The Psychology of Legitimacy

Emerging Perspectives on Ideology, Justice, and Intergroup Relations

Edited by

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For my father, Lawrence J. Jost,
        my first and best teacher, a truly legitimate authority figure,
        and a strong voice for the cause of justice.

                                    J.T.J.

For my parents, Bertram and Avonelle Major,
        with love and thanks.

                                    B.N.M.

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5   Blame It on the Group

Entitativity, Subjective Essentialism, and Social Attribution

Vincent Yzerbyt and Anouk Rogier

When the crew members of the Starship *Enterprise* first encountered the Borg, it did not take them long to realize that they were not facing yet another humanoid lifeform. Captain Jean-Luc Picard and his crew quickly understood that the Borg were different from everything they had seen before. The mechanical voice uttering "We are Borg" made it clear that this civilization was totally alien to the notion of person. It was made explicit that the Borg were one and many at the same time. Every single individual was simultaneously a summary and a part of the entire community. Every "designation" was simply another version of the larger whole, the "collective." What looked like separated bodies could not be mistaken to represent individuals as humans know them, that is, bounded entities with their unique qualities, needs, and aspirations. For once, the finest representatives of the United Federation of Planets saw the universality of the individual identity challenged in a fundamental way. The group was *the* level of organization. And precisely because of this extreme form of collective identity, the Borg constituted the ultimate threat for the Federation!

What could be the connection between the Borg and the title of this chapter? How does the well-known science-fiction series *Star Trek: The Next Generation* inform us about stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination? More importantly, what is the lesson to be learned regarding the psychology of legitimacy? We will argue that this example teaches us quite a bit. Although the television series was aired at a time of relative political correctness, it is replete with stereotypic material about the Klingons, the Ferengi, and a half dozen other species frequently encountered in this quadrant of the universe. The Borg, more than any other aliens imagined by the creators of the *Star Trek* series, offer a fascinating illustration of a much-neglected aspect of the phenomenology of social perceivers: the temptation to invoke the *group* to explain the observed behavior of individ-

ual actors. In this chapter, we propose that social perceivers are often tempted to account for what they see by invoking people's group memberships, roles, or other social qualities. In other words, one way to make sense of the various events taking place in the environment may be to resort to deep features thought to be shared by the different actors as an explanatory factor for their behavior. By doing so, we argue, social perceivers may deem legitimate the particular social arrangement.

Because it provides a perfect mix of science fiction and a thorough examination of the issue of legitimacy, a study by Hoffman and Hurst (1990, Experiment 1) deserves special mention. These authors gave their participants descriptions of a series of members of two fictional categories living on a distant planet, the Ackmians and the Orinthians, one group consisting of a majority of "cityworkers" and a minority of "childraisers," and vice versa. Importantly, the members of the two groups did not differ in personality traits. The goal of the study was to show that gender stereotypes may well arise in order to justify the differences in social roles (men are more likely to be breadwinners and women homemakers). This hypothesis was supported. In other words, the strict equivalence of the individual profiles did not prevent participants from forming role-based category stereotypes. A series of additional manipulations further revealed that the effects were especially strong when the categories were biologically defined and when the participants had to think of an explanation for the category-role correlation. That is, perceivers' a priori theories and their goals seem to have jointly contributed to the emergence of stereotypic judgments.

From our point of view, Hoffman and Hurst's (1990) data are particularly telling because they indicate that stereotypes are generated via a process linking the traits that are derived from role constraints (e.g., "being assertive") to deep features of a group (e.g., "being a member of whatever group is comprised more of breadwinners than homemakers"). In drawing upon the dispositional yet socially shared characteristics of the targets, perceivers' inferences and behaviors are given a sense of legitimacy. In line with our subjective essentialistic view of stereotypes (Yzerbyt, Rocher, & Schadron, 1997), we argue that the belief that people's lots stem from their nature as members of groups, and from the deep underlying features of those groups, goes a long way toward establishing the validity of existing arrangements. In this chapter, we refer to *social attribution* as the device by which perceivers connect observable behaviors of target persons to their group memberships (Deschamps, 1973–1974; Oakes, Turner, & Haslam, 1991; Rogier & Yzerbyt, 1999; Yzerbyt, Rogier, & Fiske, 1998). We also contend that social attribution is especially likely to be at work when

perceivers believe that they are confronted with a clear social *entity*, a coherent whole. To the extent that the perception of a group as being an entity is not at all a rare set of circumstances, it is our contention that social attribution is of paramount importance for the rationalization and justification function of stereotypes.

Over the last few years, there has been a resurgence of interest in the justification and rationalization functions of stereotypes (Eberhardt & Randall, 1997; Goodwin, Gubin, Fiske, & Yzerbyt, 2000; Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost, Burgess, & Mosso, this volume; Sidanius & Pratto, 1993; Sidanius, Levin, Federico, & Pratto, this volume; Yzerbyt, Rocher, & Schadron, 1997). For instance, Eberhardt and Randall (1997) argued that there is a relationship between the construction of race and its function. For these authors, the perception of black people as part of a different "race" obviously helps the dominant social category to maintain social power and cultural domination. This means that perceivers' tendency to rely on "essential" differences is linked to a desire to freeze the social structure as it stands. Again, social attribution and the resulting essentialistic stereotypic beliefs are seen to serve the legitimacy, and thereby the perpetuation, of the social system.

Social dominance theory, as it has been proposed by Sidanius, Pratto, and their colleagues (Levin, Sidanius, Rabinowitz, & Federico, 1998; Sidanius & Pratto, 1993; Sidanius et al., this volume) also refers to the rationalization and justification function of stereotypes. These authors hold that all social systems converge on the establishment of stable, group-based social hierarchies with some social groups at the bottom and others at the top. These group-based hierarchies would be pervasive partly because of their survival value. Group-based hierarchies are explained in terms of interpersonal and intergroup processes as well as individual characteristics. Among other things, the authors adopt an individual difference perspective and argue that people vary in their desire to establish and maintain anti-egalitarian and hierarchical relations between social groups (Social Dominance Orientation; see Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994). Although these premises are open to debate (Turner, 1999), a most attractive feature of social dominance theory remains its insistence on the role of stereotypes as legitimizing devices. Indeed, one purpose of stereotypes is to convince members of both dominant and subordinate groups of the inferiority of the subordinate group, thereby justifying the overall system of group hierarchy (Levin et al., 1998). To put it in the terms of social dominance theory, stereotypes can be seen as "legitimizing myths" that play a crucial role in helping to maintain the structural integrity of the hierarchy.

Clearly, this chapter on entitativity and social attribution fits well within

this context of renewing attention for the role of stereotypes as perpetuating devices. Indeed, the ambition of this chapter is to show that the emergence of social attribution in the presence of entitative groups greatly contributes to providing social observers with a sense of legitimacy of the existing social order (Jost et al., this volume). As we will see, our empirical demonstrations rest on the extension to the group level of classic findings in attribution theory. That is, the strategy we retained to tackle these issues is to turn traditional attribution paradigms into experiments about groups rather than individuals.

In a first section, we begin with a theoretical examination of lay dispositionism (Ross & Nisbett, 1991). We import this phenomenon in the domain of stereotyping by linking it to the notion of entitativity, a concept that has become increasingly popular in contemporary work on impression formation and person memory (Brewer & Harasty, 1996; Hamilton & Sherman, 1996; Hamilton, Sherman, & Lickel, 1998; Insko, Schopler, & Sedikides, 1998; Wilder & Simon, 1998; Yzerbyt, Castano, Leyens, & Paladino, 2000; Yzerbyt, Rocher, & Schadron, 1997; Yzerbyt & Schadron, 1996). We conclude that the degree of entitativity of social groups is likely to be a key determinant of social attribution.

In the second section, we review empirical evidence from our laboratory that points to the potential role of entitativity as a crucial triggering factor for social attribution to take place. We draw on earlier work revealing observers' tendency to incriminate stable dispositions of an actor and to neglect the impact of the situational constraints (Jones & Harris, 1967; Ross, 1977) and show that, compared to loosely defined groups and aggregates, close-knit groups and entities lead perceivers to make more polarized dispositional attributions. In other words, we provide evidence that observers confronted with coherent groups of people may well overestimate the influence of the social characteristics of the group members on the course of events and disregard the impact of the situational forces.

In the third section, we reevaluate the classic distinction between collectivist and individualistic cultures. We propose that the available research may have misrepresented the ways in which members from each of these two cultural backgrounds prefer to explain events and behaviors. Although the research literature may portray perceivers as less tempted by social attribution in individualistic than in collectivist cultures, we argue that this process is far from absent in Western societies. We dwell on the links between our research on social attribution with work on scapegoating theory, conspiracy theory, and the group attribution error. Finally, we relate our perspective with the research on biased intergroup attribution and the ultimate attribution error, both of which follow from Social

Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Spears, Jetten, & Doosje, this volume).

In the final section, we extend our analysis of the links between subjective essentialism and entitativity. We argue that the belief in a shared essence is not only a direct consequence of the perception of entitativity, but it can also be a key factor in the very emergence of perceived entitativity. We relate our findings in the attributional domain to work in the area of personality differences and recent research of our own on intergroup relations. Turning to some of the potential consequences of entitativity, we propose to consider alternative expressions of subjective essentialism, such as the ascription of agency to the groups and the impact on social identification.

From Person to Social Attribution

Attribution research suggests that perceivers make a major distinction between person factors on the one hand and situational factors on the other (e.g., Gilbert, 1998; Jones & Davis, 1965). In general, personal causes constitute an acceptable form of explanation. Indeed, actors are thought to be stable and enduring causes for the observed events. In sharp contrast, situational factors are deemed less stable as they affect behavior only temporarily. Compared to the subjective fluidity of the context, the personal cause affords more control and predictability. Indeed, a most robust phenomenon in attribution research is lay dispositionism (Ross & Nisbett, 1991). Lay dispositionism refers to a number of inferential practices, such as viewing behavior, as reflecting the correspondent disposition, believing that behavior can be predicted from knowledge of the relevant trait and expecting high behavioral consistency across situations. Clearly, people's tendencies to explain observed behavior by invoking dispositional causes when they normally should take into account the impact of situational pressures has attracted the most attention. Over the years, this pervasive tendency has been given many labels such as the "fundamental attribution error" or "FAE" (Ross, 1977), the "overattribution bias" (Jones, 1979; Quattrone, 1982), and "the correspondence bias" (Snyder & Jones, 1974). Explanations for this bias come in several kinds, but the various accounts can be distinguished depending on whether the focus is on the "how" or the "why" question.

Within the "how" strand of research, the general story is that people commit the bias because they generally start by referring to a trait in order to explain the behavior of an actor and then lack the motivation or cognitive resources to consider alternative causal factors and correct their initial

inference (for a review, see Leyens, Yzerbyt, & Schadron, 1994). The majority of authors consider that an attribution to the actor really is the default option (for a review of contemporary models, see Gilbert, 1998). For example, Gilbert, Pelham, and Krull (1988) echo Jones' (1979) anchoring and adjustment interpretation, and they argue that observers first *categorize* the behavior in terms of a personality trait, then *characterize* the target person in terms of the trait, and then make *corrections* to their inference by considering potential extraneous influences (see also Trope, 1986).

Rather than concentrating on intraindividual constraints, the "why" perspective generally refers to normative and cultural factors. For instance, a series of studies point at conversational rules and pressures from the experimenter as key factors in the emergence of the dispositional bias (Corneille, Leyens, Yzerbyt, & Walther, 1999; Leyens, Yzerbyt, & Corneille, 1996; Miller, Schmidt, Meyer, & Collela, 1984; Wright & Wells, 1988). In a neat study, Wright and Wells (1988) showed that the bias was substantially reduced when people were informed that, for reasons of methodological counterbalancing, the attitudinal questions may not match the pieces of information given to them. This finding suggests that the standard attitude attribution paradigm has participants rely on the constraint information because they see it as relevant information provided to them by the experimenter. Questioning the relevance of the information allows participants to break free and avoid the bias. Other work suggests that social desirability and social norms play a constitutive role as well (Dubois, 1994; Jellison & Green, 1981). In line with early insights by Ichheiser (1943), still other studies point at perceivers' cultural background and ideologies as a potential contributor (Choi & Nisbett, 1998; Fletcher & Ward, 1988; Lee, Hallahan, & Herzog, 1996; Miller, 1984; Newman, 1993; Shweder & Bourne, 1984). The major asset of the "why" approach is to stress the strategic and ideological dimensions of the FAE. Although the relevance of this viewpoint is obvious, we will defer our discussion of these aspects to the third section of this chapter.

One difficulty with the much-celebrated dichotomy between the person and the situation in classic attribution theory is that it is frequently equated with the distinction between internal and external factors as proposed by Heider (1958; but see Weiner, 1985). In his thoughtful analysis of the naive scientist, Heider indeed stressed the idea that social perceivers were keen to attribute events to stable causes (see Crandall & Beasley, this volume). But although Heider acknowledged the fact that the person stands as a salient causal factor, he also made clear that stable aspects of the environment would work just as well (Gilbert, 1998). As it happens, this line of argument allowed Kelley (1972, 1973) to propose his famous

called the "entity") represented a viable cause of the behavior. If one accepts the idea that the individual person is not the only stable cause that perceivers can invoke, is it possible that group memberships and social roles are other candidates? Our answer to this important question is affirmative.

When people refer to personal causes, they have traits and personality characteristics in mind. That is, the observed event took place because something in the person made it happen. For instance, if an immigrant takes part in a violent demonstration, it is because he is aggressive. The attribution literature reveals that personality traits, intentions, plans, and so forth are undoubtedly seen as the main culprit in people's quest for a true cause. In other words, social perceivers act as essentialists (i.e., they tend to seek the cause of behavior in the essence of people). To the extent that observers have been able to identify a "true" feature of the actor, subsequent behavior would seem to be legitimized. For instance, if the immigrant is inherently aggressive, then I have every reason to want him to be expelled from my country. If one wishes to build a case in favor of *social attribution* as being distinct from the more common *person attribution*, one should accept the possibility that observers evoke the essence of a group to explain the behavior of group members. This group essence would not only be something common to all group members, but it would also be seen as an underlying feature that binds together the surface attributes displayed by its members. Sticking to our example, immigrants take part in violent demonstrations more often than our fellow countrypeople because they are more aggressive than we are. Aggressiveness is what comes with being an immigrant. As it turns out, quite a few researchers have alluded to the existence of precisely this kind of social attribution process. For instance, Sherif (1948) referred to the

substantive mode of mentality, the tendency to account for or describe events (social and otherwise) in terms of the "essence" of things instead of in terms of related processes. The great mass of bourgeois respectability shows a tendency to deal with human and social events in terms of an eternal "human nature," qualities inherent in this or in that group. . . . This unscientific substantive mentality is clearly indicated in the . . . attitudes concerning masculine and feminine characteristics. In spite of the facts that the masculine and feminine roles and statuses have actually undergone considerable changes in the United States since the Revolution, the prevailing conceptions of men and women are held to be *inherent*, immutable qualities of the sexes. (p. 361; emphasis in original)

Sherif's critique of the "substantive mode of mentality" is highly reminiscent of Lewin's (1948) analysis of Aristotelian versus Galilean modes of

at the expense of a more fruitful consideration of relational properties. In fact, the most respected thinkers in the areas of stereotyping and intergroup relations (Allport, 1954; Sherif, 1966; Tajfel, 1981) all alluded to the notion that observers are often tempted to invoke underlying group features when they explain group behavior. Unfortunately, despite the obvious awareness that people act as essentialists when it comes to appraising groups of people, researchers have not given the phenomenon much scientific consideration. It seems that a thorough understanding of stereotyping and discrimination requires us to investigate the determinants of perceivers' reification tendencies in the social domain.

According to subjective essentialism (Yzerbyt, Rocher, & Schadron, 1997; Yzerbyt, Rogier, & Rocher, 1998), the emergence of an essentialistic stance toward a given set of people is greatly influenced by perceptual factors. Specifically, the degree to which a group is perceived to be an entity, a coherent whole, or an organized unit influences observers' willingness to infer the presence of essential group characteristics. But what makes a group an entity? When does a group cease to be a bunch of people with little or no apparent coherence and become an entitative whole? Four decades ago, Campbell (1958) defined entitativity as the degree to which a group has the nature of an entity, of a "real" thing. An entitative group is thus somehow a group that seems to exist more than a non-entitative group. According to Campbell (1958), several perceptual features contribute to the perception of an aggregate as being an entity. As we see them, these factors form two distinctive clusters (see also Lickel et al., 2000). The first "similarity" cluster includes proximity, boundedness and, of course, similarity. These various features are typically assumed by research on intergroup relations (Brewer & Brown, 1998). A second cluster centers around the issue of "organization" and comprises factors such as organization, structure, and common fate, and these different aspects are generally the focus of small group research (Levine & Moreland, 1995).

Recent work on the concept of entitativity suggests that the extent to which a group is perceived as a coherent whole has an impact on information processing and thus impression formation (Hamilton & Sherman, 1996). According to Hamilton, Sherman, and Maddox (1998), entitative groups, just as (entitative) individuals, induce integrative information processing characterized by on-line judgments, organization of information during encoding, and resolution of inconsistencies upon encountering information. In sharp contrast, non-entitative groups trigger retrospective information processing characterized by memory-based judgments, organization of information during retrieval, and little concern for inconsis-

tency resolution. Importantly, the crucial parameter is not the actual nature of the target (individual or group) but the perception of entitativity (see also Coovert & Reeder, 1990). The perception of groupness has been found to influence other phenomena in addition to impression formation. For instance, the degree of competition (Insko & Schopler, 1987) and the level of ethnocentrism (Brewer, Weber, & Carini, 1995; Vanbeselaere, 1991; Wilder, 1986) also seem highly sensitive to the entitativity of the group. Thus, the impact of perceptual factors is far from trivial. When a set of individuals comes across as being a coherent, consistent, organized, entitative whole, perceivers seem to switch to a different mode of processing, one that very much resembles the way in which people deal with individual targets.

An obvious extension of the above research endeavors is that attributional work in general, and the reference to essential characteristics of the actors in general, may well be facilitated when perceivers are confronted with an entitative group. As is the case for individual targets, entitative groups give rise to the belief in an underlying essence along with the use of traits and personality characteristics as the critical unit of analysis. To the extent that perceivers may take for granted the existence of underlying features common to all group members (i.e., the essence of the group), they may well account for the existing state of affairs by evoking causes that lay within the members of the groups. In other words, the existing social order is thought to emerge from the nature of the people who are present. The dividends in terms of perceived legitimacy are fairly evident. The next section examines empirical support for the contention that, compared to loose aggregates, entitative groups may facilitate the emergence of subjective essentialism and encourage perceivers to make dispositional inferences, which presumably serve to legitimize the status quo.

Overlooking the Situational Constraints

In the first section, we concluded that the perception of group entitativity is likely to facilitate the emergence of subjective essentialism in general and social attribution in particular. In other words, perceivers should disregard the situational constraints impinging on people and favor dispositional explanations more when they face an entitative group of people than when they are confronted with a simple aggregate. To investigate this issue, we decided to rely on a well-established demonstration of the fundamental attribution error (Ross, 1977), namely the quiz game paradigm inaugurated by Ross, Amabile, and Steinmetz (1977). According to that paradigm, three participants come to the laboratory and learn that they

are going to take part in a quiz. The experimenter then randomly assigns one participant to the role of questioner, one to the role of answerer, and one to the role of observer. After a short period of time during which the questioner is asked to come up with a series of questions, the game takes place. At the end of the game, all three participants rate the intelligence and knowledge of both the questioner and the answerer. A clear FAE pattern of findings emerges in the ratings made by the answerer and the observer, such that both evaluate the questioner as being more intelligent and knowledgeable than the answerer. Apparently, the questioner seems to be the only one who is aware of the obvious advantage associated with the task of asking questions.

We adapted the quiz game paradigm to a group situation (Yzerbyt, Rogier, & Fiske, 1998). Groups of at least seven students were called into the laboratory in order to take part in a quiz game in which two teams of three people were opposed. Assignment to the team of questioners, the team of answerers and the role of observer was made on an explicitly random basis. The study was carried out at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. This allowed us to take advantage of the proximity of several other colleges for our manipulation of entitativity. The participants believed that the students in their session belonged to one of several institutions. In reality, they all came from the University of Massachusetts. Whereas some students learned that the group of questioners all came from the same school so that they constituted an entity, others were informed that they came from three different institutions so that they formed an aggregate. Similarly, whereas half of the participants learned that the group of answerers comprised students from the same school, the remaining participants were informed that they came from three different schools. The participants then played the game for approximately 10 minutes. Questions about sports and entertainment were selected, because pilot research had revealed that there were no stereotypes linking these topics to the various institutions. At the end of the game, we collected observers' ratings regarding the competence and the general knowledge of the questioners and the answerers, both individually and as groups. We hypothesized that, overall, observers would see questioners as being more competent than answerers. Moreover, we predicted that the effect would be more pronounced as a function of the entitativity of these groups. Finally, we expected the effect to emerge not only for the group ratings but also for the individual ratings, thereby confirming that each target person is indeed perceived differently depending on the degree of entitativity of his or her group.

To examine the viability of our hypotheses, we computed the difference
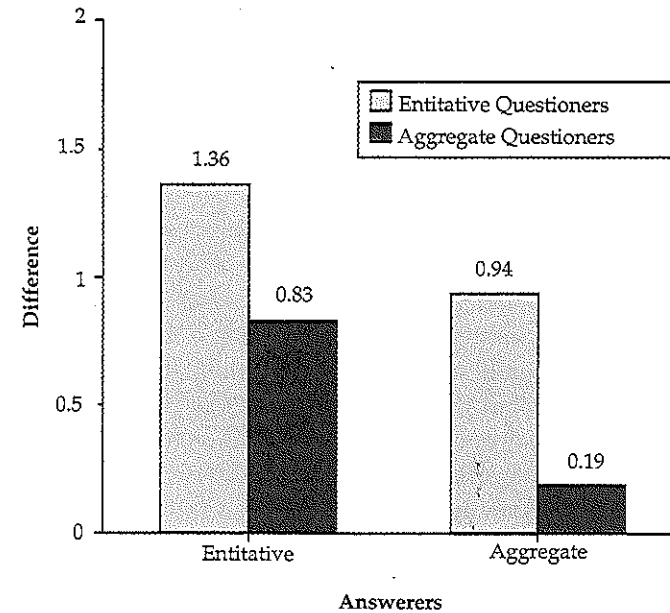
Figure 5.1. Difference in knowledge and competence between questioners and answerers as a function of the entitativity of the answerers and the entitativity of the questioners

of the average ratings of the individual questioners and the individual answerers (see Figure 5.1). Our data confirmed the presence of a global FAE. In other words, questioners were generally rated to be superior than answerers. However, the difference between the two categories of participants was not constant across conditions. In line with our prediction that entitativity would affect the emergence of the FAE, the difference between the two groups was largest when they both formed an entity, lowest when the two groups were aggregates, and intermediate when one group was an entity and the other an aggregate.*

Classic attribution theory in general and Kelley's (1972, 1973) ANOVA model in particular suggest that perceivers are reluctant to attribute a behavior to personal characteristics when the behavior is highly consensual. In the present case, the fact that different participants behaved simi-

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* We also wanted to gather more precise information about the absolute evaluations of the two groups. Examination of these ratings confirmed that the questioners were perceived to be rather competent and the answerers rather incompetent. As expected, the questioners were judged to be more competent when the observers thought that they constituted an entity than when they formed an aggregate. Even more striking are the results for the answerers. Observers perceived answerers to be much less competent when they were presented as an entity than when they formed an aggregate.

larly should disqualify the actor as a viable causal factor. In other words, the existence of a strong consensus implies that the behavior must be accounted for by aspects of the stimulus or the situation. Our data suggest that similar behavior observed within entities leads to different social inferences than similar behavior observed within aggregates. But then why does consensus observed among members of entitative groups trigger a strong dispositional attribution that leads to the emergence of an FAE? From our subjective essentialistic perspective and the Borg analogy, we propose that perceivers confronted with an entity no longer see the members of the group as distinct entities but rather as "replications" of the same person. Relying once again on Kelley's work, this state of affairs brings in a very different aspect of the ANOVA cube in that perceivers are no longer perceiving a high level of consensus among different individuals so much as perceiving strong consistency with regard to the "same" entity. Thanks to the presence of entitativity, social attribution can turn the metal of behavioral similarity into the gold of a deep disposition, which is the same for all group members.

Although our version of the quiz game paradigm illustrates the impact of entitativity on the emergence of social attribution, it seems important to know more about the underlying psychological processes. Indeed, do perceivers incriminate group members when they are confronted with a highly entitative group? A recent study of ours (Rogier & Yzerbyt, 1999) addresses this issue. We decided to run a group version of the classic attitude attribution study first carried out by Jones and Harris (1967). In the original study, participants were asked to guess the true attitude of the author of an essay about Fidel Castro that expressed either favorable or unfavorable views regarding the Cuban leader. Participants were informed that the author was either acting freely or assigned to take a particular stand. Although participants should refrain from taking the essay into account in ascribing attitudes when they learn about the presence of situational constraints, Jones and Harris (1967) and many others since have observed that participants generally overlook situational forces and persist in making dispositional attributions.

In our group version of the attitude attribution paradigm (Rogier & Yzerbyt, 1999), participants watch a video that portrays an experimenter with six students. The experimenter explains that he needs to collect many arguments about euthanasia. He then randomly assigns the six students to two groups of three. Whereas the first group of three students is asked to find arguments in favor of euthanasia, the second group is asked to come up with unfavorable arguments. The three students comprising the second group are always presented as coming from three different departments.
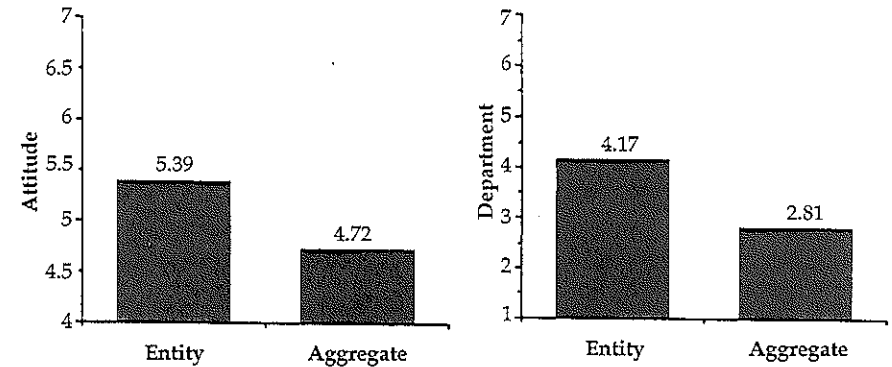
Figure 5.2. Perceived attitude (left) and role of the department (right) as a function of the entitativity of the group

The crucial experimental manipulation concerns the affiliation of the first group of students, who are presented either as coming from the same department or from three different departments. The video is stopped and participants are asked to answer a series of questions dealing with the perceived attitudes of the three members of the first group and with potential explanations for their behavior.

The data provided strong support for the hypotheses. Replicating our earlier findings, the FAE was much stronger when participants were confronted with an entitative group than when they were facing an aggregate of students expressing favorable arguments about euthanasia (see left side of Figure 5.2). Moreover, participants were much more confident about their inferences when they were presented with an entity rather than an aggregate. The real focus of the study concerned the extent to which participants thought that the department of origin had played a role in shaping the students' behavior. Compared to participants confronted with an aggregate, those facing an entity were significantly more likely to state that the department of affiliation had an impact on the opinion about euthanasia and to overestimate the number of students in that department who would share the same opinion, as predicted (see right side of Figure 5.2).

Together, the results of these two studies illustrate the fact that group membership may constitute a suitable causal factor in interpreting behavior. Moreover, our data confirm the importance of entitativity in the attribution process. When a group of people is perceived to be entitative, observers tend to interpret the members' behaviors more in terms of a dispositional feature than in terms of situational forces. As we have seen, this tendency to fall prey to the FAE takes the form of social attribution

because the explanation of the observed behavior is framed in terms of the underlying features shared by the members of the group. That is to say, deep characteristics seem to come along with being a member of the group and allow perceivers to account for the observed behaviors.

Social attribution is a powerful device because it locates the origin of behavior in the nature of individuals as group members. Going back to our earlier example, when people observe the aggressive behavior of an immigrant, they are quick to refer to the "inherent" characteristics of the group members rather than to an alternative factor, such as the living conditions of the group. This kind of explanation is extremely tempting for observers because it provides a means to explain the behavior of an impressive number of people at a minimal cost. Incidentally, the social arrangement that contributed to the behavior remains largely unquestioned. This brings us back to the debate with regard to the ideological foundations of social attribution (Ichheiser, 1943). The emergence of social attribution would probably not be of much consequence, were it not for the power of self-fulfilling prophecies (Darley & Fazio, 1980; Snyder, 1984; Snyder & Stukas, 1999). Research has demonstrated that a priori expectations are often perceptually confirmed, especially when social stereotypes are involved (e.g., Snyder, Tanke, & Berscheid, 1977; Word, Zanna, & Cooper, 1974). The next section examines the potential impact of the larger cultural context on the emergence of social attribution.

The Context of Social Attribution

During the last decade or more, an increasing number of researchers have distanced themselves from a purely cognitive account of dispositionism and stressed the contribution of a variety of conversational, normative, and cultural factors (Choi & Nisbett, 1998; Corneille et al., 1999; Ichheiser, 1943; Jellison & Green, 1981; Krull, 1993; Leyens et al., 1996; Miller, 1984; Miller et al., 1984; Quattrone, 1982; Wright & Wells, 1988). Building upon the growing interest in cross-cultural differences within social psychology (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1995), a number of authors have taken issue with the view that the dispositional bias is universal. Thanks to these research efforts, there now seems to be strong evidence that dispositionism is sensitive to cultural aspects (Choi & Nisbett, 1998; Miller, 1984). The general message emanating from this line of work is that people from Western cultures tend to make more person attributions, whereas people from Eastern cultures tend to make more situational attributions (Fletcher & Ward, 1988; Shweder & Bourne, 1984). Does this mean that Easterners are less likely to fall prey to social attribution? We don't think

so! To understand our position, we need to distinguish two different interpretations of a cultural perspective on dispositionism.

A first, *"differential process"* interpretation holds that Euro-Americans are more prone to call upon inherent characteristics of persons than Asians are, whereas Asians prove to be more sensitive to the transient influences of the situation on human behavior (Shweder & Bourne, 1984). In support of this view, Morris and Peng (1994) found that Chinese newspapers explained two mass-murder incidents in terms of situational factors surrounding the actor. In contrast, American newspapers stressed the dispositions of the persons (Lee et al., 1996). According to the differential process view, Asians are expected to be much less likely than Euro-Americans to display the FAE in a number of standard situations in which the dispositional bias has repeatedly been observed (Choi & Nisbett, 1998). Obviously, in light of our earlier discussion of Heider's theory, one potential danger of such a perspective is to promote the idea that Asians avoid referring to extensive and broad dispositions altogether and prefer to invoke circumstantial, context-specific, and non-general factors. In contrast, according to a second, *"differential content"* view, all humans have a fundamental tendency to search for stable causes. The observed difference between cultures resides in the fact that Asians tend to give priority to stable external (i.e., situational) causes in order to explain events, whereas Euro-Americans generally elect stable internal (i.e., personal) causes (Krull, 1993).

Our work on social attribution shares with the differential content view the assumption that social perceivers have a universal tendency to isolate stable causal factors in order to make sense of the surrounding world. However, the idea of social attribution goes one step further in that it stresses the social dimension as a distinctive causal factor. By social dimension, we refer both to social groups as entities and to individuals' group loyalties and duties. To the extent that the interdependence and social embededness of the actors are more "real" and their independence and autonomy are less "real" to Easterners than to Westerners (Chiu, Dweck, Tong, & Fu, 1997; Kashima, Siegal, Tanala, & Kashima, 1992), that is, to the extent that Easterners easily "see" the group behind an actor's behaviors, then Easterners are likely to make attributions to collective agents rather than to individual agents (Menon, Morris, Chiu, & Hong, 1999). In her classic study on attributional responses among North Americans and Indian Hindus of various age groups, Miller (1984) not only found that North Americans used an increasing number of person dispositions as they were growing older (a pattern not observed for Hindus), but also that older Hindus invoked social roles and relationships much more than

younger Hindus did (a finding that did not emerge for North Americans). Data such as these suggest that the crucial difference between Asians and Euro-Americans does not so much lie in the differential weight given by the members of these two cultures to the dispositions of either the actor or the situation but in people's differential ability to see the person or the group as an entity and, as a result, as the meaningful locus of causality. From our perspective, members of Western and Eastern cultures indeed differ in the kind of attributions that they make. But instead of the preferential reference to fluid aspects of the situation in comparison with fixed individual factors, what matters is the causal status of the individual as a self-contained entity versus the individual as member of a larger group or even the group itself.

The above discussion promotes the idea that the individual actor is much more salient in Western cultures than in Eastern cultures. Conversely, compared to independent cultures, interdependent cultures emphasize the role of the collective and social actor.* Note that we do not take this to argue that one group of cultures is more efficient than the other with respect to the legitimization of the existing social order. As the individual and social version of the quiz game paradigm make clear, both individual and social attributions contribute to freezing the existing social arrangement. In fact, we would simply like to stress the fact that Eastern cultures are no less likely to legitimize the social structure simply because the prevalence of individual attribution is less than in Western cultures. Moreover, the above opposition between Western and Eastern cultures refers only to a very general trend and there are many exceptions to be found in both cultures. For instance, a moment of introspection reveals that cases of group attribution are not rare at all, even in so-called independent cultures. Scapegoating, for one, is an obvious illustration of the fact that Westerners may also see groups as causal agents. Indeed, history is replete with examples of people reacting to a frustrating situation, such as the worsening of the economic conditions by blaming identifiable collec-

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* Ironically, the ongoing debate about the distinctive features characterizing the Western and the Eastern cultures (and we include the present discussion) may illustrate the strong tendency of social perceivers (and we are including social scientists) to rely on apparently meaningful category membership and reify observed social practices as expressions of essential characteristics of the members of the groups. Note, however, that we are not claiming that social attribution is always erroneous. As had been argued by self-categorization theorists (Oakes, Haslam, & Turner, 1994) and ourselves (Leyens, Yzerbyt, & Schadron, 1994), people quite often behave in terms of their group membership. The problem with social attribution emerges when perceivers overestimate the role of social characteristics as opposed to other factors. We discuss these aspects in more length in the final section of the chapter.

tive agents. On this point, Allport (1954) quoted from the Roman author Tertullian:

They take the Christians to be the cause of every disaster to the state, of every misfortune to the people. If the Tiber reaches the wall, if the Nile does not reach the fields, if the sky does not move or if the earth does, if there is a famine, or if there is a plague, the cry is at once, "The Christians to the Lions." (in Allport, 1954, p. 243)

A close relative of scapegoating is the belief-in-conspiracy phenomenon (Billig, 1978; Cohn, 1966; Zukier, 1987). The idea of a conspiracy is that all, even the most puzzling, events can be explained in terms of the schemes of hidden conspirators. Not surprisingly, a belief in conspiracy greatly reduces the complexity of the world because the imagined plot provides one unifying explanation for a multitude of events (Poliakov, 1980). Modern examples of beliefs in conspiracy abound. For instance, there is currently a relatively widespread belief among North Americans that the U.S. government hides any information related to alien lifeforms having made contact with Earth. In Belgium, a sizable proportion of the population is deeply convinced that the infamous Marc Dutroux, the psychopath and child killer arrested in 1997, is a member of a well-organized network involving several important politicians.

Another example of the strong tendency to assign dispositions to groups, and by way of consequence to group members, can be found in Allison and Messick's (1985) work on the group attribution error (see also Allison, Mackie, & Messick, 1996). The paradigm differs from this work in that judgments about group members are made after group-level information has been provided to the participants. In typical group attribution error studies, participants are informed that a given percentage of group members (e.g., 57%) supported a proposition on the occasion of a ballot. Depending on conditions, participants are led to believe that the voting rules were such that the proposition passed or failed (e.g., 50% vs. 67% of support was necessary for the vote to pass). Participants are then asked to estimate the attitude of a typical member of the group. Generally, this judgment turns out to be influenced by the outcome of the vote. The typical group member is rated as being more in favor of the proposition when the proposition passed than when it failed. The difference between the judgments collected in the two conditions is clear evidence for the presence of a bias. Indeed, participants' judgment should rely exclusively on the support information which, of course, is the same in both conditions. In accordance with the arguments of this chapter, Allison, Beggan, Midgley, and Wallace (1995) presented evidence that the group attribution error emerges more strongly

when the group is thought to be inherently unanimous (i.e., entitative) than when the group is thought to be democratic.

Finally, the research on group-serving attributions also confirms that many Westerners do explain events by referring to groups. Building upon Kelley's (1973) observation that perceivers attribute events with positive outcomes to themselves and events with negative outcomes to others, a tendency he called the egocentric bias, Taylor and Jaggi (1974) were among the first to suggest that a similar pattern (i.e., the ethnocentric bias) could be observed at the group level. Specifically, these authors predicted that people would make more internal attributions for ingroup members behaving in desirable ways and external attributions for ingroup members acting in undesirable ways, while the opposite pattern would be observed for the outgroup members (see also Hewstone, 1990). Extending the notion of FAE to the group level, Pettigrew (1979) called this attributional pattern the "ultimate attribution error" (Spears et al., this volume). Using the linguistic category model (Semin & Fiedler, 1988), Maass and colleagues (Maass, Salvi, Arcuri, & Semin, 1989; for a review see Maass & Arcuri, 1996) recently confirmed that group members have a tendency to describe positive ingroup and negative outgroup behaviors more abstractly than negative ingroup and positive outgroup behaviors. Moreover, Maass, Ceccarelli, and Rudin (1996) showed that this "linguistic intergroup bias" depends upon an ingroup-protective motivation.

One crucial question concerns the relation between this group-serving bias and the present findings that people tend to display the FAE when confronted with an entitative group. Does the impact of entitativity manifest itself over and above the group-serving bias? Our group version of Ross et al.'s (1977) quiz game paradigm allows us to examine this issue in a rather straightforward manner. Remember that the questioners were presented as either entities or as aggregates, and the same was true for answerers. Moreover, the members of the entities were allegedly affiliated with the same institution as the observers (ingroup) or to another institution (outgroup). It is thus possible to compare the ratings given to the contestants as a function of their role (questioners vs. answerers) and their affiliation (ingroup vs. outgroup). In line with the group-serving bias, ingroup entities were better evaluated than outgroup entities independently of their role in the quiz. Consistent with our social attribution analysis, however, both entities were perceived to be significantly more competent when given the role of questioners rather than the role of answerers. In sum, our data suggest that people's tendency to make social attributions when facing an entity is not simply another form of group-serving bias.

Interestingly, our results were also influenced by group members' motivations in a complex way. Indeed, outgroup questioners were not seen as more competent when they constituted an entity than when they were an aggregate. This finding suggests that the positive role of an outgroup may not readily translate into favorable dispositional characteristics. By contrast, the assignment of a negative role to the ingroup (i.e., answering the questions) seemed to be conducive to internal attributions. This pattern is intriguing but not unprecedented. For instance, Turner, Hogg, Oakes, and Smith (1984) found that strongly identified group members were more likely to attribute the failure of their team to causes that were internal to the group. Further, failure produced more cohesion than success. The opposite pattern was observed for weakly identified members. In other words, the fact that highly committed people rely more heavily on internal attributions allows them to build up a stronger and more entitative image of the group. This comment does not only bring us back to the question of the antecedents of the perception of entitativity but also suggests that the perception of entitativity, along with its impact on social attribution, may have important consequences. These are questions to which we turn in the final section.

Antecedents and Consequences of Entitativity

Throughout this chapter, we have been suggesting that people may invoke group membership as a potential causal factor and that one crucial moderator of this explanatory strategy is the degree of entitativity of the group to which the targets belong. In the empirical work reviewed above, we have been limiting ourselves to manipulating the surface similarity of the targets in order to increase the degree of entitativity. Recent work in cognitive, personality, and social psychology reveals that a host of additional factors may influence the extent to which a collection of individuals will be seen as an entity.

Recent research on categorization and conceptual knowledge reveals that the surface similarity among objects may not occupy as central a role as was once thought (Medin, 1989; Medin, Goldstone, & Gentner, 1993). In fact, perception of surface similarity may largely be influenced by the prior existence of naive theories. In the present context, this means that the existence of strong essentialist theories may lead social perceivers to construe the members of a group as sharing more commonalities than they objectively do, and the members of different groups as having less in common than they actually do (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, and Wetherell, 1987; see also Miller & Prentice, 1999). This phenomenon can be seen

as a subtle form of the accentuation effect, as first demonstrated by Tajfel and Wilkes (1963). As a result of the accentuation at the surface level, an explicit reference to an underlying essence should become more easy.

We have examined the impact of essentialist beliefs in a variety of ways (Yzerbyt, 1999), but one illustrative example using the illusory correlation paradigm will suffice. For two decades, the illusory correlation paradigm (Hamilton & Gifford, 1976; Hamilton & Sherman, 1989) has been presented as an ideal tool to study the formation of stereotypic beliefs. In the typical study, participants are confronted with a series of behaviors of individuals issued from two groups. Not only is one group larger than the other but there are globally more positive than negative behaviors. Despite the fact that the proportion of positive to negative behaviors is held constant across the two groups, so that there is no actual correlation between valence and group membership, participants report an illusory correlation such that the negative behaviors are more strongly associated with the minority.

Among other accounts (Fiedler, 1991; Hamilton & Gifford, 1976; Smith, 1991), one explanation of the illusory correlation is that participants understand the task as an accentuation of the difference between the two groups (Haslam, McGarty, & Brown, 1996; McGarty, Haslam, Turner, & Oakes, 1993). As a consequence of this differentiation goal, participants encode the information so as to confirm the positivity of the majority. In one adaptation of the illusory correlation paradigm (Yzerbyt, Rocher, Haslam, & McGarty, 1997), we reasoned that, compared to what happens with the standard instructions, participants would engage in active differentiation of the groups more when they are led to believe that the groups differ on essential grounds, but less when they think that membership to one or the other group is not based on the presence of any meaningful feature. Specifically, one-third of the participants were informed that the individuals had been distributed into two groups by a series of clinical psychologists. Another third of the participants learned that the individuals had been assigned to one or the other group by a computer. The final third of the participants was confronted with the standard instructions. Contrary to participants in the "computer" condition, who displayed no illusory correlation, participants in the first condition indeed exhibited a strong illusory correlation effect, with the standard condition falling in between. In sum, the availability of a priori essential theories about groups may encourage the perception of entitativity and, in turn, facilitate the emergence of stereotypes (but see McConnell, Sherman, & Hamilton, 1994, 1997).

As far as essentialist beliefs are concerned, research by Dweck and her colleagues (Dweck, Hong, & Chiu, 1993; Chiu, Hong, & Dweck, 1997)

indicates that some people, referred to as "entity theorists," believe that traits are fixed, whereas others, called "incremental theorists," believe that traits are malleable. In a series of studies, Levy, Stroessner, and Dweck (1998) confirmed that people's implicit theories about the fixedness versus the malleability of human beings predict differences in degree of social stereotyping. For instance, participants holding an entity theory were more confident that the stereotypic traits of various ethnic and occupational groups were accurate descriptions of the groups and formed more extreme judgments of new groups than participants holding an incremental theory. Levy and her colleagues also found that entity theorists attributed stereotyped traits to inborn group qualities more than incremental theorists, and that incremental theorists attributed stereotyped traits to environmental factors more than entity theorists. Thus, people who believe that other people's behavior can be explained in terms of enduring, deep characteristics are more prone to stereotype any given group and to see it as a coherent whole.

Finally, research on intergroup relations points to a series of factors that are likely to increase the perceived entitativity of groups (Brewer & Harasty, 1996; Castano, Bourguignon, & Yzerbyt, 1999; Sherman, Hamilton, & Lewis, 1998; Yzerbyt, Rocher, & Schadron, 1997). Because the field has long been dominated by the view that homogeneity is a typical feature of outgroups (for a review, see Doosje, Spears, Ellemers, & Koomen, 1999), the notion of entitativity continues to be linked mainly to outgroups (Abelson, Dasgupta, Park, & Banaji, 1998; Dasgupta, Banaji, & Abelson, 1999; Hamilton & Sherman, 1996; McGarty, Haslam, Hutchinson, & Grace, 1995). Recently, social psychologists have also begun to turn their attention to the conditions affecting the perception of the ingroup as being more or less homogeneous, and thus more or less entitative. Factors such as the minority status of the ingroup (Simon, 1992), the comparative context (Castano & Yzerbyt, 1998; Haslam, Oakes, Turner, & McGarty, 1995), the level of identification of group members (Castano & Yzerbyt, 1998), the presence of threat (Corneille, Yzerbyt, Rogier, & Buidin, 2001; Rothgerber, 1997) or any combination of these factors (Doosje, Ellemers, & Spears, 1995; Kelly, 1989; Lee & Ottati, 1995) have been shown to increase the perception of ingroup homogeneity (for a review, see Yzerbyt et al., 2000). As we see them, these research endeavors stress the dynamic aspect of entitativity. Indeed, a social category such as the ingroup is perceived to be homogeneous only in certain conditions, depending on the perceivers' motivation and goals. In one illustration of the role of involvement in the emergence of entitativity, Brewer, Weber, and Carini (1995) showed that the mere

categorization of people into two groups is not sufficient to increase the perception of entitativity, but that such an increase requires that participants expect to be or actually be assigned to one of the two target groups.

What are the specific functions and implications of perceiving group entitativity? On the basis of our earlier discussion about the parallels between social attribution and person attribution, we can safely conclude that explanation along with a subjective sense of control and prediction is likely to be the primary function of attributional work whenever perceivers see a group as an entitative whole. These functions may, however, take on a particular importance in the case of groups. Indeed, our empirical data show that even in the absence of any a priori essentialist beliefs regarding the group(s) in question, the coherence of a group may point to the existence of an essence common to all the members of the group. In that sense, social attribution can be seen as the process by which a social entity acquires *specific* meaning. In the same way that attribution work allows for the inference that a person possesses a specific trait, holds a specific attitude, or has a specific intention, social attribution takes care of providing groups with specific traits, opinions, and intentions. In other words, the group is seen as having a particular agenda shared by every group member. This aspect is most important because it links the notion of perceived entitativity with the perception of a group as being an agent. More generally, the assumed goals and aspirations of the group become salient. Moreover, every group member, however different on unrelated surface features, can then be seen as striving for the success of the group objectives. The consequences of the agentic dimension of entitative groups are largely unexplored. In our opinion, the main repercussion is undoubtedly that the group and whatever group feature is attached to it become more real. With regard to outgroup entitativity, threat may become more apparent (Abelson et al., 1998; Insko & Schopler, 1987). When the ingroup is perceived as entitative, people may be reassured as to their status as group members and identify more strongly with the group (for a review, see Yzerbyt et al., 2000).

One additional aspect of our data reveals yet another feature of the social attribution process. Indeed, the participants in our quiz game paradigm always first evaluated the three individual members of a group and then the group as a whole. Interestingly, we obtained the exact same pattern for the individual ratings and for the group ratings. This is important because it suggests that social attribution is more than just a characterization of a group with little of no implication for the individual group members. Quite the contrary! When a group is perceived in an entitative way and becomes associated with a trait, an attitude, or an opinion, per-

ceivers are quick to infer that every member of the group possesses the trait, holds the attitude, and has the intention. The fact that every individual seems to be credited with some portion of "social" personality is highly reminiscent of Tajfel and Turner's (1979) position regarding social identity and the related argument that social interactions can be seen along a continuum ranging from the interpersonal to the intergroup end. When people find themselves at the interpersonal end, they see one another as autonomous and self-contained individuals and behave in terms of personal or idiosyncratic characteristics. At the intergroup end, people are members of a group and behave in accordance with their group or category memberships. Self-categorization theorists (Oakes, Haslam, & Turner, 1994; Reicher, 1987; Turner et al., 1987) refer to the shift from personal identity to social identity as depersonalization. Depersonalization does not make people less human. Simply, people are functioning on the basis of a different premise. They not only see members of other groups in stereotyped ways, they also see themselves as relatively interchangeable with ingroup members (see also Abrams & Hogg, 1990). People act in terms of the self both at the interpersonal end of the continuum and at the intergroup end of the continuum, but in one case their actions are the actions of individuals as individuals and in the other case their actions are the actions of individuals as group members. Clearly, one consequence of social attribution is that social perceivers can and do take into account the social dimensions of the actors. In this sense, social attribution can indeed be seen as the intergroup version of interpersonal attribution. What identity theorists remind us is that perceiving others in terms of their social personality is far from being irrational. Because people often do behave in stereotyped ways, social attribution may indeed be quite accurate (Oakes et al., 1994; see also Leyens et al., 1994). But, just as dispositional attribution can lead perceivers into the trap of the fundamental attribution error, social attribution can sometimes be off the mark.

One feature of our empirical work is that we have sought to uncover the impact of entitativity on social attribution in what could be called a "social vacuum" (see also Hoffman & Hurst, 1990). Indeed, our materials have been selected so as to avoid as much as possible the interference of existing knowledge. This is the case of both the social attribution studies as well as the illusory correlation study. Other researchers have made claims about the existence of social attribution while relying on socially shared beliefs (Oakes et al., 1991). The lack of a priori beliefs strongly reinforces the validity of our conclusion that social attribution is a most important process in the emergence and perpetuation of social beliefs. Moreover, the absence of real-world stakes highlights the robustness of

the tendency to account for situationally based differences in terms of natural, deep, and essential characteristics of the groups. Our demonstration that the justification and rationalization of the existing social structure happens even in highly novel situations stresses the importance of these functions. Our work thus constitutes a powerful demonstration of the system justification quality of our cognitive apparatus (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Tajfel, 1981). The addition of existing ideological beliefs and structural differences in resources or treatment can only reinforce people's readiness to engage in social attribution and justify the existing social arrangement.

One last question remains as to the possibility that social attribution could serve system change as well as system preservation. For several reasons, we think that it can. First, as Medin (1989) suggested, the fact that essentialist theories influence the detection of surface similarity ought to remind us of the flexibility in our construction of the social world. Adopt a different premise about the essential division of the social world, and one will arrive at different conclusions about the (assumed) real nature of people. Relatedly, the world is a place where several perspectives can coexist, at least theoretically. One particular ideological vision, which is accompanied by beliefs about the underlying nature of group members, may well be used to fight another ideological vision. After all, the French seventeenth- and eighteenth-century conception that there were Aristocrats and Peasants was defeated by Les Lumières and the view that all human beings have equal rights.

Conclusions

Given the consequences of stereotypes in social life, more research is needed to understand what makes stereotypes so powerful. The basic message of this chapter is that many stereotypes are created to provide a rationalization of observed social arrangements. Confronted by a set of targets who have something in common (an entity), for which an essence can possibly be inferred (subjective essentialism), people make a social attribution about what they see. More often than not, perceivers tend to explain events by referring to the "real" or inherent nature of people. The danger of this essentialistic stance is obvious: In perceivers' minds, group members are imprisoned in stereotypic images that are often negative, often wrong, and always constraining (Robinson & Kray, this volume). As noted in several chapters in this book (Jost et al.; Sidanius et al.; Spears et al.), stereotypes are likely to be used not only by high status groups but also to some extent by low status groups themselves. The latter aspect makes them particularly pernicious.

stereotypes as excuses and justifications for their domination of other categories (Fiske, 1993; Goodwin et al., 2000). It is our view that subjective essentialism helps a great deal in this respect. Indeed, if low status groups are perceived to be dispositionally marked with negative characteristics, then it may seem legitimate to leave those groups at the bottom of the hierarchy, thus allowing members of high status groups to make decisions at the top. The rationalization process is quite subtle. For example, taking the perspective of a sexist man, if more women stay at home than men do, it is not because women are prevented from working outside the home, but because their nature makes them especially well-suited to take care of children. Men's nature, of course, makes them better breadwinners – so why should people change roles, if everyone is well-suited to his or her role? Because the powerful create social realities more readily than do the powerless (Snyder & Stukas, 1999), stereotypes are not easily disconfirmed, and the current state of affairs is likely to last.

Thus, although part of this chapter outlined the adaptive aspects of social attribution, we do not want to stress this aspect as much as some of the less desirable implications. In our opinion, social attribution, as it builds upon entitativity, plays a crucial role in the emergence and preservation of stereotypic beliefs. To the extent that stereotypes serve a justification function that makes them likely to reinforce the social and political status quo (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Tajfel, 1981; Yzerbyt, Rocher, & Schadron, 1997), social attribution – and this is the main theme of this book – contributes to the maintenance of the existing social structure. As we hope to have shown, the Borg are not only to be found at the outer limits of the universe. In fact, most of us "see" the Borg in our everyday life. But what if they are really less Borg-like than we think?

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6   Status versus Quo

Naive Realism and the Search for Social Change and Perceived Legitimacy

Robert J. Robinson and Laura Kray

In a book that deals with questions of legitimacy, it is only appropriate that social conflict be examined closely. Most seemingly intractable social disputes are by their very nature subjective, and are characterized by attempts by the various sides to delegitimize the other while advancing the acceptability of their own views. It has long been known that this is a process much governed by the rules of social perception. Other chapters in this book make this point eloquently, particularly the chapters by Yzerbyt and Rogier and Spears, Jetten, and Doosje.

Within the tradition of experimental social psychology, the classic "They Saw a Game" study by Hastorf and Cantril (1954) documented how a conflict between irate football fans from rival Ivy League schools related to their contrasting perceptions of a controversial game. In particular, each side was convinced that their own team was less aggressive than their opponents believed they were. Social perception, this study showed, is greatly influenced by intergroup conflict. Subsequent research has elaborated upon this seminal idea, documenting the robust, reflexive, and seemingly universal tendency for opposing partisans to perceive their opposition as hostile, irrational, immoral, and ideologically extreme. This work has also described the manner in which these mutual perceptions lead to the escalation of social conflict (e.g., Bar-Tal & Geva, 1986; Brewer, 1979; Levine & Campbell, 1972; Plous, 1985; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986).

Generally, the social cognitive approach to group conflict has assumed that both sides in social conflicts are equally prone to social misperception (e.g., Brewer & Kramer, 1985; Bronfenbrenner, 1961; Worchel & Austin, 1986). Invariant cognitive processes, such as ingroup favoritism, stereotyping, and dehumanization, are assumed to lead opposing factions to misperceive one another, independent of the group affiliation of the perceiver or the target of perception. Recently however, a variety of studies have