acted today”) and achieving social identity objectives (gaining the approval and respect of other individuals with whom one is currently dealing). Our understanding of how effective people are in using attributions to satisfy both motives is very limited. Moreover, what little evidence exists is relevant to impressing external, not internal audiences.

Results from early studies suggest that, by and large, people do a pretty good job at using attributions to protect and even enhance their images in the eyes of others. For instance, Tetlock (1981) focused on the social impact of the ordinary-language (as opposed to rating-scale) attributions that people offer for behavior. He adopted two approaches to assessing the social impact of attributions:

1 Measuring the degree to which the attribution, when taken at face value, is flattering to the person who performed the behavior—the identity-favorableness of the attribution. To illustrate this concept, consider the behavior “John does not help his wife with tedious household chores,” and the attribution that “this is because he has an extremely demanding job that completely exhausts him.” The attribution is identity-favorable to the extent that other people evaluate the actor (John) more positively when they believe the attribution is the true explanation for the actor’s behavior than they do when they are aware only of the behavior. In general, self-flattering attributions are identity-favorable; self-critical attributions are identity-ufavorable.

2 Measuring the actual impression that other people form of the actor when they know that the actor was the source of a particular attribution for his or her behavior—the impression management value of the attribution. It is not sufficient simply to claim to be a good or competent person; it is necessary to avoid sounding implausible, conceited, or defensive. In the context of the previous example, John’s attributing his failure to help his demanding job will have positive impression-management value to the extent that others evaluate
John more positively when they learn of his attribution than when they know of his behavior. Impression management value, in other words, is the source-discounted persuasive impact of attributions.4

To assess the identity-favorableness and the impression-management values of attributions, Tetlock asked a group of subjects to report events from their everyday lives in which they or acquaintances had behaved in desirable or undesirable (identity-threatening) ways. Subjects then explained their own or their acquaintances’ behavior under the expectation that their explanations would be completely confidential (creating only internal audiences) or topics for public discussion (creating both internal and external audiences). Another group of subjects was asked to explain their own behavior as if they were trying to create the most favorable possible impression on others. Finally, Tetlock instructed an independent group of observer subjects to form impressions of the subjects in the original sample. These observers had information about only the subjects’ behavior or about both the subjects’ behavior and the attributions the subjects expressed. Some observers were told to assume the explanations described the true causes of the behavior (to measure identity favorableness); others were told the explanations were offered by the person who performed the behavior (to measure the impression-management values of attributions).

The results were clear-cut. Subjects reported public attributions for their own behavior that were well-designed to create positive impressions on others. Subjects’ public attributions for their own behavior were significantly more self-flattering (as indicated by their higher identity-favorableness values) than their private attributions for their own behavior or for their private or public attributions for others’ behavior. However, subjects did not go “overboard” and offer implausibly self-serving public attributions. Subjects’ public attributions for their own behavior were significantly more effective than their private attributions in impressing others who were aware that the actor was the source of the explanation (as indicated by the impression-management values of attributions). Overall, the attributions that subjects publicly expressed for their own behavior most closely resembled those expressed by subjects who had been explicitly instructed to explain their behavior in order to impress others.

Tetlock also found that subjects in the public condition used attributions to protect those aspects of their social identities most directly threatened by the behavior they were called upon to explain. Thus, in explaining their worst performance in a course, subjects offered attributions that actually led others to think of them as more ambitious and intelligent (but not as more likeable, honest, or mature); in explaining dubious interpersonal acts (e.g., giving someone reason to be angry with you, falling to act in accord with principles), subjects offered attributions that led others to think of them as more likeable, honest, and mature (but not as more ambitious or intelligent). Attributions appeared targeted to eliminate threats to particular aspects of the identities that people sought to protect. All in all, the patterning of the evidence is highly suggestive: When people explained undesirable behavior in public (antecedent variables), they offered attributions that eliminated specific threats to their social identities (consequence variables).

One is not, however, always well-advised to offer self-serving identity-favorable) attributions for one’s behavior. Tetlock (1980) found that schoolteacher subjects in an experiment by Ross, Bierbrauer, & Polly (1974) created the best possible social identities for themselves by being self-critical or modest. In the original Ross et al. (1974) experiment, teachers were led to believe that they had been successful or unsuccessful in teaching a spelling lesson to an 11-year-old pupil in a special laboratory environment. Ross et al. then asked the teachers to rate the importance of several possible causes of their successful or unsuccessful performance. Some causes related to the student (e.g., ability, aptitude), others to the teacher (e.g., overall teaching ability, techniques and strategies employed). Teachers generally advanced self-critical attributions: They attributed primary (although not sole) causal responsibility for failure to themselves and primary (although, not sole) causal responsibility for success to the pupil. Tetlock (1980) constructed a simulation of the Ross et al. study in which he asked observers to form impressions of a hypothetical teacher who had been either successful or unsuccessful and who had offered either no explanation or one of four explanations that ranged from highly self-serving to highly self-critical. The explanations were scaled so that moderately self-critical attributions corresponded to the mean “importance of cause” ratings given by the actual teachers. Tetlock found that observers evaluated the moderately self-critical teacher more positively than any of the other types of teacher. This was true, moreover, on both social-moral traits or characteristics (likable, honest, mature) as well as achievement-related traits or characteristics (smart, dynamic). Moderate self-criticism was clearly the optimal social response in this situation. (See also Carlton & Shovar, 1983.)

The previous studies depict people as shrewd intuitive politicians who adroitly employ attributional tactics that protect or advance their claims to desired identities. Everyday experience suggests, though, that we are not that skillful and that we often misclassify how others will react to the attributions we express. As Scott and Lyman (1968) point out, the accounts people offer are not always “honored.” People may be as imperfect at being intuitive politicians as they are at being intuitive scientists—prone to numerous errors and biases. Indeed, many of our shortcomings as intuitive politicians may directly derive from our shortcomings as intuitive scientists. For instance, people may exagger-
ate how receptive observers are to “situational” attributions for their behavior. Social psychologists have known for some time that actors (persons behaving in specific ways) tend to explain their own behavior in situational terms, whereas observers tend to explain the same behavior in trait or dispositional terms (Jones & Nisbett, 1971). Since people tend to assume that others view events in much the same way as they do (the false consensus effect—Ross, Greene, & House, 1977), they may often be surprised to discover that others take a more “dispositional” perspective toward their conduct. Actors may also overestimate the willingness of observers to revise their initial opinions of actors’ behavior. Work on belief-perseverance effects on judgment suggests that people are often slow to revise their first impressions of events (Nisbett & Ross, 1980). If actors want to maximize the persuasive impact of their attributional claims, they should advance those claims before, rather than after, the target audience has an opportunity to judge their behavior (Jones, Riggs, & Quattrone, 1979; Zillmann & Cantor, 1976). Prebehavioral disclaimers (Hewitt & Stokes, 1975) may be much more effective than postbehavioral accounts.

How Sincere Are Intuitive Politicians?

For many, politicians are individuals who are willing to say almost anything in order to gain public support. To call people intuitive politicians is, in effect, to call them liars: to imply that people typically make attributional claims they themselves do not believe. No doubt, people do sometimes advance explanations that they do not fully believe to be true—or that they simply disbelieve. However, deliberate or self-conscious deception is neither a necessary nor an integral part of the intuitive-politician research program. There is no compelling psychological reason why people might not, under certain conditions, be completely convinced of the truthfulness of explanations that serve to support their claims to desired personal or social identities.

One distinction that many researchers implicitly or explicitly accept is that people need to believe attributions designed to protect their sense of self-worth (otherwise the attributions do not serve their “intended” motivational function), but people do not need to believe attributions designed to protect their public or social identities (we can offer explanations for conduct that impress others favorably, but that we do not really believe to be true). On its surface, this argument seems valid. Two important caveats do, however, need to be introduced. First, as Sackheim (1981) argues on the basis of considerable experimental evidence, people engage on occasion in self-deception and may not even believe all the claims they make to protect their self-images. People seem capable of simultaneously holding contradictory beliefs, but keeping one of the beliefs out of awareness. Second, people may sometimes sincerely believe attributions designed to protect their public images (Hass, 1981; Schlenker, 1980; Tedeschi & Riess, 1981; Weary & Arkin, 1981). Many factors promote internalization of opinions originally expressed simply to gain the approval of others. People are more likely to believe their attributional claims if the claims are plausible (Hass, 1981), if they receive social encouragement or reinforcement for the claims (Jones, Gergen, & Davis, 1962), and if they are in settings in which the social pressures for making the claims are subtle and low-key (Bem, 1972; Wicklund & Brehm, 1976).

The challenge is then to identify when intuitive politicians are being sincere or insincere. Tedeschi and his colleagues are responsible for the largest body of work on this topic. (For a review, see Tedeschi & Rosenfeld, 1981.) They have argued that the “justificatory attitude-change” effects observed in many forced-compliance experiments are not real. Subjects do not actually change their attitudes in the direction of their counterattitudinal behavior (e.g., subjects who freely choose to deliver antitoothbrushing speeches do not actually develop more antitoothbrushing attitudes). The attitude change reported in such studies is spurious: It represents an “uninternalized, temporary, feigned shift in attitudes that has the purpose of mending a spoiled social identity” (Tedeschi & Rosenfeld, 1981, p. 158). As support for this hypothesis, they point to the results of a series of “bogus-pipeline” experiments. In a typical bogus-pipeline experiment, some subjects are led to believe that the attitudes they express are being monitored by an extremely accurate lie detector (the bogus pipeline), whereas other subjects express their attitudes on traditional paper-and-pencil questionnaires. If subjects in forced-compliance studies are simply pretending to change their attitudes in order to be consistent with their behavior, they should be much less likely to do so when responding to the bogus pipeline (where they think there is a good chance of their deception being revealed) than when responding to paper-and-pencil questionnaires (where they think there is no danger of their deception being revealed).

The bogus-pipeline experiments suggest that attitude change effects in forced-compliance studies are “not real” (Gaes, Kalle, & Tedeschi, 1978; Malkis, Kalle, & Tedeschi, 1981). For instance, Gaes et al. (1978) induced subjects to write antitoothbrushing essays that would allegedly be read by impressionable junior high school students. The postbehavior attitudes of half of the subjects were assessed on standard paper-and-pencil attitude scales; the remaining half responded to the same attitude questions while connected to the bogus pipeline. Gaes et al. found that subjects shifted toward a more antitoothbrushing position only when they responded to the paper-and-pencil measures, not when they responded to the bogus pipeline. Gaes et al. also found that subjects in the paper-and-pencil condition only shifted their attitudes when they felt “publicly identified” with the antitoothbrushing speech, not when they felt their anonymity was guaranteed. In short, the data indicate that intuitive politicians in this study engaged in largely deceptive impression management aimed at external audiences.

Although the bogus-pipeline experiments suggest that some (many?) attitude-change effects observed in forced-compliance studies may not be “real,” they do not demonstrate that all such effects are feigned. Arkin (1981), Scheier and Carver (1980) and Schlenker (1982) have identified several problems with drawing strong theoretical conclusions from a research procedure as complex...
and potentially reactive as the bogus pipeline. It is, moreover, unclear how representative a portrait of the intuitive politician emerges from forced compliance studies. These studies create novel situations that may elicit unusually self-conscious tactics of impression management. More routine situations probably elicit more well-ingrained, habitual tactics (cf. Langer, 1978).

**Attributions and Deeds**

In discussing how people use attributions to achieve desired personal or social identities, I have treated the attribution process—the search for plausible and satisfying explanations for conduct—as something that occurs only after people have acted or committed themselves to act. First people behave, then they worry about constructing acceptable rationalizations for their conduct.

The intuitive-politician image of the average person suggests that the attributions people offer for behavior are more than afterthoughts. People—like politicians—may consider the justifiability or excusability of behavioral options before they commit themselves to action. The social necessity of defending one's conduct can serve as an important constraint on how people make behavioral decisions. In the words of C. Wright Mills (1940, p. 906):

> Often expectations of acceptable justifications 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.

This intimate relationship between attributional and behavioral decision making is probably most obvious in high-level policy making. As the political scientists Snyder, Bruck, & Sapin (1962) have observed: “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?’” Historical accounts of important decisions abound with references to policy makers assessing possible attributional lines of defense 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 (in this case, erroneously) they could assume the role of peacemaker. In Goldman’s (1971) words: “In a sense, the British searched for an acceptable justification. Having found one, actions were modified accordingly.”

Similarly, President Kennedy rejected direct American participation in the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba 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, which contributed to the failure of the mission.) Likewise, in the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, the Kennedy administration ruled out a surprise air strike on the missile silos in part because it felt it could not construct a compelling rationalization for such an air strike. Kennedy opted instead for the more defensible naval blockade of Cuba. These examples illustrate what Snyder, Bruck, & Sapin (1962, p. 183) call “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.”

Do ordinary people also try to calculate the defensibility of alternative courses of action before deciding how to behave? Although there is not a great deal of evidence, what evidence we have is certainly consistent with this hypothesis. Snyder, Kleck, Strenta, & Mentzer (1979) have provided perhaps the most convincing experimental support. They hypothesized that people generally desire to avoid the handicapped but are reluctant to admit it. People are willing to act on socially undesirable motives (e.g., avoiding the handicapped) only when they can plausibly argue that they had acted for some other reason. To test this idea, they had subjects make one of two different choices: (a) sitting next to a handicapped or a normal person and (b) choosing between two movies, one which required sitting next to a handicapped person, the other which required sitting next to a normal person. Only in the latter case, when avoidance of the handicapped person could be attributed to a movie preference, did subjects reveal their aversion to the handicapped.

Other, less direct, research support is also available. Many experimental manipulations that increase people’s willingness to perform socially undesirable acts may do so by increasing plausibility of “good accounts” for the behavior. For instance, it was easier for subjects in Milgram’s experiments on obedience to excuse their willingness to administer severe electric shocks if the experimenter explicitly accepted responsibility for the well-being of the individual receiving the shocks (Milgram, 1974). It is easier to excuse one’s failure to help in an emergency when one believes that many others are also in earshot of the emergency (Latané & Darley, 1970, on diffusion of responsibility). And it is easier to justify refusing to donate to charity if the individuals in need of help are somehow responsible for their own plight (Schwartz, 1977). Exploring the interrelationships between attributional and behavioral decision making is a promising area for future development within the intuitive-politician research program. It may also serve the valuable function of linking up otherwise isolated bodies of social-psychological theory on such topics as decision making, helping, obedience, and aggression.

**Where Will the Research Program Lead Us?**

I stated earlier that the intuitive-politician research program is still in an early stage of development. In previous sections, I have sketched only some of the major directions in which the program seems likely to develop as researchers pursue the theoretical implications of thinking about people as intuitive politicians. In concluding, I would like to speculate on what form a mature version of the research program might take.

One crucial issue is whether it is realistic to expect the emergence of theories of the intuitive politician that have substantial cross-cultural and historical generality. The skeptic might well argue that it is not. The types of personal and
social identities people strive to create, and the types of attributional strategies people use to protect or further those identities, may vary widely from one cultural-historical setting to another. Perhaps C. Wright Mills (1940) makes this point most effectively. When people leave groups and join new ones, they must learn new vocabularies of motives—rules for generating socially acceptable explanations of behavior. What serves as a plausible and identity-enhancing explanation in one group may make a highly negative impression on another group. In Mills' (1940) words:

Motives are of no value apart from the delimited societal situations for which they are appropriate vocabularies. They must be situated. . . . Motives vary in content and structure with historical epochs and social structures.

Must advocates of the intuitive-politician research program be content with simply documenting the vocabularies of motives that prevail in particular times and places? Is this branch of social psychology, like other branches, "merely" a form of social history? (Cf. Gergen, 1973.) I do not believe so. The generality of psychological theories across cultural-historical settings depends crucially on the level of abstraction of the theory (Triandis, 1978). "Low-level" or concrete theories of the intuitive politician—which specify particular attributional tactics people employ to create particular impressions on others—are not likely to hold up well across cultural-historical settings. For instance, the vast majority of "forced compliance experiments" have been performed on middle-class, twentieth-century, American college students. These subjects often try to justify their counterattitudinal behavior by changing their attitudes to be consistent with their behavior. It is by no means clear that other subject populations would respond to the predicament created by the forced compliance paradigm in the same way. Subjects from Thailand might experience no "identity threat" from acting in counterattitudinal ways at the request of a legitimate authority figure (Triandis, 1978). Subjects from other cultures might experience identity threat, but employ very different attributional tactics to resolve the predicament (e.g., by offering excuses for their conduct).

Higher-level or more abstract theories of the intuitive-politician have much less difficulty in assimilating data on cross-cultural and historical variability in behavior. Unfortunately, such theories do not, at this time, go much beyond specifying the underlying tactics and goals of intuitive politicians: People should explain their behavior in ways that are plausible and that protect their claims to desired personal or social identities. The first requirement, plausibility, is extremely general; it simply means that people should offer explanations consistent with the facts of the situation, with prevailing ideas concerning causality, and with rules of evidence and inference in the language community (Scott & Lyman, 1968). The proliferation of cognitive theories of attribution underscores the enormous variety of factors that affect plausibility judgments. The second requirement, effectiveness in protecting or furthering claims to personal or social identities, is equally general. As noted earlier, there is virtually no limit to the types of identities people may seek.

From this standpoint, universal processes do exist (processes that occur in some form in virtually all human communities). The universals are, however, extremely abstract and functional. People use attributions to achieve desired personal or social identities, and, if they are to do so successfully, they must select attributions that meet plausibility requirements. What vary are the identities people seek, and the acceptable attributional strategies for creating those identities.

Ultimately, it is crucial for the intuitive-politician research program to develop theoretical formulations that integrate highly abstract, cultural-general constructs and highly concrete, culture-specific ones. Both types of constructs, as Triandis (1978) notes, play a key role in advancing our understanding of social behavior. Highly abstract constructs (plausibility, and personal or social identity needs) apply to virtually all times and places. They can serve as anchors and provide guidelines for developing standard methods of operationalizing culture-specific constructs that do vary—sometimes dramatically—across time and space (e.g., What do particular individuals at a particular time regard as a plausible explanation for conduct? What types of personal or social identities do they seek?) The abstract constructs give theoretical coherence to what otherwise be isolated historical and anthropological facts. The specific constructs give empirical content to what would otherwise be vacuously abstract assertions about social life.

A very interesting example of the approach I am advocating here is V. L. Hamilton's (1983) cross-cultural work on attribution of responsibility. Her work focuses on how people assess the degree to which individuals should be held responsible (and hence punishable) for misdeeds. Psychologists who have studied this topic have emphasized individualistic determinants of responsibility judgments: What the actor did, what the consequences of the act were, and whether the act was intentional (Heider, 1958). Anthropologists and sociologists who have studied this topic have emphasized social context and role determinants of responsibility judgments: Given the actor's location in the social system, what do people think the actor should have done? Hamilton argued that an adequate universal model of how human beings judge wrongdoing must include deed, consequence, and intention variables, and role-expectation variables. In a well-designed cross-cultural study, she demonstrated that Japanese and American respondents use both types of information in assessing responsibility, although the Japanese were more sensitive to the actor's role position and to the social context of the act than were the Americans. Basically the same model applied to both cultures; however, the members of the two cultures placed different importance on certain variables in the model.

Hamilton's findings obviously have important implications for understanding how people use attributions to protect or further their claims to desired identities. Developing the best possible strategies of identity maintenance and enhancement requires an understanding of how members of the culture assess an individual's responsibility for conduct. In America, one may be well advised to focus on changing observers' perceptions of one's behavior or of one's inten-
tions. In Japan, one may be well advised to focus on changing observers’ perceptions of one’s role relationships to the other persons involved or observers’ perceptions of the social context in which the behavior occurred.

Concluding Remarks

In some respects, we all are intuitive scientists. In other respects, we all are intuitive politicians. Both the scientist and politician metaphors are examples of what McGuire (1983) has called guiding-idea theories: “Partial views of the person, each of which exploits the provocative implications of a selective depiction of human nature” (p. 25). Social psychologists can advance their understanding of the attribution process by exploring the research implications of both images of human nature. Highly specialized realms of human activity such as science and politics serve to magnify and reveal basic truths about ourselves. However, there is a serious price to be paid by adopting this strategy of theory construction. We may come to believe too literally in the underlying assumptions on which we have based our theories. We may attempt to squeeze too much of reality into the Procrustean bed of hard-core assumptions that give direction and purpose to our research efforts (Feyerabend, 1970).

Of course, the difficult question is, “How much is too much?” How can one tell whether one has pushed a particular research program too far? Unfortunately, there are no clear guidelines for assessing where the explanatory “ranges of convenience” (Kelly, 1955) of the intuitive scientist and politician research programs begin and end. As I have argued, each program sensitizes us to very different sets of issues and questions. Each program also possesses enormous flexibility in accounting for new data. One of the greatest theoretical challenges confronting us is the integration of these partly complementary, partly contradictory ways of looking at attribution processes.

REFERENCES


4 should add here that the politician metaphor is by no means the only alternative to the scientist metaphor. Social psychologists have also noted the similarities between the lay attributor and the lawyer (Fincham & Jaspar, 1980; Hamilton, 1980) and the stage actor (Brissett & Edgley, 1975; Scott & Lyman, 1968). These perspectives have a good deal in common with the politician metaphor. All emphasize the social functions and consequences of attributions. They differ primarily in emphasis and in tone. For instance, the stage-actor metaphor implies that behavior is very much under the control of well-defined roles, and it also leaves little room for internalized standards to constrain the types of social identities people claim, or the types of tactics people use to claim those identities. The politician metaphor—some stereotypes notwithstanding—implies a more intricate interplay between personal standards and external pressures in shaping social-identity goals and tactics. Perhaps most important, though, the politician metaphor serves to highlight important continuities between the attribution process as it is observed in the laboratory and in the “real world” of conflicting social, economic, and moral values.


