

ATTRIBUTIONS IN SOCIAL INTERACTIONS:

A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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LYNNE R. BARGA, B.A.

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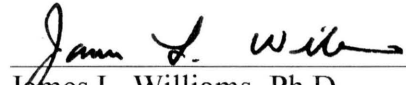
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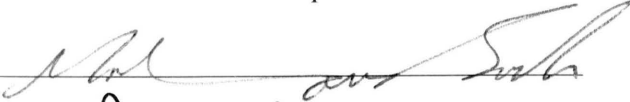
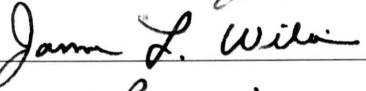

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To the Dean of the Graduate School:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Lynne R. Barga entitled "Attributions in Social Interactions: a Qualitative Study." I have examined this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in Sociology.


James L. Williams, Ph.D.
Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:




Department Chair

Accepted: 
Dean of the Graduate School

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ABSTRACT

ATTRIBUTIONS IN SOCIAL INTERACTIONS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

DECEMBER, 2003

Lynne R. Barga

The purpose of this study was to investigate people's attributions in explaining ambiguously described behavior, and to discover whether and how those attributions reflect their social identities and social roles. A literature review grounded the study theoretically in Sociological Social Psychology. Qualitative methods of data collection and textual analysis were applied to open-ended questions about behavioral vignettes and a demographic information form

Five major themes of attributional derivation emerged, supported in the literature:

- 1) Personal experience;
- 2) Socialized norms, expectations, stereotypes;
- 3) Response to the vignette, not the behavior;
- 4) Impression management;
- 5) Thought complexity

Social roles and identities reflected four themes:

- 1) Relationships and human welfare – people in arts and humanities;
- 2) Behavioral perceptions – gays, lesbians, mixed ethnicities;
- 3) Political and religious ideologies (dualisms, role expectations, judgment) – conservatives and fundamentalists
- 4) Occupational characteristics.

Future research should address other demographic or social characteristics, as well as asking entirely new questions.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Purpose of the Research

This is a study of the human tendency to attribute attitudes and dispositions to other people, on the sole basis of their behavior alone. It also considers whether and how people's individual social identities and roles may contribute to the formation of such attributions, given that the positions that people occupy in society can channel their behavior, shape their attitudes, and influence the values they hold (Michener and DeLamater 1999).

Attributions also influence our perceptions of the behavior of other people (Heider 1944) and are "important determinants of persons' interactions with others in an interdependent social world" (Seibold and Spitzberg 1982, p.88). As human meanings and intentions are worked out within the frameworks of social structures, "social phenomena such as language, decisions, conflicts, and hierarchies" exert strong influences over human activities" (Miles and Huberman 1994, p.4). Membership in organizations or social categories, including nationality, race / ethnicity, religious or political affiliation – and especially people's expectations about members of such social groups – can contribute to and shape people's perceptions of themselves and others (Hamilton 1979).

Discrepancies among personal characteristics, role requirements, and group values, however, are nearly universal, as individuals inevitably are “exposed to conflicting socializing experiences.” Reasons are multiple and complex: “because socialization takes place largely through mediating social units that have their own agendas and structure, such as families and schools; because roles and structural requirements change continually; and because our understanding of how to produce desired socialization outcomes is so primitive” (Turner 1988). So just how accurate can our understandings of those around us be?

The question is timely and pressing. “In the past year, 1,000 people who thought they knew their acquaintances have been raped by them, 10,000 people who thought they knew their mates have divorced them, and 100,000 people who thought they knew their sovereigns have died as pawns in their wars” (Gilbert and Malone 1995). Clearly there is a tie between what people perceive – or think they perceive – and the behavior that results from how they interpret those perceptions.

What is unclear is how perceptions affect social interactions, from the microsocial interpersonal level to the macrosocial level of international and interethnic relations. Research suggests, for example, that opposing parties in any setting: religious, legal, political, scientific, diplomatic, academic, among others, may be experiencing an “unacknowledged mixing of incompatible” world views (Trumbull 1983), which necessarily limits their communication and mutual understanding (Kenworthy and Miller 2002). If the assumptions that define the collective “way of seeing” of each group are not shared by the other groups involved, “failures of understanding and communication may

result” (Hilton 1988, p.3). “A thorough examination of people’s behavior explanations must therefore consider . . . the network of folk concepts and assumptions on which explanations are based” (Malle 1999). The study of how these world views, or “characteristic ways of perceiving and organizing experience,” can lead to the unwarranted attribution of feelings and even personality traits to others is important, “not merely for understanding how individuals differ,” but ultimately for understanding the roots of every kind of social behavior (Lohman and Bosma 2002). It is the purpose of this study, then, to conduct a qualitative investigation of the attributions people make in ambiguous situations, to uncover some of their sources and their relationship to people’s social identities and social roles.

Rationale

Berg states that research is seldom, if ever, really value neutral. “Topic selection occurs because of an interest in the subject matter, or because it is a politically advantageous area to receive grant monies, because of some inner humanistic drive toward some social problem, or because one has personal experiences or . . . familiarity with the subject area. The fact is, research is seldom undertaken for a neutral reason” And “furthermore, all humans residing in and among social groups are the product of those social groups. This means that various values, moral attitudes, and beliefs orient people in a particular manner” (2004, p.155). Nevertheless, Gouldner’s *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* (1970) urges that in order for sociologists to better understand people and their social worlds, they must themselves identify their own deepest assumptions about humans and society (Phillips 1988).

Accordingly, then, this study can be seen to take the perspective of Sociological Social Psychology. As House and his colleagues point out, the “defining purpose” of Sociological Social Psychology is “to link social structure to microsociological and psychological processes” in “topics of central concern to sociologists, such as the interplay between self and society, emotion and behavior, and interaction and organization” (1995; 1990; 1981). Kohn (1989) makes these links by asking “how does position in the larger social structure affect the immediately impinging conditions of people’s lives, and how do these conditions affect their values, their orientations, their thinking processes?” Social psychologists, he says, “at least recognize the existence of people; other sociologists sometimes seem to act as if they thought that social institutions function without benefit of human participants, or at any rate without benefit of participants who act human.”

The resurgence of interest in this relationship between macrosocial and microsocial phenomena rests on the recognition of “complex and reciprocal relations between social structure and the individual” (House and Mortimer 1990). Social interactions at all levels are shaped in part by the attitudes and assumptions brought to them by the people involved. But interactions among people and social structures (such as organizations, communities, social classes, racial or ethnic groups) and processes (like industrialization, urbanization, and social mobility) affect individuals as well as whole societies in ways which are not fully comprehended (Michener and DeLamater 1999). This study is important in that it contributes to the understanding of attributions in social

communication by examining, through the use of qualitative methodology, people's individual experiences with social interaction.

Most research in attribution theory to date has been quantitative and experimental in form, but there is much to be gained from taking an approach in which participants are allowed to describe their experiences in their own words, free of constrained and preconceived choices. Researchers have been known to miss important aspects of a situation because they failed to ask the appropriate questions (Hilton 1988). As Trumbull (1983) notes, different approaches are "informed by different views of the world," and the world views held by researchers and participants are "not always compatible, thus limiting communication and mutual understanding." Qualitative techniques aim to discover the "lived experiences" of individuals from the perspective of those studied (Creswell 1998), and are particularly well suited for finding at least "partial explanations or understanding for phenomena that cannot be directly measured" (Williams 2003).

As Berg describes it, qualitative research seeks to discover the "naturally arising meanings among members of study populations," as opposed to having concepts rigorously defined in advance (2004, p.31). These methods emphasize the researcher's role as "an active learner" who can tell the story from the participants' view, rather than as an "expert" who passes judgment" on them (Creswell 1998, p.18). The rich descriptive data that emerge complement existing statistical information and help to fill in the larger picture of who attributes what to whom and, possibly, why.

Research Questions

In order to understand an experience which is at the same time both universally common and uniquely subjective, this study uses qualitative techniques to investigate the following research questions:

1. What do people draw on when they make dispositional or situational attributions in response to ambiguous, neutrally-worded descriptions of behavior lacking specific information regarding social identities or social roles, such as: in- or out-group membership, stereotypical behavior or appearance, culture or other demographic identifiers?
2. Are people's attributions related to, or reflective of, their social identities and social roles?

Definition of Terms

Since interest in attributions spans widely varied disciplines, terminology has arisen with meanings specific to particular fields. This study uses definitions drawn from research in Sociological Social Psychology. For the purpose of this study, the term **attribution** refers to the means through which people infer other people's intentions from their behavior, estimate attitudes from what they say, or draw conclusions about why they feel the way they do, as well as inferring the causes of their behavior (Michener and DeLamater 1999; Siebold and Spitzberg 1982). **Attribution theory** is the field of research that deals with aspects of these methods of interpreting behavior and inferring its sources in either the internal disposition of the person observed or in situational factors in the environment, or most often, some combination of the two (Seibold and Spitzberg

1982). **Social identities** are conceptions of the self and of others in terms of the defining characteristics of membership in the civic and social organizations available to them. (Michener and DeLamater 1999). **Social roles** are the specific “identities a person assumes that are also social positions,” such as those of kinship, age, race, sex and occupations (Newman and Newman 1995, p.518).

Literature Review

Theoretical Foundation

People seem to think that their perceptions of the world are the products of basic biological sensory processes that “operate in about the same manner for everyone who shares their biology” (Gilbert and Malone 1995; Jones and Nisbett 1972). Fritz Heider, one of the originators of attribution theory, refers to this as “naïve psychology” (1958, p.5), a common-sense belief system which both shapes our understanding of the social environment and guides our reactions to it. Social scientists, in comparison, regard people’s perceptions as individual interpretations, the products of their cognitive processes, which have been filtered through a set of highly idiosyncratic beliefs, attitudes and expectations. In *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Clifford Geertz refers to this as an “information gap.” “Between what our body tells us and what we have to know in order to function, there is a vacuum we must fill ourselves, and we fill it with information (or misinformation) provided by our culture” (1973, p.50). Guided by cultural, historical, and ideological norms, “our social scientific, cognitive processes take our *impressions* of others as representative of their inner reality, rather than their *expressions* of themselves”

(Rudmin, Trimpop, Kryl; et al. 1987). And since in Western civilization most people “may be socialized to expect behavior to reflect personality” (Quattrone 1982), the tendency to draw lasting inferences about people’s dispositions solely from observing their behavior is so prevalent it has been called a fundamental phenomenon of social psychology (Gilbert and Malone 1995).

These questions and answers among ordinary people, about explanations of behavior and how they influence perceptions of other people, interested scientists who were concerned with the interpretation of behavior (Kelley 1967; Jones and Harris 1967; Jones and Davis 1965; Heider 1944, 1958; Ichheiser 1949). Attribution theory emerged as “a general conception of the way people think about and analyze cause-effect data,” a phenomenon Harold Kelley identifies as “social perception” (1973, p.107). He is said to have brought an attributional perspective to the study of behavior, and to have “explicitly suggested the analogy between the tasks of the intuitive observer and those of the behavioral scientist” (Ross 1977a). Attribution theory is not so much a coherent position as “a loose framework of mini-theories, models, and hypotheses” (Jones and McGillis 1976; Kelley 1973;). It is concerned, in its broadest sense, with “the attempts of ordinary people to understand the causes and implications of the events they witness,” and to interpret their own behaviors and the actions of others. (Seibold and Spitzberg 1982)

Much of the research in attribution theory deals with the shortcomings of these attempts. People’s perceptions derive from their deepest beliefs, or “background assumptions” (Gouldner 1970, p.29), those explanatory structures which are acquired as “common sense” with socialization. Often remaining at the fringe of conscious

awareness, background assumptions “involve strong feelings, shape our behavior and [interestingly] are not easily changed even when experience yields evidence counter to them” (Phillips 1988). They reflect and are embedded in individual “world hypotheses,” Stephen Pepper’s (1942) term for those all-encompassing beliefs about the world that are so general they provide the terms of reference by which all our other beliefs are defined. “Thus the “intuitive psychologist” is equipped with and guided by implicit, lasting, and often unexamined, assumptions about human nature and behavior (Ross 1977a).

Distortions and Biases in Perception

Some attribution researchers seek to uncover “sources of the systematic bias or distortions in judgment that lead the intuitive psychologist to misinterpret events and hence to behave in ways that are personally maladaptive, socially pernicious, and often puzzling to the social scientist who seeks to understand such behavior” (Ross 1977a). Research in this area concerns itself with prejudice and stereotypes. Jones and Berglas (1976) define a stereotype as “a strong predictive generalization about the attributes of a category of persons. The more stereotypic the generalization, the greater the confidence in predicting individual characteristics from knowledge of category membership.” These unjustified or irrational overgeneralizations “foster various errors in social perception and judgment” (Michener and DeLamater 1999). Hamilton (1979) concurs, reporting in his research that “the perceiver would ‘see’ evidence that confirmed his stereotypic expectations, even in the total absence of such confirming evidence.”

Other studies of bias examine the influence of societal expectations on individual and group perceptions of social phenomena, such as out-groups, rape, and sexism (King

2003; Anderson, Beattie, Spencer; et al. 2001; Devine 1989b). Ross (1977a) demonstrates “that laymen tend to perceive a ‘false consensus,’ that is, to see their own behavioral choices and judgments as relatively common and appropriate to existing circumstances while viewing alternative responses as uncommon, deviant, and inappropriate.” Howard (1984) states, further, that attributional patterns can be strongly influenced by traditional gender roles.

Studies also explore cultural and ideological variations in attribution. Krull, Loy, Lin, et al. (1999) and Al-zahrani and Kaplowitz (1993) find that members of collectivist societies, as opposed to those of individualist societies, offer differing explanations of responsibility for perceived behavior. Skitka, Mullen, Griffin, et al (2002) observe disagreement between liberals’ and conservatives’ attributions as to the causes of social problems as well as in their resulting attitudes toward the affected populations. They find that liberals tend to focus on situational or institutional explanations, whereas conservatives tend to focus on personal explanations. As they put it, “conservative belief systems are heavily invested in the value of self-reliance and individualism,” which rarely conflict with personal attributions for social problems, while “liberals’ ideological belief systems are more likely . . . to contain commitments to conflicting values.” Quist and Wiegand (2002) echo this finding in their examination of causal attributions in liberal versus conservative media representations of hate crime, finding that the conservative media downplayed the role of situational factors.

In research dealing with social roles, Ross, Amabile, Steinmetz (1977a; 1977b) look at the perceiver’s ability to form accurate social judgments by making allowance for role-

conferred advantages and disadvantages, such as those of “quizmaster and contestant” and “mentor and student.” Their findings suggest that observers “are apt to underestimate the extent to which the seemingly positive attributes of the powerful simply reflect the advantages of social control,” rather than innate personal qualities – a result they refer to as a “distortion in social judgment.” Johnson, Jemmott, and Pettigrew (1984) confirm that tendency, indicating that “an individual may exhibit a clear understanding of these [situational] determinants and yet persevere in an inappropriate trait attribution. . . . A relatively complete awareness of situational contingencies may not necessarily preclude a view of the disadvantaged as somehow personally inferior.” Such research has implications for understanding biased perceptions of the powerful and powerless in society.

Other studies investigate the relationship between people’s “tendency to derogate victims,” and the magnitude of their need for control over the environment. They find that many people believe in a “just world”: that the world is a place where good people are rewarded and bad people are punished. Believers in a just world are more likely than nonbelievers to admire the fortunate and to disparage victims, thus “permitting the believers to maintain their perception that people in fact get what they deserve” (Dion and Dion 1987; Feinberg, Powell, and Miller 1982; Rubin and Peplau 1975). The belief in a predictable, just world is so essential to these people that it will not be relinquished easily. It persists in a defensive style of polarized views which serve to protect their belief in ultimate justice (Ellard and Lerner 1983). In related work, Keinan and Sivan (2001) propose that individuals in situations of uncertainty and ambiguity may feel a

reduction of their sense of control, and use attribution processes as a coping strategy to reduce experienced stress.

One source of much perceptual distortion – the tendency for people to underestimate the impact of situational causes while overestimating the role of individual disposition in explaining behavior – has been identified by Ross (1977a) as the “fundamental attribution error.” While other terms have been used interchangeably for this phenomenon, current work prefers the “less value-laden and more descriptive term correspondence bias” (Gilbert and Jones 1986), as suggested by Gilbert and Malone’s (1995) review of relevant research. The apparent persistence of this belief that behavior corresponds to disposition is of great interest to social scientists.

Numerous studies have explored the effects on attributions of accountability and perceivers’ expectations. Tetlock (1985) finds that the “strategies people employ in making judgments appear to depend (among other things) on whether they expect to justify the positions they take,” and that the pressure of accountability can encourage more complex explanatory thinking. As Howard and Levinson (1985) state, “The lack of explicit knowledge need not prevent the construction of ‘assumed’ information, of course. Past research has found that subjects can ‘remember’ information that has not been given to them, if this information is consistent with their expectations.” Jones and colleagues (1971; 1967) also discuss this tendency to attribute “attitude in line with behavior” as being partly reflective of the perceiver’s own attitudes on the issue. Wittenbaum and Stasser’s (1995) study reports that these attributions can persist even after group discussion reveals the constraints imposed on participants whose behavior

was observed. Reeder, Fletcher, and Furman (1989) conclude that correspondence bias appears to be the result of “faulty assumptions” and observer expectations.

Sources and Functions of Attributions

Another body of research concerns the spontaneity of attributions. Uleman, Newman, and Moskowitz (1996) make the case that “the meaning of many social events is constructed routinely, habitually, and unintentionally (i.e., spontaneously),” and that people make such inferences without explicit intent or even conscious awareness. Studies repeatedly show that people frequently explain events and interpret behavior by relying on the apparent similarity of the current situation to a single previously experienced instance (Read 1983; Ross et. al. 1977b). Many perceivers seek “a single, sufficient, and salient explanation for behavior, often the first satisfactory one that comes along,” and instead of using supporting information logically, “people are often more influenced by a single, colorful piece of case history evidence” (Taylor and Fiske 1978). Attributions can also emerge from previous experience or from the simple fact of membership in a particular group, either the perceiver’s or that of the observed. Winter and Uleman (1984) report that participants “made covert trait inferences without intentions to do so,” and Wilder (1978) concurs that “mere membership in a group affected attributions of both behavioral causality and beliefs.”

Some researchers attempt to understand how people explain the origins of their attitudes, trying to identify whether the sources of attributions are external or internal, stable or situational, or tied to the perceiver’s own emotional state (Kenworthy and Miller 2002; Jackson, Lewandowski, Fleury, et al. 2001; Weiner 1985). Kelley (1973)

offers a succinct formulation of the question: “What is the interplay between the two kinds of processes, the one based on observation and analysis of present information, and the other based on causal preconceptions and stereotypes?” A related area of investigation deals with attributional complexity, which describes conditions under which simple or complex causal explanations emerge (Devine 1989a). Fletcher and his colleagues (Reeder and Bull 1990; Danilovics, and Fernandez 1986) offer a seven-point Attributional Complexity Scale, and find that more attributionally complex individuals have greater need for cognition, spontaneously produce more causes for personality dispositions, and select more complex causal attributions for simple behavioral events. Individuals toward the other end of the complexity continuum “typically generate a single construal of an ambiguous or incompletely specified situation and then make judgments as if their situational construals corresponded to perfect situational knowledge” (Griffin and Ross 1991). Pope and Meyer (1999) confirm these results, using the complexity scale to study the decision-making behavior of jurors. They find that attributionally simple jurors made more guilty findings, reported more confidence in their decisions, and attributed more personal causes for behavior, while attributionally complex jurors were more likely to consider the influence of external causes on defendants’ behavior.

Many studies focus on the functionality of attributions. Forsyth (1980) discusses four functions that attributions can perform for the perceiver: explanatory, predictive, egocentric, and interpersonal, demonstrating the link between attributions (which is a “typically psychological social psychology topic”) and social identity (“a typically sociological social psychology topic”). Erickson and Krull (1999) similarly distinguish

judgments about the person's personality from inferences about the situation. Sears and Freedman (1967) also take a functional approach, looking at the ways in which selective perception and bias may serve for processing discrepant information. Others study the conditions under which people attempt to resolve perceived inconsistencies, and suggest that stress elicits a search for causes as a coping response (Keinan and Sivan 2001; Hastie 1984).

One area of research of particular interest to the present study explores the idea that the ways in which people explain social behavior are, "themselves, social behaviors that need to be explained" (Kenworthy and Miller 2002). Or as Malle (1999) puts it, "By explaining behavior, people make sense of the social world, adapt to it, and shape it. Behavior explanations are thus themselves a social behavior that must be described and explained." He proposes using a multilevel analysis of types of behavior, kinds of explanations, and variations among them for describing people's "folk theories about mind and behavior and their effects on social perception and social interaction." Malle Knobe, O'Laughlin, et al. (2000) suggest that the coding of free response explanations offers a "promising alternative to the rating-scale approach."

As fascinating as these behavior explanations are, however, they are elusive subjects of study, and most research to date has dealt with them by quantifying people's responses to various ingenious manipulations. But Howard and Levinson (1985) raise the following criticism: "The typical structured measures of attributions obtained in laboratory settings may constrain the domain of factors from which potential causes are selected. In using such measures, we may also overlook important variables that people

do use in making attributions.” This present study, then, contributes to the understanding of attributions as social behaviors by describing them qualitatively, in the words of the participants, from their points of view and with reference to their social roles and identities.

CHAPTER II

METHODOLOGY

Differentiating Among Approaches:

Qualitative and Quantitative

Traditional research in attribution has been quantitative, concentrating on gathering information for a small number of variables, so that the initial description of events is lacking in detail. Much statistical analysis focuses on norms and central trends and “ignores the outliers, treating deviations as accidental fluctuations.” Differences among individuals “are conceived of only as variations from the norm and thereby accorded little importance.” The regularities and patterns which emerge may be misleading “because they are based on a limited range of variables. The variables attended to may not be the significant ones, so may fail to characterize the norms or types encountered” (Trumbull 1983).

Qualitative techniques, on the other hand, tend to be inclusive and to let people speak for themselves, on a case by case basis. They allow researchers to “examine how people learn about and make sense of themselves and others,” “to share in the understandings and perceptions of others, and to explore how people structure and give meaning to their daily lives” (Berg 2004, p.7). The qualitative researcher acts as “an instrument of data collection who gathers words or pictures, analyzes them inductively, focuses on the meaning of participants, and describes a process that is expressive and

persuasive in language” (Creswell 1998, p.4). Qualitative researchers deal with unquantifiable facts about people, attempting to make sense of both routine and problematic events in their lives.

The variety of methods used by social scientists, then, “fall along a continuum from totally uncontrolled (and perhaps uncontrollable) techniques arising in natural settings to totally controlled techniques of observation” (Berg 2004, p.7). The analysis of qualitative data refers, in Berg’s words, to “meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols, and descriptions of things. In contrast, quantitative research refers to counts and measures of things” (2004, p.3).

As Ichheiser sees it, “social scientists should not aspire to be as ‘scientific’ and ‘exact’ as physicists or mathematicians, but should cheerfully accept the fact that what they are doing belongs to the twilight zone between science and literature (letter to Sol Tax, 11 September 1967)” (cited in Rudmin et al. 1987). It is in that spirit that this study attempts to contribute to the understanding of attribution in social interaction. By allowing participants to describe the experience of interpreting ambiguous behavior from their own perspectives, the lively narrative data that emerge can enrich the existing body of research.

Data Collection

Convenience and snowball sampling techniques were used with the intention of obtaining as demographically diverse a group as possible from the Denton / Dallas / Fort Worth area. The goal of 20 to 25 participants was exceeded, with a final count of 27. Individuals were approached on the campus of Texas Woman’s University and in the

homes of personal acquaintances, and asked to help in a study of attitude perceptions requiring completion of a four-page questionnaire. Many prospective participants were acquaintances and co-workers of the researcher. In several cases, participants volunteered to contact other people to solicit their participation, and a few of those others later asked to receive their own questionnaires. In all cases, response was strictly voluntary, and several of those who were asked to take part declined, with no embarrassment to either party.

Participation was restricted to adults over the age of eighteen, but no category of sex, race / ethnicity, occupation, or education was deliberately excluded. Many possible social categories, of course, are not represented in the final results, occupations, for example, as a consequence of the small scale of the study and the relative homogeneity of the available population. Table 1 displays the totals and percentages of occupations reported by this study's participants.

TABLE 1. Occupations of Participants

OCCUPATION	N	%
Administrative assistant	1	3.7
Electronics Technician	1	3.7
Homemaker	1	3.7
Library professional	13	48.1
Retail shopkeeper	1	3.7
Registered Nurse	1	3.7
Student	8	29.6
Teacher	1	3.7
TOTAL	27	100%

The Instrument

Vignettes and Questions

Carlston, Skowronski, and Sparks (1995) report that “people do derive trait information from behavioral statements and that they apparently associate that trait information with the actor.” They conclude that these influences “may be more subtle, yet more pervasive, than previously suspected.” Malle et al. (2000) also report work with free response behavioral explanations, calling them a “promising alternative to the rating-scale approach.”

Supported by those findings, the data collection instrument for this study is made up of a self-administered questionnaire, followed by a page requesting demographic information. The questionnaire consists of three vignettes, followed by three probing, open-ended questions. The same three questions are used for each vignette. It was developed by the researcher from newspaper reports about behavioral studies and other human interest stories. Essential facts were distilled and turned into one- or two-sentence vignettes, describing behavior in value-ambiguous terms and without gender-revealing pronouns or other social clues. The questions, identical for all three vignettes, read as follows:

- What went through your mind as you read this? Please explain fully.
- What does this behavior tell you about the person? Please explain your thoughts.
- Have you ever been in a situation like this one, and if so, give details.

Vignette 1 is based on a story about a public-education effort in another state, the aim of which is to remind people to treat children with respect and gentleness. The

program offers training for health-care providers, park and recreation workers, librarians and others whose work puts them in contact with the public, to get people to intervene when they see a parent act harshly with a child in public. They are encouraged to offer support, use humor, or even just to smile, to make life easier for parents and more kid-friendly for children.

The vignette which resulted reads: “A teacher who runs public adult education classes tries to help a parent who’s having a hard time with kids in a store. Joking with the adult and playing with the kids seems to help.” In retrospect, it would have been preferable not to specify the occupation of Person 1, since the intention was to eliminate clues as to social positions. As will be seen in the findings in Chapter III, however, even such apparent specificity did not eliminate multiple interpretations, and some interesting analytical opportunities resulted. Hindsight also shows that a statement of behavior which requests interpretation should ideally involve only one character, as do the two other vignettes. However, neither review nor pre-testing revealed the subsequent confusion of some study participants, and as an unexpected positive result, the multiple-peopled vignette allowed other participants to display attributional complexity.

Vignette 2 grew out of a newspaper story about a study of hoarding behavior reported in the journal Behavior Research and Therapy. Researchers described various aspects of the behavior and what they might reveal about people, including whether or not any treatment was required. Vignette 2 reads: “A neighbor has trouble throwing things away, since all the items could be useful to someone else or might be needed later. Having to make a choice is very hard, so the house is getting more and more filled up.”

The gender-neutral descriptor, “neighbor,” also raised some unanticipated difficulty, in that it implied for some respondents an unwarranted intrusion in someone else’s life. On the other hand, since they were requested to imagine themselves as observers of the behavior, such involvement may have been inevitable, even if the character had simply been called “a person.”

The inspiration for Vignette 3 was, broadly, the interest in patriotism raised by the terrorist attacks on America of September 11, 2001. Not one specific article, but the daily media barrage and individual displays of flags and opinion statements fired the imaginations of both faculty advisor (at that time) and researcher (Williams 2003). The resulting vignette reads as follows: “A local resident who was out walking the dog one morning saw that American flags were displayed on several parked cars, and took one off of one of the cars.” Happily, this final vignette was apparently ambiguous enough to allow a free play of attributional speculation among respondents. The fact that many responses to the vignette reflected the prevailing concerns of the times has ample confirming support in the literature.

Demographic information

The Demographic Information form includes both open spaces for free responses and items which require a selection among given categories. Items for which choices are offered include: Sex, Last year of school completed, Religious preference, Political views, and Sexual preference. Categories requesting participant self-identification are: Age, Occupation, Race or Ethnicity, Major field of study, if a student, Religious and Political Party affiliations, and Political / Civic or Religious Organization membership.

As Miles and Huberman point out, “decisions about focusing and bounding the collections of qualitative data in the field” are essential aspects of designing a study. Those decisions force the researcher to be selective, to decide “which relationships are likely to be most meaningful, and, as a consequence, what information should be collected and analyzed – at least at the outset” (1994, p.18). The particular demographic categories chosen for this study were felt to characterize the concepts of social identities and social roles. As outlined in the Definition of Terms, they encompass conceptions of the self and others in terms of membership in civic and social organizations, and social positions including those of kinship, age, race, sex and occupation (Michener and DeLamater 1999; Newman and Newman 1995). And as Michener and DeLamater point out, “the roles that people occupy not only channel their behavior but also shape their attitudes. Roles can influence the values that people hold and affect the direction of their personal growth and development” (1999, p.8). They can also, as Chapter III demonstrates, produce specific attributions.

Procedure

Once the approval of the Institutional Review Board (see Appendix A) was obtained, data collection began. A cover letter describing the project and its purpose was given to prospective participants and gone over with them by the researcher. They were given an opportunity to ask and discuss any questions they had regarding the study until they felt satisfactorily answered. If they then agreed to participate, they were given the cover letter to keep. Next, they were asked to read each of the three vignettes and to respond to the behavior described, imagining themselves as observers of the situation.

Participants were asked to write down “what went on in their heads” as they read the vignettes, and to write out on the forms their answers to the printed open-ended questions about what they thought and felt, unconstrained by any forced choices.

After the forms were completed and returned, they were reviewed by the researcher. If it was determined that greater detail was needed, the forms were given back to the participant, and five to ten minutes of oral follow up questions by the researcher encouraged amplification of any sketchy responses. Participants added any new material in writing to what they had previously written. Finally, the participants were asked to supply basic demographic information by filling out a one-page form. To assure anonymity, no names or addresses were obtained and the forms were returned in plain, unmarked envelopes to a designated collection folder, holding all the completed returns until data collection was complete. Identifying details are also eliminated where it was necessary and possible, in discussions of the research findings.

Sufficient space was provided on all sheets to encourage fully developed responses, including an invitation to use backs of pages. Completion of the forms required in most cases fifteen to twenty minutes, and at the most, forty-five minutes. Since completing the forms was completely voluntary, anonymous, and private, there was no risk of emotional distress to the participants. On the contrary, many appeared to relish the opportunity to speak their minds. Return of the completed form and retention of the cover letter, as discussed with participants, constituted informed consent for participation in the project. The Appendix includes copies of the cover letter, the vignettes and questions, and the demographic information form.

Data Analysis

In qualitative research, data analysis “acknowledges the voluminous nature of qualitative data in the raw” (Berg 2004, p.39). Qualitative data can be analyzed through selection, summarizing, or submersion in a larger pattern, in an interactive, cyclical, spiraling process. As data collection proceeds, the business of focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming the data takes place continuously, in the form of teasing out themes, coding motifs, forming clusters, making partitions, and writing memos and summaries. This “data transforming” process usually continues until a final report is completed (Miles and Huberman 1994).

The responses to the current study were analyzed for salient themes that were relevant to each of the research questions. Data analysis incorporates the complete text of the responses, as well as the demographic information. Addressing Research Questions 1 and 2 separately, extensive and ongoing textual examination of the participants’ own words was conducted, to help identify commonly occurring motifs as they emerged from the written responses. Copious descriptive notes and memos were written for each response and frequently reviewed, with the aim of eventually illuminating similarities of meaning, subject, or reaction to context. Subsequent subgrouping and re-analysis yielded categories and themes, which are abundantly supported by representative quotations.

Social identities and roles, as indicated by demographic information, are dealt with in the context of Research Question 2. Textual responses were once again resubmitted to the process of analysis described above, with special reference to the respondents’ social

roles and identities, as conceptualized above. Of particular relevance were the categories of political and religious ideologies, sexual orientation, and areas of occupation and / or study.

A coding scheme was developed, as suggested by the accumulating data and by the findings of previous research whose applications seemed useful for the present study. Kenworthy and Miller (2002) propose three major coding categories for possible sources of attitudes: externality (e.g., family, news, friends), rationality (thought and decided) and emotionality (how it feels). The Attributional Complexity Scale developed by Fletcher, Danilovics, and Fernandez (1986) suggests further categories by presenting a descriptive means of assessing people's explanatory schemata. Fletcher et al. define attributional complexity in terms of two concepts: *differentiation*, which refers to the number of dimensions or characteristics involved in the person's perception, and *integration*, which looks at organizational connections among the differentiated characteristics.

Forsyth (1980) discusses the explanatory, predictive, egocentric, and interpersonal functions of attributions, while work by Wimer and Kelley (1982) suggests dichotomous classifications of attributional dimensions, including: good – bad (an evaluation of the actor); simple – complex (a direct cause-and-effect link, versus a more complicated network of causality); self – other (whether causes are psychologically within the actor or not) ; enduring – transient (assesses stability of the attributed cause); common – unusual (referring to the event in question); changeable – unchangeable (whether or not it remains stable over time); and weak – strong (relatively minor versus relatively major cause), among others. They also caution that “attribution researchers do not agree on a

single set of attributional categories. For the most part, causal dimensions derive from the minds of attribution theorists, not laypeople,” an important reminder for the researcher aspiring to reflexive sociology. All these suggested possibilities for the analysis and coding of qualitative data.

Another concern is for the verification of research findings. According to Berg, verification may be accomplished by the qualitative researcher by carefully checking or “retracing the various analytic steps that led to the conclusion.” It also involves “assuring that all of the procedures used to arrive at the eventual conclusions have been clearly articulated. In this manner, another researcher could potentially replicate the study and the analysis procedures and draw comparable conclusions” (2004, pp.39-40). This chapter delineates the procedures used by the researcher for data analysis, and to give an understanding of the relentlessly ongoing revisiting and re-sorting of data by which saturation of categories was achieved. An examination of the findings in Chapter III will show the results, and should enable subsequent replication.

Limitations

This study, like Wimer and Kelley’s work into attributional dimensions which is referred to above, was begun with the purpose of trying to understand people’s underlying assumptions about other people and their behavior. The concluding, cautionary, words of their study reveal some inherent difficulties.

We began this study with a sense that, given a sufficiently broad sampling . . . , we might identify the main causal distinctions people make We are now humbled by the complexity of the problem. People can make whatever distinctions their language permits and the causal structures of their world make important. (1982)

The present research also acknowledges certain limitations, in addition to those already mentioned regarding shortcomings of the vignettes and demographic information form. First, findings from the small, non-random sample made necessary by the scope and design of the study may not be generalizable to a larger population. Second, research that relies on participants' reports of their own experiences presumes and requires of them a level of self awareness and integrity that may not be realistic. In addition, when people are asked to respond to verbal hypothetical depictions rather than to actual behavior, their responses may or may not correspond to what would happen in the real situation. The kind of imaginative projection required may be more compatible with certain individual ways of perceiving than with others. Nevertheless, the lure of discovery overpowers these weaknesses, and the authentic voices of a few individuals are certain to reach interested and appreciative listeners.

CHAPTER III

FINDINGS

Description of Participants

A total of twenty seven people completed and returned questionnaires. Table 2 presents a summary of their demographic characteristics. The participants range in age from 20 to 83 and include Black, White, Hispanic, "Other," and "Mixed" ethnicities, although more than seventy percent are White (N=19). One third of respondents are male (N=8), two thirds are female (N=17), and two self-identify as "other" and "multi," respectively. Sexual preference responses include 22 Heterosexual (81.5%) and 5 Gay, Lesbian and Other (18.5%). Both Republican and Democratic political parties are represented, as well as Others, although a majority (44.4%, N=12) are Democrats. Religious preferences include Catholic, Protestant, Non-denominational and Others, with 51.9% (N=14) claiming no affiliation. Under Political Views and Religious Orientations, responses span the entire range of choices from liberal through conservative / fundamentalist to unspecified. Fully one third (N=9) of respondents, however, claim "Liberal" in the Religious Orientation category. Another one third (N=9) of respondents indicate "Depends on the situation" in the Political Views category. Levels of Educational Attainment are homogeneously high, reflecting the population from which participants were drawn, with 55.6% (N=15) having done graduate work, and all having at least some college credit. The Occupations category is similarly related to the setting

TABLE 2. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

CATEGORY	N	%
AGE		
20-29	6	22.2
30-39	6	22.2
40-49	9	33.3
50-59	4	14.8
60-89	1	3.7
RACE / ETHNICITY		
African American / Black	2	7.4
Caucasian / White	19	70.3
Hispanic	2	7.4
Other	4	14.8
SEX		
Female	17	63.0
Male	8	29.6
Other / Not specified	2	7.4
SEXUAL PREFERENCE		
Heterosexual	22	81.5
Gay / Lesbian	4	14.8
Other	1	3.7
EDUCATION LEVEL		
Some College	7	25.9
College Graduate	5	18.5
Any Graduate work	15	55.6
POLITICAL PARTY		
Democrat	12	44.4
Republican	5	18.5
Other / No Preference	10	37.0
POLITICAL VIEWS		
Liberal	4	14.8
Moderate	6	22.2
Conservative	4	14.8
Depends on situation	9	33.3
Other / Not Specified	4	14.8
RELIGION		
Catholic	3	11.1
Protestant	8	29.6
Non-denominational	2	7.4
None \ Unspecified	14	51.9
RELIGIOUS ORIENTATION		
Liberal	9	33.3
Moderate	4	14.8
Conservative	4	14.8
Fundamentalist	2	7.4
Unspecified / Other	8	29.6
OCCUPATION		
Business or Professional	5	18.5
Homemaker	1	3.7
Library professional	13	48.1
Student	8	29.6
TOTAL for Each Category	27	100%

of the study, with nearly half (48.1%, N=13) of respondents identifying themselves as library professionals and nearly one third (29.6%, N=8) as students. It is interesting and somewhat dismaying to note that of the prospective participants who chose not to return questionnaires, most held "non-professional" positions in areas of housekeeping, facilities management, or operations, such as groundskeeping or warehousing. Their points of view could have broadened the perspective of this study, and future research to remedy this omission is indicated.

Research Question 1

The first research question asks: what do people draw on when they make dispositional or situational attributions in response to ambiguous, neutrally-worded descriptions of behavior lacking specific information regarding social identities or social roles, such as: in- or out-group membership, stereotypical behavior or appearance, culture or other demographic identifiers? As mentioned in Chapter II, Kenworthy and Miller (2002) propose three major coding categories for possible sources of attitudes: externality (e.g., family, news, friends), emotionality (how it feels) and rationality (thought about and decided). Research into attributional causes and effects suggests that the possible functions of attributions include: explanatory (for understanding the social world), predictive (to facilitate expectations about future possibilities), egocentric, (for reduction of anxiety and coping with apparent inconsistencies), and interpersonal (to communicate social identity information) (Keinan and Sivan 2001; Hastie 1984; and Forsyth 1980):

The twenty-seven people in this study showed a remarkable range of responses, supporting aspects of all previously cited literature. Keeping in mind Wimer and

Kelley's (1982) precaution that "for the most part, causal dimensions derive from the minds of attribution theorists, not laypeople," this study suggests the following general groupings for categorizing responses:

- Personal Experience or Interests
 - Individual ethical beliefs
 - Suggestions for counseling or intervention
- Social Norms
 - Interpersonal boundary concerns
 - Risks of behavior
 - Mind your own business
 - Stereotypes or role expectations
- Response to the Vignette Itself Rather Than to the Behavior Depicted
 - Wording
 - Symbolism and Labels
- Impression Management
- Insufficient Information / Multiple Suggestions: Attributional Complexity

Personal Experience or Interests

Gilbert and Malone (1995) and Jones and Nisbett (1972) show that many people consider everyone's perceptions of the world to be necessarily the same as their own. Ross (1977a) reports research demonstrating that "laymen tend to perceive a 'false consensus,' that is, to see their own behavioral choices and judgments as relatively common and appropriate to existing circumstances while viewing alternative responses as uncommon, deviant, and inappropriate." The intuitive psychologist also "judges those responses that differ from his own to be more revealing of the actor's stable dispositions than those responses which are similar to his own."

In addition, studies by Ross et al. (1977) and Read (1983) report that people frequently interpret events and behavior by relying on their apparent similarity to a single previous experience. Taylor and Fiske's (1978) finding that "people are often more

influenced by a single, colorful piece of case history evidence” is amply supported by respondents in this study. Vignette 1, about the teacher who helps parent and kids in a store, brought up many personal connections to the perceived misbehavior, like these:

- *“Somebody needs to whoop those kids’ ass. . . . My mom however is quick to reprimand anyone’s child – hey she’s old school!”*
- *“I remember at a Luby’s restaurant, once, a child running up and down the aisles like a wild monkey. The parents did nothing.”*
- *“My mom and my dad told me if I acted up then no one could go again. (1 brother, eldest; & 2 older sisters) peer pressure worked in my family.”*

Vignette 2, which mentions the neighbor having trouble throwing things away, inspired responses based on background experiences such as the following:

- *“This person has a fire and safety hazard. I spent 5 years as a volunteer fireman and realize the clutter contributes fuel and makes getting out difficult.”*
- *“I grew up in the 30’s, the time of depression, we just naturally saved everything that might be used again.”*
- *“It sounds like me and my father. I don’t judge that person though I can ‘hear’ other people’s voices in my head calling us ‘trashy’.”*
- *“You should see the house I grew up in. Nobody can throw anything away. With a grandmother into recycling – you use everything again and again. There are lots of uses for cereal boxes.”*

Vignette 3, in which a dog-walker removes a flag from a car, touched some respondents' nerves about theft and vandalism, as in these responses:

- *"Having recently had the front yard water hose stolen would put me in this situation."*
- *"My sorority put out cute little bags with a yellow rose displaying a message. Nothing was in the bag but paper but everyone had to dig in anyway. Our flowers were even missing on some."*

Other respondents related to different aspects of the situation:

- *"I used to put coupons on cars for a job. People really don't like coupons on cars!"*
- *"It is entirely possible it was just a random urge, for instance: I am sometimes confronted with an urge in grocery stores to grab a bag of chips and squeeze until all the chips are crumbs."*
- *"Reminds me of a story on the news that a Denton used car salesman had one [flag] on each car and people complained."*
- *"What kind of dog?"*

Individual ethical beliefs

Jones and colleagues (Jones, Worchel, Goethals, et al. 1971; Jones and Harris 1967) see attributions as being partly reflective of the perceiver's own attitudes. Other researchers find that many people believe in a predictable, just world, and that they protect this view with a defensive polarization of attributions which allows them to maintain that people actually do get what they deserve (Dion and Dion 1987; Ellard and

Lerner 1983; Feinberg et al. 1982; Rubin and Peplau 1975). These interpretations can be seen in the following excerpts, in which personal ethical standards are invoked in response to all three vignettes. The individual vignette numbers will be referred to in parentheses, abbreviated (after the first example) as V 1, V 2, or V 3.

- *"I have used laughter / humor as a tool for facilitating conversation – it calms people down, comforts them, and befriends them, all making it easier to get at the root of the issue. Must be careful not to just stop at the laughter and assume that means everything is okay."* (Vignette 1)
- *"Being without teaches that everything has value."* (V 2)
- *"I hope that I would never take something that belongs to someone else. Besides, I am a rule follower, not just laws, rules, even unwritten rules."* (V 3)
- *"I wouldn't have done that only because I think it's wrong to steal people's stuff, but I would have enjoyed watching someone else do it."* (V 3)
- *"Last night a boy stole 4 cartons of cigarettes . . . he'll get what he deserves when he's suffering from lung cancer! (bad karma)"* (V 3)

Suggestions for counseling or intervention

Some responses to Vignettes 1 and 2 express aspects of the proposed functionality and sources of attributions in their suggestions for therapy or other helping approaches:

- *"Joking with the adult and playing with the children may make them feel better temporarily, but ultimately does not solve the problem – some other form of therapy should be added to this routine"*

- *“Saving the parent for a few minutes isn’t really going to help the parent in the long run If the parent is having enough trouble that the teacher feels the need to intervene, perhaps the teacher should suggest a parenting class”*
- *“Identity crisis; sounds familiar. See if you can help them organize and plan a garage sale.”*

Vignette 3’s character, by comparison, draws no suggestions for helpful action, inspiring only mild ambiguity in some respondents:

- *“Perhaps the person is unpatriotic, or having a bad morning.”*
- *“Was he too broke to afford a flag, or was the flag on a vehicle that belonged to a foreigner who might or might not be offended by its presence?”*
- *“He may not have felt guilty about this thinking he wanted to be patriotic and couldn’t buy a flag.”*

Social Norms

Miles and Huberman (1994) point out that social structures and phenomena such as language, institutions, customs, conventions, and hierarchies influence people’s construction of meaning. Perceptions and expectations about behavior – their own as well as others’ – can be affected by membership in organizations and social categories, including nationality, gender, ethnicity, occupation, and political and religious affiliations (Hamilton 1979). Responses to all three vignettes give evidence of such influence.

Interpersonal boundary concerns

Participants express particular concern with observing appropriate boundary lines in social interactions in their responses to Vignette 1:

- *"I wondered if the teacher was over-stepping some boundaries by playing with the children. . . . What if this made the mother / children uncomfortable?"*
- *"I am hesitant to get too involved, because some families might interpret as an intrusion or reflection of their ability or inability to discipline children."*

Risks of behavior

Vignette 1 also elicits anxiety over possible misinterpretation or sanctions:

- *"I usually feel a little apprehension for the adult that isn't the parent."*
- *". . . hopefully the teacher will not be judged as interfering."*
- *"My first thought was about the possibility that the teacher might be placing themselves at risk for potential law suits."*

Mind your own business

Boundary issues are further expressed by several respondents to all three vignettes who question inappropriate involvement in other people's business:

- *"I think the teacher has taken on more than he / she is responsible for. He tries to make up for this by joking and making light of the situation, so the responsibility he has taken on is no longer his."*
- *"If it doesn't stink or become a safety hazard or something, it's none of my business."*
- *"The neighbor deciding his neighbor's house is cluttered may need examining. . . . Is this neighbor a busybody or a peeping tom . . . ? Why does he not mind his own manners?"*
- *"But, it's none of my business unless one of the cars is mine, etc."*

Stereotypes or role expectations

Stereotypes are “unjustified or irrational generalizations” about entire categories of persons, and as research shows, the stronger the stereotype is, the greater is people’s confidence that they can predict individual characteristics from knowing their category membership (Jones and Berglas 1976). People tend to “accept information that confirms their stereotypes and to ignore or explain away information that disconfirms them” (Michener and DeLamater 1999, p.112). Similarly, the persistent belief that people’s behavior corresponds to their dispositions appears to result from faulty assumptions and expectations (Gilbert and Malone 1995; Reeder et al. 1989; Gilbert and Jones 1986). Perceivers “see” confirming evidence of stereotypic expectations even where none exists (Hamilton 1979). A sub-theme of this idea occurs in the use of the pronouns “he,” “she,” and “s/he” or “she / he” to refer to gender, as participants in the present study employ a variety of these forms in discussing vignette characters. However, since it is not possible to determine whether they presume inclusivity or intend to indicate a particular sex, the use of gendered pronouns is not considered as part of the findings.

Studies involving perceptions of role-conferred advantages and disadvantages find that observers “underestimate the extent to which the seemingly positive attributes of the powerful simply reflect the advantages of social control,” rather than innate personal qualities. Other work goes farther to point out that awareness of the situation may not change this view of the disadvantaged as personally inferior. (Johnson et al. 1984; Ross et al. 1977a; 1977b). Participants in the current study echo these findings about

expectations, with statements like the following responses to Vignette 1, which refers to “a teacher who runs public adult education classes”:

- *“Teaching isn’t just a vocation but a way of life for him/her. It doesn’t turn off after he leaves the classroom.”*
- *“An appeal to ‘authority’ i.e. Teacher”*
- *“A picture of a compassionate and giving individual helping another . . . as her role in society is that of a teacher. I think of a teacher as a helper.”*
- *“The educator is always an educator, always thinking of the kids and family.”*

On the other hand:

- *“What difference does it make that person [#] I was a teacher for adult ed?”*
- *“The occupation of the person doesn’t really relate because it would not have been part of the discussion that occurred.”*
- *“[How] does the adult educator have extra qualifications to help with kids?”*

Some drew on expectations about the role of the parent:

- *“This parent was unprepared to have kids. There is no way a child should control a parent.”*
- *“My first thought was the ‘kids’ were juvenile delinquents and the parent a single mother. Why because I have seen mothers (don’t know if they are single, married) having problems with children in stores.”*
- *“If the child just has behavioral problems, discipline should be the responsibility of the parent and not that of the teacher.”*

Vignette 2, which mentions a neighbor having trouble throwing things away, evokes the following expectation-revealing comments:

- *[What went through your mind as you read this?] "Trash and cars in the yard."*
- *"They're insecure, unable to make decisions."*
- *"I know many people like this and they always seem to have something you're needing. I actually thought about my best friend's mother. . . . I've always wanted to be this kind of person, to always be prepared."*

In response to Vignette 3, regarding removal of an American flag from a car, personal expectations show up in statements like these:

- *"Leave it up to a stupid dog person to steal something."*
- *"This person cannot be trusted. If they take a flag then they could take other things from people they know."*
- *"This person's a petty thief and a low life. A theft of a car flag isn't a big deal but shows a lack of character. They've got very little respect for anything."*
- *"This person is stealing a symbol of something he/she totally disregards."*

Response to the Vignette Itself Rather Than to the Behavior Depicted

The sources and functional dimensions of attributions which are referred to above can also be useful in interpreting people's responses to the actual wording or content of vignettes instead of to the behavior they depict.

Wording

Many participants react to the vignettes with what could be considered a rationally derived stance or possible attempt to reconcile discrepancies:

- *"It (the scenario) did not state that a sign was posted – 'please take a flag.' If there was a sign fine. But if the flag was not theirs then that person is a stealer."*
- *"What kind of hard time? Whose kids? Which person?"*
- *"It is kind of a vague situation. . . . It is difficult to say without more details. . . . It all depends on how you read it. Without more details, one is only projecting."*
- *"I had to read it twice, because I was try[ing] to place the parent in the teacher's course rather than the store."*

By contrast, external influences and emotionality appear to stimulate comparisons with the participants' own behavior, as seen in these examples from Vignette 1 (teacher helping parent):

- *"I have mixed feelings. When I've fallen down in public and had a stranger help me up, I appreciated that. However I think that 'helping' with my kids would trigger in me 'mind your own business.' "*
- *"I was told that she did not need any help with her kids so I left her to her own devices."*

Responses to Vignette 2 (trouble throwing things away) include the following:

- *"I keep things from clothes to dinner napkins because I try to connect with everything from my past."*

- *"I also thought of loneliness – maybe the items are a compensation for the individual being / feeling alone, or isolated."*
- *"My apartment had gotten full and when I moved out and back in, it (the experience) helped me to see that I was in a transition – I was clinging to old stuff and not making room for the new."*

Vignette 3 brings out the following examples:

- *"My first thought was I witnessed a robbery, but then I questioned myself for quickly judging their behavior."*
- *"Well, I think if he or she had been disgusted by the flags as I am, he or she would have taken them all off in an act of defiance."*

Symbolism and labels

For some respondents, Vignette 2 calls up particular labels for behavior:

- *"I can understand [that] being a pack rat is a disease, and as annoying as it can be and frustrating it is better to be resourceful – now days everyone wastes everything besides one man's trash is another's treasure."*
- *"This neighbor is possibly obsessive / compulsive, or maybe just a pack-rat."*
- *"Hoarding often a sign of psychological problem. . . . A family friend was a hoarder."*

Vignette 3 sets off a variety of flag-themed symbolic associations:

- *"He should have taken them off all of the cars. If he needed one for something, he could have gone to any store; American Flags are as valuable and attainable as toilet paper."*
- *"Would be cool to see all the flags – how patriotic."*
- *"I've never seen so many American flags on cars as I have in the parking lots of Wal-Mart when I am desperate enough to have to shop there. I've seen cars and trucks completely plastered with them."*
- *"I am in this situation right now. I am surrounded by the sickening patriotic brainwashing of paranoid herd hysteria. I see american flags and 'support our troops' everywhere, but the symbols of patriotism no longer represent our now castrated bill of rights but only represent military domination and revenge."*

Impression Management

Behavioral explanation has been described as a process, involving identifying the behavior, characterizing the actor, and considering the situation. And this process is not static but can be influenced by the goals and demands of the immediate circumstances (Krull 1993; Krull and Dill 1996). Researchers advocate viewing people as "flexible interpreters" who explain the meaning of events "spontaneously as well as tactically" (Uleman et al. 1996). When people are concerned with what kind of impressions their explanations of behavior make on an audience, it can affect the choice of explanations they offer in an attempt to manage those impressions (Malle et al. 1999; 2000).

Responses to all three vignettes can be read as showing concern with the impression they give of the respondent:

- *"I usually keep my distance, however, unless the parent looks at me with those eyes that say 'AARGH!!' Then I smile to show comradeship – one who's 'been there' – and then depending on the parent's reaction, I might speak up."*
- *"My first reaction is [spank the kids] but being an Educ[ation] major – I guess I'd say redirecting the children is the best way to get immediate results without injuring the child's individuality or self confidence."*
- *"I did once witness individuals taking a tv. set out of a bar (I was passing in my car) and putting it in their car trunk. My first thought was I witnessed a robbery, but then I questioned myself for quickly judging their behavior."*

Insufficient Information / Multiple Suggestions:

Attributional Complexity

Research into the conditions under which simple or complex behavioral explanations emerge points out that people "daydream, engage in cognitive play, and are struck by ideas from out of the blue. . . . [They] have at their disposal a whole repertoire of cognitive procedures that they can deliberately deploy or 'put on automatic' " (Uleman et al. 1996). Individuals who habitually make more complex attributions are thought to have greater need for cognition, to spontaneously produce more explanations for personality dispositions, and to select more complex causal attributions for simple behavioral events (Pope and Meyer 1999; Fletcher et al. 1990; 1986; Devine 1989a).

People may not be aware of the distortions and inadequacies in their primary assumptions and the way they analyze their everyday experience, but they cannot be "totally insulated from clashes between expectations and observations, between intuitions

and evidence.” These clashes among an assortment of competing values can be seen in responses to all the vignettes, as can the range from attributional simplicity to complexity. The following are – sometimes astonishingly original – examples of complex thinking:

- *“I’m not sure what ‘a hard time’ exactly means in this situation and I’m not sure what type of store it is. I’m not even sure if this parent is having trouble with his or her own kids or someone else’s kids or if the kids in question are young goats breaking into a feed store or if they are human children.”*
- *“They may enjoy accumulating stuff. Some people do. They may be obsessive / compulsive or they may be trying to fill a need in their life by collecting and accumulating unnecessary stuff. They may be elderly, mentally impaired, or really do have trouble making choices. More details are needed.”*
- *“Could have a background in poverty; could be an antiques collector; could be considering the possible worth of something later; could just be crazy like the rest of us; could be a response to ownership issues.”*
- *“1. They are resourceful; 2. They make attachment easily; 3. They have a hard time organizing; 4. Clutter is comforting; 5. They have other priorities; 6. Not very structured; 7. Not restricted by others’ ideas of clean or appropriate behavior.”*
- *“Maybe it was the owner of the car that had a flag placed on their car and wanted to remove it.”*
- *“I saw a person wanting to feel a part of a greater whole; or a youth, perhaps, who wouldn’t think stealing a cheap item was a big deal; or a person seeking a thrill.”*

- *“Perhaps this was a resident of a country other than America. . . . Maybe the flag that was removed was in a position that would have obstructed the driver’s vision. Maybe that car hadn’t run in over a year so it didn’t ‘need’ a flag on it. Or perhaps the flag was tattered and so it was no longer respectful to fly it. Maybe it was a resident who had a budding collection of stolen American flags in his or her Italian villa. Who knows?”*
- *“First impression – stealing. But it could also be that this individual knows the car owner and was told to take the flag as s/he walked by.”*

In comparison, examples of attributionally simple or dichotomous responses are also found among all three vignettes:

- *“Two things – either the person is a ‘save every last piece of string or wire, I might need it some day’ or the person is too lazy or non caring to keep a neat house.”*
- *“Either very frugal or compulsive.”*
- *“Either the person can’t bear to let things go or he / she is a collector.”*
- *“Ruthless or thoughtful.”*
- *“Could be he had had enough of looking at the flags, or he saw one he would like to have!”*

Research Question 2

This question asks if people’s attributions are related to, or reflective of, their social identities and social roles. In Berg’s words, “all humans residing in and among social groups are the product of those social groups. This means that various values, moral attitudes, and beliefs orient people in a particular manner” (2004, p.155). Participants in

this study bear out that assertion, as demonstrated by attributions which reflect their social selves in the following areas:

- Helping or Relating with Others
 - Issues of interpersonal relations and boundaries
 - Suggested help or therapeutic intervention
- Interest in How Behavior is Perceived
- Political and Religious Ideologies
 - Dualism
 - Role expectations
 - Judgment
- Characteristics Related to Occupational Temperament
 - Indications of business or professional orientation
 - Single-minded “obviousness” of interpretation
 - Focus on details or wording

Helping or Relating with Others

Concern with interpersonal relationships and human welfare can be found in respondents with some role in the social sciences, health studies, education, the arts, or another area of the humanities. This, of course, is not to say that people from other fields or interests do not have similar concerns, but that the people in this category display a consistency throughout their responses which suggests a certain characteristic way of perceiving the world. Vignette numbers are included in this section for illustration, and are abbreviated as V 1, V 2, and V 3.

Issues of interpersonal relations and boundaries

- A full-time Fine Arts student sees the teacher in Vignette 1 as a “*giving individual helping another having a hard time. . . . He / she must be willing to give a lot of themselves away.*” In V 2, “*I also thought of loneliness . . . a compensation for the*

individual feeling alone or isolated.” V 3 referred to “a person wanting to feel a part of a greater whole.”

- A service organization member shows concern for the interpersonal relations of the “neighbor” in Vignette 2, who *“can use them [things filling up the house] as a reason for not having people over,”* and for Vignette 3’s character, who *“could take other things from people they know.”*
- A Registered Nurse and member of oncology and hospice associations says V 3’s character *“violated personal property,”* and asks in reference to V 1’s relational boundaries, *“what does running public adult ed classes have to do with anything?”*
- Responding to V 3, a graduate teaching assistant in Sociology *“might be a little more aware to see if the behavior was ever repeated, or might mention it to the neighbor.”* Vignette 1 also elicits this respondent’s interpersonal concern: *“Similar – light humor with some sorts of folks who are under arrest can ease tension.”*
- A student of Family Studies says the teacher in V 1 *“takes chances offering assistance in a public manner, [and that] some families might interpret [it] as an intrusion or reflection of their ability or inability to discipline children.”* Further sensitivity to relational issues is seen in V 2: *“The need to keep things, or perhaps keep memories attached to items becomes important [in older adults].”*
- A Social Work major wonders *“if the teacher was over-stepping some boundaries by playing with the children. . . Would it have been more appropriate to ask the mother first?”* The behavior in V 2 is described as *“this person is always thinking ahead, wanting to be prepared, and they care about others. ‘What if someone needs this?’”*

Suggested help or therapeutic intervention

- A student majoring in Education suggests *“redirecting the children [as] the best way to get immediate results without injuring the child’s individuality or self confidence.”*
- A Health Studies major says, *“[if] the teacher feels the need to intervene, perhaps the teacher should suggest a parenting class.”*
- A student who participates in theatre and creative writing organizations urges in Vignette 1 that *“some other form of therapy should be added to this routine. . .,”* and goes on in response to V 2 to discuss efforts to intervene and help an obsessive friend clean house, *“and had to give up because he would not let me throw anything away. He even had a particular organization system for his junk.”*

Interest in How Behavior is Perceived

Participants who listed their sexuality as gay / lesbian / other, or who identified their ethnicity as mixed or “other” returned responses expressing concern with people’s perceptions of behavior – their own or anyone else’s.

- One gay / lesbian participant wonders *“what type of ‘playing’ is involved with the kid. Seems like some odd behavior could happen. Teacher is willing to help but may not be aware of how this might look to the parent / others.”*
- An interracial adopted respondent sees in V 1 *“a picture of a compassionate and giving individual helping another having a hard time.”* Vignette 2’s character may *“suffer from a disorder of the mind, or it’s linked to another social situation, or maybe the person is eccentric.”* About V 3: *“I have met people who steal and I generally distrusted them, although I knew they had many personal troubles.”*

- A participant whose sex is identified as “male / female / other” responds to V 1 as
“What a nice thing for someone to do – on the other hand – how could it have been perceived if both parties are strangers?”
- A gay / lesbian person suggests *“establishing rapport before helping someone. . . .*
“what if this made the mother / children uncomfortable?” Vignette 2 elicits this perception: *“I’ve always wanted to be this kind of person, to always be prepared [to have what others need].”*
- A student whose ethnicity is identified as “other” describes the person in V 1 as
“alert to his / her surroundings,” and reveals similar perception in the workplace: *“I give balloons to crying babies so they’ll quiet down and their parents and other customers can eat in peace.”* V 2 suggests that *“this person could also be considerate of others,”* and V 3 urges *“respect[ing] the right of others to display / express their opinions.”*

Political and Religious Ideologies

Social psychologists believe that people’s underlying dispositions may lead to different ways of seeing the world, which in turn leads them to adopt different political identities. Disparities among liberal and conservative attitudes toward personal and social problems are summed up as follows by Skitka et al. (2002):

(a) conservative belief systems are heavily invested in the value of self-reliance and individualism, which will rarely conflict with personal attributions for social or personal problems, and (b) liberals’ ideological belief systems are more likely than conservatives’ to contain commitments to conflicting values.

Participants in this study support these descriptions with responses that reflect their religious and political leanings. Denominational and party affiliations aren't necessarily associated, but ideological preferences appear to be. Those who identify themselves as conservative or fundamentalist in either religion, politics, or both are far more likely than others to display dualistic attitudes, strong expectations about what's appropriate for various social roles, and / or allusions to judging others. And while other respondents may also show some of these tendencies, the responses from this particular demographic group are expressed with little or no uncertainty and greater consistency across vignettes. The sequential numbers that were assigned to response forms as they were turned in are included in this section, in brackets, (for example: [9]) to illustrate the pervasiveness of characteristic thinking in the respondent cited.

Dualism

Attributions are expressed in terms of "if / then" conditions or "either / or" possibilities, as opposites, or as polar extremes of a given dimension.

- *"If the flag was not theirs then that person is a stealer. . . . If they take a flag then they could take other things from people they know."* [9]
- *"Two things, either the person is a 'save every last piece of string or wire, I might need it some day,' or the person is too lazy or non caring to keep a neat house."* [11]
- *"Either very frugal or compulsive."* (V 2) *"Ruthless or thoughtful."* (V 3) [13]
- *"Basically, a thief or tight wad. Theft that she [took] this off someone else's car or a tight wad that she didn't buy herself one."* [24]

- *"Could be helping / could be intruding. . . . the teacher's input could be intrusive instead of altruistic." (V 1) "The person could be altruistic, thinking of others . . . or the person could have a mental condition – OC – that they cannot control." (V 2) "The person could be within his / her proprietary rights or he / she could be a vandal or thief." (V 3) [26]*

In contrast, other respondents who wrote in "either / or" terms were much more tentative, and offered other possibilities which were not necessarily opposites.

- *"The need to keep things, or perhaps keep memories attached to items becomes important. . . . The behavior can mean several things, my thoughts – either the person can't bear to let things go or he / she is a collector." [22]*
- *"The neighbor is possibly obsessive / compulsive, or maybe just a pack-rat. However, the neighbor is, I would guess, an exception to the norm . . . [of] typical consumer-minded individuals." [19]*
- *"The teacher could be construed as a busybody, sticking his / her nose into a situation he was not involved in, or as kind, caring and helpful trying to ease the parent's plight." [15]*
- *"They may or may not be organized; they may or may not be absent minded." [3]*

Role expectations

Responses reflect particular ideas about the behavior believed to be associated with and required from given social roles or positions.

- *"Leave it to a stupid dog person to steal something." [8]*

- *"My first thought was the 'kids' were juvenile delinquents and the parent a single mother. Why because I have seen mothers (don't know if they are single, married) having problems with children in stores – the mothers are talking to the kids like they are adults."* [9]
- *"An appeal to 'authority' ie: Teacher. . . . Controlling though subtle."* [13]
- *"The teacher is using her classroom training outside the classroom. . . The teacher seems to act as if he / she has something of value to contribute to the situation (whether it be humor or professional expertise in child management.) I assume the term 'teacher' means K-12 and not college."* [26]

Other respondents' expectations are more general and flexible, as in these examples:

- *"The teacher may be assisting as per community role, even though he / she may sincerely be interested in helping."* [14]
- *"The teacher has conversational skills that she could use well – she chose verbal and physical responses."* [10]
- *"I think of a teacher as a helper . . . sharing / giving as her role in society is that of a teacher."* [2]

Judgment

The idea of judging is applied to people themselves, rather than to the behavior or the situation.

- *"It's good that the teacher is trying to help the parent; hopefully the teacher will not be judged as interfering."* [11]
- *"Don't we all know people like this but it is never us. . . . Isn't it easy to judge others, easier than ourselves."* [24]
- *"The person could be within his / her proprietary rights or he / she could be a vandal or thief. I cannot judge without more info."* [26]

By comparison, the only other responses using the term judgment refer to the vignette or the situation involved:

- *"The above vignette is too vague to allow the reader to make well-informed judgments."* [19]
- *"It sounds like me and my father. I don't judge that person though I can 'hear' other people's voices in my head calling us 'trashy'."* [6]
- *"My first thought was I witnessed a robbery, but then I questioned myself for quickly judging their behavior."* [2]

Characteristics Related to Occupational Temperament

Sociologists observe that some aspects of social organization have more effect on personality than others. Thorstein Veblen, for example, compared "world views in Europe's postmedieval era of handicraft with those in the machine era" to argue that "prevalent patterns of workmanship pervade our thinking in all spheres of social life" (Turner 1988). Participants in this study support that argument with responses that reflect characteristics which probably shaped their occupational choices.

Given the relative homogeneity of the present sample population, the responses that stood out and gave rise to this category of interpretation were mostly from participants with occupations in technical or administrative business positions. And again, in this section, it is the consistency of the responses across vignettes and categories that distinguish this group of participants from others who may have made similar responses. Vignette numbers are abbreviated V 1, V 2, and V 3, as previously, and sequential participant numbers are again indicated in brackets.

Indications of business or professional orientation

The responses of an Engineer with an MS in Engineering Technology can be seen as evidence of a predisposition to assessment and analysis, in phrases like the following: *"An appeal to authority"* and *"controlling though subtle – achieving a desired outcome thru jocularly"* (V 1); *"Compulsive possible loss of probable futures"* (V 2); and *"Ruthless or thoughtful – his action"* (V 3). [13]

A Librarian (MLS – Library Science) provides a possible variation in the broadly defined business occupations which make up this category (pointing to one direction for necessary future research). This participant's responses assess V 1's character as: *"helpful, has good interpersonal skills, is outgoing, is a problem solver."* V 2's receives this evaluation: *"poor decision-making skills. Attached to things. Possibly obsessive / compulsive disorder. Likely to be the same situation at work. Not necessarily disorganized."* V 3 is summed up as: *"Unreliable. Opportunistic. Possible petty theft culprit at work. Untrustworthy."* [21]

Single-minded “obviousness” of interpretation

Responding to the question “What does this behavior tell you about the person?” a business owner states: “*The teacher likes to help people.*” (V 1); “*He’s a pack rat.*” (V 2); and “*If they like something they’ll take it.*” (V 3). [8]

The Nurse Administrator’s response to the same question implies its obviousness by simply reiterating the wording of V 2: “*that they like things around and may have difficulty choosing to throw things away.*” Vignette 3 elicits the response: “*He obviously didn’t like American flags displayed on cars.*” [12]

The Librarian’s terse “*Very helpful person*” (V 1), and “*Theft*” (V 3) give no suggestion of any other possible interpretation. [21]

Focus on details or wording

Using triple underlines for emphasis of the word “adult”, a business owner responds to V 1 (about the teacher helping the parent) by asking: “*What [how] does the adult educator have extra qualifications to help with kids?*” In answer to Vignette 3’s question “Have you ever been in a situation like this one?” the same respondent writes: “*Not really, don’t have a dog and haven’t seen lots of flags on cars that could be stolen anyway. I am more like the car owner.*” [8]

Similarly, the Nurse Administrator’s response to V 1, also says “*What does running public adult ed classes have to do with anything?*” and in reference to the question “What does this behavior tell you about the person?” asks “*Which person?*” without volunteering possibilities, as other respondents do. [12]

The Engineer suggests an attention to detail of wording by pointing to the derivation of several responses: in V 1, “*An appeal to ‘authority’ ie Teacher;*” and in V 2, “*Either very frugal or compulsive [due to] painting of the person;*” “*Compulsive possible loss of probable futures – due to the ‘choice is very hard.’*” “ [13]

These findings are summarized in the following chapter. Several of the themes which emerged from the data, however, were not found to correspond to any of the specific demographic categories addressed in this study. These unclassified themes are discussed, along with suggestions for future research, in the conclusion.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

Summary

This study set out to investigate what people draw on when they make attributions in explaining ambiguously described behavior, and to discover whether those attributions reflect their social identities and social roles. Qualitative analysis of the data yielded the following major thematic categories from which responses appeared to emerge:

1. Personal Experience or Interests – arising from participants’ own lives, and including:
 - a) Individual ethical beliefs
 - b) Suggestions for counseling or intervention
2. Social Norms – the socialized “rules” for what constitutes acceptable behavior
 - a) Interpersonal boundary concerns
 - 1) Risks of behavior
 - 2) Mind your own business
 - b) Stereotypes or role expectations
3. Response to the Vignette Itself Rather Than to the Behavior Depicted
 - a) Wording
 - b) Symbolism and Labels
4. Impression Management – concern with how one is perceived by the researcher, which results in attempts to create a favorable impression through responses

5. Insufficient Information / Multiple Suggestions: Attributional Complexity – examples of complicated and original thinking in contrast to simple or dualistic attributions

Themes which reflected individual social roles and identities took shape in the following general groupings:

1. Helping or Relating with Others – concern with interpersonal relationships and human welfare is found in respondents with some role in the social sciences, health studies, education, the arts, or another area of the humanities.

a) Issues of appropriateness in interpersonal relations and boundaries

b) Suggested help or therapeutic intervention

2. Interest in How Behavior is Perceived – participants who report gay, lesbian, or other sexual orientation, or who identify their ethnicity as mixed or other, expressed concern with perceptions of behavior – theirs and other people's.

3. Political and Religious Ideologies – liberal or conservative attitudes toward personal and social problems arise from underlying world views which in turn shape political identities and attitudes.

a) Dualism: attributions are expressed in terms of “if / then” or “either / or, as opposites, or as polar extremes

b) Role expectations: beliefs about appropriate and / or required behavior for various social roles

c) Judgment: allusions to judging people, rather than behavior or situations

4. Characteristics Related to Occupational Temperament – participants with occupations in technical or administrative business positions give responses that reflect characteristics required in their chosen occupation.

- a) Indications of business or professional orientation
- b) Single-minded “obviousness” of interpretation
- c) Focus on details or wording

Discussion

These findings are naturally a bit thin in places, given the small sample size – sometimes dealing with as few as two or three examples in a given category – but they are none the less suggestive. The data suggest that people draw largely on what they already know or have been taught to believe or expect, often without critical examination and in spite of evidence to the contrary. Sometimes a single experience can be sufficient to set up expectations for succeeding events. What is interesting, and richly promising for future research, is the finding that not everyone behaves in this way. It appears that some, maybe even most, people stay with these original learnings, filtering new information by excluding or interpreting in various ways to reinforce what they already “know,” while others use their first sets of learned “facts” for reference, taking in subsequent differing or conflicting information for comparison and assimilation into a larger understanding. On the one hand:

We tend to resolve our perplexity arising out of the experience that other people see the world differently than we see it ourselves by declaring that these others, in consequence of some basic intellectual and moral defect, are unable to see things ‘as they really are’ and to react to them ‘in a normal way’. We thus

imply, of course, that things are in fact as we see them and that our ways are the normal ways (Ichheiser, 1949, p.39) (cited in Griffin and Ross 1991).

And on the other:

The intuitive psychologist, however, cannot be totally insulated from clashes between expectations and observations, between intuitions and evidence. From such clashes he may be led to cynicism, self-doubt, or disappointment. Alternatively, he may be led to new psychological insights and a willingness to reshape his own life and the institutions of his society (Ross 1977a).

Implications

The assortment of social roles and identities which could conceivably influence attributional dimensions is practically limitless. It includes tangible as well as intangible factors, such as family composition, significant others' views, early educational influences, confrontation with alternative world views and different cultures, life changes (planned and unplanned), role models, imposed choices of occupation, religion, school, etc., and as many other possibilities as researchers can imagine. As Johnson and his colleagues (1988) surmise, "scientists' personalities may play a role in what is often regarded as a purely rational and empirical enterprise," and their "philosophical presuppositions may mirror their view of themselves." Gouldner's insistence that "reflexive" sociologists identify their own deepest assumptions about people and society in order to view others' beliefs as they do their own is indispensable to the process of making sense of attributions. (Phillips 1988)

Qualitative methodology can contribute substantially to this sense-making process, in that it specifically requires researchers to acknowledge and minimize, as far as possible, their own background assumptions. Researchers are not restricted to a small

number of preconceived variables, and so are free to discover which ones are meaningful to the study participants themselves. People who live the experience being studied are allowed to be the experts, while the researcher plays the role of active learner. When research is conducted in this way it yields data whose rich, narrative, descriptive character balances and completes the picture developed by traditional quantitative work in attribution theory.

In addition, considering the influence of social roles and social identities on attributions expands the scope of study to include the entire world. The reciprocating ways in which people and societies shape each other can be seen holistically, with more of a global perspective. Undoubtedly, many of the pieces in the attribution puzzle are hidden within questions no one has yet thought to ask, and broadening the field can only prove enriching.

Directions for Future Research

Response themes without discernible categories

Three major themes which could not be definitely linked with any of the demographic categories addressed emerged from data analysis. Those themes took shape as follows: “Multiple possibilities or suggested explanations”; “Patriotism and anti-patriotism”; and “Mind your own business.” Pursuit of each of them in future research will be enlightening.

Multiple possibilities or suggested explanations

Seibold and Spitzberg (1982) say that “competent communicators” must “coordinate their perspectives and actions sufficiently to recognize that differences exist

between themselves and others, to assess the nature and extent of these differences, and to divorce themselves from their own perspectives” in order to interact understandably with others. Some of this study’s participants demonstrate greater awareness than others of these requirements and of the likelihood of multiple perspectives.

Research into attributional complexity finds that individuals who rank as more complex have a greater need for cognition and the spontaneous production of more – and additionally complicated – explanations for behavior (Pope and Meyer 1999; Fletcher et al. 1990, 1986; Devine 1989a). What they do not address is the potential reciprocal relationship between attributional complexity and social roles and identities.

Respondents to the current study who fit the above criteria, for example, include representatives of all categories of race, gender and sexuality, occupation, and religious and political ideologies. And as was previously shown, all participants in the study have at least some college, so level of education seems not to be relevant. Apparently, other factors are involved than those addressed by the present research. Possibly, work with characteristics other than social identities and roles may prove illuminating.

Patriotism and anti-patriotism

Vignette 3 prompted ideas about patriotism in several participants in this study, which is not surprising, given the national political atmosphere in America in 2003. What is surprising is the lack of uniformity of demographic characteristics among respondents who make up the two groups with either discernibly favorable or discernibly unfavorable attitudes. The small sample size, of course, also makes generalizing difficult, since religious and political ideologies, as well as sexual preferences are found

to fall in both categories. The influence of race cannot be fairly evaluated, since over 70 percent (N=19) of the participants are White. Among discernibly favorable respondents are:

- a White gay / lesbian, religious moderate, politically liberal Independent, and
- a White heterosexual, religious fundamentalist, moderate Democrat.

Discernibly unfavorable responses are found among:

- a White multi-sexual, religious non-believer, radical anarchist;
- a Black heterosexual, moderate Non-denominational, moderate Democrat;
- a White heterosexual, liberal but religiously non-affiliated, moderate Democrat; and
- a Cajun heterosexual, religious liberal, anarchist whose politics depends on situation.

Obvious classification is defied by this array, and research is called for into other demographic or social influences, such as race, cultural difference, social class, or geographic area, which could conceivably contribute to attribution.

Mind your own business

Among the small number of respondents who prefer to “keep themselves to themselves” and recommend that other people do likewise, virtually all the demographic categories are represented: race / ethnicity, sex, occupation, religious and political ideology. All the respondents but one – who self-identifies as “multi sexual” – are heterosexual. Interestingly, participants who identify themselves as gay or lesbian express more concern with how behavior would be perceived than with suggesting how it be managed, as seen in the “Interest in How Behavior is Perceived” section above. Other

ways of accounting for this apparent discrepancy should be sought among different sources of attribution than those demographic categories addressed in this study.

Different Questions To Be Asked

That the thinking of rational beings can interact with elements of personality is an “unavoidable fact of life, a necessary consequence of the fact that sensing, thinking, and personality all coexist within persons” (Johnson et al. 1988). Yet Kenworthy and Miller (2002) think that “most people are alike in their motivation to perceive their own ideological positions as internally caused and rationally justified and to perceive the positions of the opposing out-group as much less so.” They suggest that “such realizations may help to mediate negotiations of conflict between opposing parties in religious, legal, political, and diplomatic settings of social interaction.” Griffin and Ross (1991) go farther: “To ease conflict in our increasingly heterogeneous communities, and in our ever smaller global village, we must struggle to see reality through our neighbors’ and even our adversaries’ eyes, and to make charitable attributions when we cannot.”

One way of doing that is by asking questions – many, different, and frequent – of all the people with whom we hope to interact and communicate, and then attempting to understand the answers as coming from someone else’s reality. Seeing reality “through our neighbors’ eyes,” with whom we have at least some familiarity, is astonishingly difficult, on those rare occasions that it is even attempted at all, rather than assumed. To see through the eyes of our “adversaries,” requires a leap of the imagination which may exceed present human capacity. There remain many questions to be asked which have yet to be thought of. The field seems wide open, and the work will be rewarding.

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APPENDIX A



Institutional Review Board

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
P.O. Box 425619, Denton, TX 76204-5619
940-898-3375 Fax 940-898-3416
e-mail: IRB@twu.edu

July 16, 2003

Dear Ms. Barga:

Re: Attributions in Social Interactions: a Qualitative Study

The above referenced study has been reviewed by the TWU Institutional Review Board (IRB) and was determined to be exempt from further review.

If applicable, agency approval letters must be submitted to the IRB upon receipt PRIOR to any data collection at that agency. Because you do not use a signed consent form in your study, the filing of signatures of participants with the TWU IRB is not required.

Another review by the IRB is required if your project changes in any way. If you have any questions, feel free to call the TWU Institutional Review Board.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "L. Rubin", is written over a horizontal line.

Dr. Linda Rubin, Chair

Institutional Review Board - Denton

cc. Dr. James Williams, Department of Sociology & Social Work
Graduate School

APPENDIX B

TEXAS WOMAN'S UNIVERSITY
Information for Participants

Title: Attributions in Social Interactions: A Qualitative Study

Investigator: Lynne Barga 940/898-3701
Advisor: James L. Williams, Ph.D. 940/898-2051

Explanation and Purpose of the Research

You are invited to participate in a research study for Ms. Barga's thesis at Texas Woman's University. The purpose of this research is to study the meanings people give to observed behavior and how they may be influenced by individual social roles and identities.

Research Procedures

For this study, you will be asked to read three brief vignettes of individual behavior and then to write out your responses to questions about what you thought and felt. The investigator will then ask a few follow-up questions to probe for greater detail and allow you to write out your answers. Finally, you will be asked to fill out a demographic information form. Your maximum time commitment in the study for the completion of these questionnaires is estimated to be 45 minutes.

Potential Risks

Your participation in the study is completely voluntary, and if you choose to participate, you may withdraw at any time without penalty. A potential risk of participation in any study is the release of confidential information. However, your participation will be completely anonymous. Do not include your name on any of the forms. No identifying information will be requested. It is anticipated that the results of this study will be published in the investigator's thesis as well as in other research publications. However, no names or identifying information will be included in any publication. Confidentiality will be protected to the extent that is allowed by law.

The researchers will try to prevent any problems that could happen because of this research. If you have any trouble with it, let them know at once and they will help you. However, TWU does not provide medical services or financial assistance for injuries that might happen because you are taking part in this research.

Questions Regarding the Study

If you have any questions about the research study you may ask the researchers; their phone numbers are at the top of this form. If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this research or the way this study has been conducted, you may contact the Texas Woman's University Office of Research and Grants at 940-898-3375 or via e-mail at IRB@twu.edu. You will be given a copy of this form to keep. We appreciate your time, your interest, and should you choose to participate, your valuable input into this study.

APPENDIX C

Attributions in Social Interactions
Vignettes & Questions

The return of your completed questionnaire constitutes your informed consent to act as a participant in this research. Please read each of the 3 vignettes and respond to the questions following. Use as much space as you need, including the backs of sheets if necessary. Your responses will be completely anonymous.

1. A teacher who runs public adult education classes tries to help a parent who's having a hard time with kids in a store. Joking with the adult and playing with the kids seems to help.

- What went through your mind as you read this? Please explain fully.

- What does this behavior tell you about the person? Please explain your thoughts.

- Have you ever been in a situation like this one, and if so, give details.

2. A neighbor has trouble throwing things away, since all the items could be useful to someone else or might be needed later. Having to make a choice is very hard, so the house is getting more and more filled up.

- What went through your mind as you read this? Please explain fully.

- What does this behavior tell you about the person? Please explain your thoughts.

- Have you ever been in a situation like this one, and if so, give details.

3. A local resident who was out walking the dog one morning saw that American flags were displayed on several parked cars, and took one off of one of the cars.

- What went through your mind as you read this? Please explain fully.

- What does this behavior tell you about the person? Please explain your thoughts.

- Have you ever been in a situation like this one, and if so, give details.

APPENDIX D

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Your present age _____ Occupation: _____

Race or ethnicity: _____ Female _____ Male _____

Last year of school completed (choose one): Some high school _____ High school graduate _____
Some college _____ College graduate _____ Any post-graduate work _____

Are you currently a college or university student? Yes _____ No _____

What is (or was) your most recent major field of study? _____

If you have a religious preference, which of the following best describes your views:

Fundamentalist _____ Conservative _____ Moderate _____ Liberal _____

Of which religion, if any, are you a member? _____

If you have a political party preference, which one? _____

Which of the following best describes your political views:

Liberal _____ Moderate _____ Conservative _____ Depends on the situation _____

What do you consider to be your sexual preference:

Heterosexual _____ Gay or Lesbian _____ Other (please specify) _____

If you are a member of any professional or civic organizations, please list up to 3 that mean the most to you:

If you are a member of any religion-affiliated associations (for example: Knights of Columbus, B'nai B'rith, American Red Crescent, etc.), please list up to 3 that mean the most to you:

VITA

Lynne Barga was born in Celina, Ohio, on February 7, 1951, to Vera Gagel Barga and F.L. (Bill) Barga. She started school in Sao Paulo, Brazil, where the family lived for six years. After returning to the United States, she graduated from Kelly High School in Beaumont, Texas. Work toward the Bachelor's degree was done at the University of Houston, Baylor University in Waco, TX, and University of the Incarnate Word, in San Antonio, Texas, where she was awarded the B. A. in Fashion and Theatre Design, in December, 2000. In May, 2001, she entered the graduate program in Textile Science at Texas Woman's University, switching to Sociology after being introduced by her first class in Social Systems to the field which is now home. She worked as a Graduate Research Assistant in the Blagg-Huey Library's Reference department while pursuing the M.A. in Sociology.

This thesis was typed by: Lynne R. Barga