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Overattribution Effect:
The Role of Confidence and Attributional Complexity

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The overattribution effect has proved to be a well-replicated if not a tenacious finding in the social psychological literature. This paper explores the possibility that 1) the robustness of the overattribution effect may be partially due to the insensitivity of traditional measures to subjects' judgmental uncertainty (i.e., attitude extremity scores) and 2) ability (i.e., attributional complexity) and motivation (i.e., normativeness of the position defended in the essay) may interact to diminish the overattribution effect. On the basis of Jones and Davis's (1965) correspondent inference theory, confidence measures were included to tap subjects' judgmental uncertainty. Subjects, who were identified as being high versus low in attributional complexity (Fletcher, Danilovics, Fernandez, Peterson, and Reeder 1986) were exposed to essays in favor of (normative) or opposed to (counternormative) federal support for AIDS research that had been prepared under free choice or constraint conditions. Subjects then estimated the essayist's attitude on the issue and rated their confidence in the attitude estimate. Attitude extremity scores showed the standard overattribution effect. As predicted, however, diminution of the overattribution effect was found for high-complexity subjects evaluating counternormative essays prepared under constraint. The discussion focuses on qualifications on the previously established pervasiveness of the overattribution effect.

Many studies using the attitude attribution paradigm have reported that subjects are insensitive to situational constraints and show a decided preference for dispositional explanations for others' behavior. In such studies, subjects are presented with an essay to evaluate and are provided with information regarding the conditions under which the essay was prepared. The crucial information concerns whether the essay, pro or con, was prepared under conditions of high choice (i.e., free choice of essay position) or low choice (i.e., assignment of essay position). Subjects then estimate the essayist's attitude on the essay topic. Ratings of the essayist's attitude in the direction of the essay position are taken as evidence of correspondence of attitude attributions.

The typical finding in these studies is that attitude estimates were more extreme in the high-choice than in the low-choice situations, but that even under low-choice conditions subjects attributed essay-consistent attitudes to the essay writers (Jones and Harris 1967; Jones, Worchel, Geothals, and Grumet 1971; Miller, Jones, and Hinkle 1981; Miller and Rorer 1982; Miller, Schmidt, Meyer, and Colella 1984; Tetlock 1985). Subjects in the low-choice conditions estimated attitudes that were more extreme than the objective situation would appear to warrant. These subjects had no diagnostic information on the essayist's underlying attitude; the essay position was assigned and thus may or may not have reflected the essayist's true attitude. Subjects appeared to behave as if the position advocated in the essay was at least somewhat diagnostic of the essayist's attitude; this is the classic example of the overattribution effect (Jones 1979).1 The overattribution effect has been well replicated and has proved to be difficult to eliminate (e.g., Miller et al 1984; Quattrone 1982).

Although many attempts have been made to explain this robust and tenacious finding, there remains considerable controversy regard-

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1 Ross (1977) referred to the preference for dispositional explanations as the "fundamental attribution error." Whether the preference really represents an error has been the subject of some debate (Harvey, Town, and Yarkin, 1981) but the tendency appears to be pervasive and remarkably robust. We will use the term "overattribution effect" to refer to observers' tendency to overestimate the role of personal or dispositional causes of behavior and to underestimate the role of situational constraints on behavior because it seems to be more descriptive and less value-laden than the attribution error terminology.

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The Overattribution Effect: Assessing Correspondent Inferences

In their theory of correspondent inferences, Jones and Davis (1965) define correspondence of inferences as a perceiver’s confidence that the attribution that he or she made is correct. According to Jones and Davis, “Operationally, correspondence means ratings toward the extremes of trait dimensions which are given with confidence” (p. 264). In discussing the use of correspondence in research settings, Jones and Davis specifically recommend that the perceiver be presented with “rating scales designed to measure the strength of the trait attribution to the actor and his confidence in making the rating” (p. 224, emphasis added). This distinction between the extremity of judgment and confidence in those judgments becomes important because most of the research on the overattribution effect examines extremity but not confidence judgments. When confidence is examined, it is only of secondary importance.

Drawing from Jones and Davis, I suggest that it is not enough to know the extremity of subjects’ ratings; it is also important to measure their confidence in the ratings. These are two separate judgments and may be influenced by different factors. Previous failures to eliminate the overattribution effect (Jones, Riggs, and Quattrone 1979; Miller and Rorer 1982; Miller et al. 1984; Quattrone 1982) might have been more successful if the researchers had measured confidence, which may be a more sensitive measure of the strength of subjects’ belief in the attribution.2

Examination of the attitude attribution literature suggests that although the overattribution effect occurs, subjects are not entirely insensitive to situational factors such as whether the essay was written freely or under constraint. For example, Miller et al. (1984) demonstrated a somewhat puzzling finding: even when subjects recognized and reported that essays written under constraint were not diagnostic of the essayist’s underlying attitude (i.e., the essay was “not useful” for making an attribution), their attitude estimates reflected correspondence between the opinions expressed in the essay and the essay writer’s underlying opinions.

Miller et al. (1984) argued that this finding suggests that the attitude attribution paradigm itself contains strong pressures to consider the essay diagnostic of the essayist’s attitude and to use it to make the required attitude judgment (see also Wright and Wells 1988). They reasoned that subjects’ attitude attributions may reveal more about the experimental setting than about subjects’ true beliefs concerning the essayist’s underlying attitude. Miller et al. suggested, “As traditionally executed, the paradigm may prevent a majority of subjects from expressing reservations concerning the value of the constrained essay” (p. 160). Because subjects do not receive the option of refusing to make the attribution, the request for an attitude estimate imposes pressures for subjects to attempt an attribution.3 In support of this idea, Miller and Rorer (1982) concluded that subjects may make the attitude attributions “even if an attribution must be made with less than strong conviction” (p. 57). Other studies have shown that increasing the salience of the

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2 In the few studies whose manipulations were extreme enough to reduce or reverse the overattribution effect, confidence measures, when taken, were consistent with the attitude extremity scores.

3 Miller et al. (1984) argued further that subjects may believe that the experimenter would view judgments in the middle of the attitude attribution rating scale as evidence of judgmental incompetence, which is undesirable, rather than as a measure of uncertainty. Their second experiment suggested, in fact, that subjects were less favorable in their impressions of other subjects who make moderate ratings. Miller et al. interpreted these data as suggesting that self-presentational concerns may be present in the attitude attribution paradigm, which discourage subjects further from discounting the diagnostic value of essays written under constraint.
constraint manipulation did not eliminate the overattribution effect (Jones et al. 1979; Snyder and Jones 1974).

Thus in at least some of these studies, it appears that subjects were sensitive to situational factors but were not provided with measures that would reveal the judgmental uncertainty. If such measures had been included, conclusions about the pervasive nature of the overattribution effect might have been tempered. One goal of the present study was to examine the possibility that subjects do make attributions under low-choice conditions, as Miller et al. (1984) suggested, but that under some conditions they are not confident in these attributions. To explore this possibility, the present study includes measures of both extremity of attitude attributions and confidence in those attributions.

The Overattribution Effect: Ability and Motivation

The present section considers the possibility that before the overattribution effect can be reduced on any measure, 1) subjects must have the ability to generate and consider multiple causes for behavior and 2) in addition, subjects must be motivated to engage in complex causal reasoning. To the extent that either factor is missing, I suggest that subjects will take advantage of well-practiced heuristic causal explanations (Jones 1979; Nisbett and Ross 1980).

Fletcher, Danilovics, Fernandez, Peterson, and Reeder (1986) suggested that people differ in the complexity of the attributional schemata they use in explaining human behavior. In general, Fletcher et al. suggested that people high in attributional complexity are able to consider many possible causes for behavior (e.g., internal, external) and can engage in complex (i.e., flexible) causal reasoning. In contrast, attributionally simple people are not able to engage in this type of flexible, complex causal reasoning. As with many abilities, attributional complexity is asymmetrical (cf. Reeder and Brewer 1979). Whereas attributionally complex individuals can use either complex or simple schemata in explaining behavior, low-complexity individuals are restricted to using simple schemata.

Explanations of the overattribution effect have appealed to the notion of the lazy processor (Miller et al. 1984; Taylor 1981; Tetlock 1985). For example, Miller and Rorer (1982) suggested that in the attitude attribution paradigm, subjects tend to misapply the overlearned rule that acts correspond to dispositions. This rule works in most settings (Jones 1979); without specific cues that the rule may be inappropriate, subjects are efficient information processors. Fletcher et al. (1986) recognized that it is impossible for people to produce complex explanations for all behavior, and argued that motivation may be the type of cue that would stimulate careful information processing. Indeed, Tetlock (1985) found that motivation, operationalized as personal accountability, encouraged subjects to be discriminating and complex information processors who recognized that behavior is only sometimes diagnostic of underlying attitudes or dispositions. In addition, information that contradicts expectancies also seems to motivate complex information processing. For example, when subjects expect an essay writer to have an extreme attitude and when the essay prepared is relatively weak, subjects question the extremity of the essayist’s attitude (Jones et al. 1971).

When motivation is lacking, Fletcher et al. suggested that both high- and low-complexity people are likely to use simple attributional schemata or heuristic rules to generate causal explanations (e.g., that behavior corresponds to dispositions). Thus they suggested that differences between high- and low-complexity people are likely to be evident when people have both the motivation and the time to engage in attributional processing.

Although their research was devoted to developing and validating the attributional complexity scale, Fletcher et al. made a specific prediction with regard to the overattribution effect (or fundamental attribution error, as they cited it). They predicted that “complex individuals are less prone to this error than people with simple attribution schemata” (p. 883). This prediction, however, is a main effect prediction and is made with regard to the traditional measure of the overattribution effect (i.e., judgment extremity). Two qualifications on this prediction are suggested. First, moderations of the overattribution effect are expected to be manifested on confidence measures but not necessarily on the attitude extremity measures (cf. Miller et al. 1984). Second, ability and motivation are expected to interact such that the overattribution effect will be moderated only under conditions of high ability and high motiva-
tion. Under conditions of high ability and low motivation or low ability and either high or low motivation, the overattribution effect is expected to emerge as in previous studies.

Thus in the present research, we examined the role of both attributional complexity and confidence in the overattribution effect. I measured attributional complexity with the Fletcher et al. (1986) attributional complexity scale. I manipulated motivation by varying the position advocated in the essay (Jones and Harris 1967; Jones et al. 1971). The issue is whether the federal government should support research to find a cure for acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS). Pretesting showed that subjects favored government-supported AIDS research overall and believed that others also favored such support. Thus the normative or expected position favored government support of AIDS research. Because unexpected or unusual events stimulate causal thinking (see Hastie 1984 for a review), the essay opposing federal support for AIDS research was expected to motivate more careful processing of the essay.

Both high- and low-complexity subjects were predicted to be confident in their attributions for the “pro” essay under both free choice and assigned conditions. That is, subjects knew the popular position; reading an essay favoring this position was not likely to stimulate careful thought. When evaluating the “con” essay, which should have motivated subjects to engage in more careful processing, high-complexity subjects were expected to be influenced by the essay assignment manipulation. When the essay position was chosen freely, subjects would use this information to conclude that the position reflected the essayist’s underlying attitude. When the essay position was assigned, however, high-complexity subjects would use the constraint information to conclude that the essay might or might not reflect the essayist’s attitude; their lowered confidence scores would reflect this uncertainty. Low-complexity subjects were not expected to be differentially sensitive to the essay assignment manipulated in their confi-

4 We pretested several issues, including several that were used in previous studies, on 11-point scales ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree (e.g., capital punishment, gun control, abortion, students parking cars on campus). The AIDS issue produced the most extreme mean score (M = 7.69) with the smallest standard deviation (sd = 1.89).

**METHOD**

**Subjects and Design**

Subjects (N = 98) from introductory psychology courses participated in small groups (between four and eight) and received course credit for their participation. The design of the study was an essay direction (pro vs. con) x essay assignment (free choice vs. assigned) x attributional complexity (high vs. low) between-subjects factorial. Subjects were assigned randomly to the essay direction and essay assignment conditions and assigned to high and low attributional complexity on the basis of a median split (mdn = 39.5) of scores on the Fletcher et al. (1986) Attributional Complexity Scale (see below).

**Procedure**

Subjects were told that they would participate in a study that involved making judgments about other people. The stimulus materials were presented in booklets that contained the manipulations and the dependent measures. The first page contained the essay position manipulation and the essay (handwritten) either favoring or opposing federal funding of AIDS research. The following pages contained the attitude estimate and the confidence, personal attitude, and public attitude judgments. The final pages of the booklet contained the 28-item Attributional Complexity Scale. After filling out the scale, subjects were debriefed and were thanked for their participation.5

**Essay Position Assignment**

Before reading the essay, subjects were provided with background information con-
cerning the conditions under which the essay was prepared. They were told that subjects in a previous psychology experiment had been asked to imagine that they were engaged in a debate over whether or not federal money should be spent on research to find a cure for AIDS. Subjects then learned that the subject in the previous study either 1) chose freely the position advocated in the essay or 2) was assigned the position on the basis of a coin toss. Subjects were then informed that the students in the previous study had been instructed to write a convincing 100- to 150-word essay in favor of or against the issue (the essay assigned condition indicated the direction of the essay).

Normative and Counternormative Essays

Each essay was approximately 150 words long and contained five major arguments supporting or opposing the following statement: “Federal money should be spent on research to find a cure for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome.” The essays were composites of actual essays written by students under the conditions described above. The essay favoring federal support for AIDS research argued that the purpose of the government is to look out for the welfare of its people and that AIDS is a threat to the people; discrimination can’t be made on the basis of moral judgments about the activities of those hit hardest by the disease; research to find cures for other diseases (e.g., diabetes, cancer) is supported; and so on. The essay against support for AIDS research argued that despite all the publicity, AIDS affects only a very small population; people at risk should realize the potential danger and deal with it themselves; there are many more common diseases (e.g., diabetes, cancer) that people contract through no fault of their own, and money should be spent on these diseases; and so on.

Dependent Measures

After reading the essay, subjects were asked to complete a number of dependent measures. First they were asked to estimate the essay writer’s actual personal belief on the issue of spending federal money on research to find a cure for AIDS. Their attitude estimates were measured on a standard seven-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly against) to 7 (strongly in favor), which has been used in previous research in the attitude attribution literature. Subjects were then asked to indicate their level of confidence in their estimate of the essayist’s attitude. Confidence was measured on a 10-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 10 (extremely). Questions to tap subjects’ personal attitude and their perception of the general public’s attitude toward spending federal money to find a cure for AIDS were also included. Subjects indicated their judgments on seven-point scales ranging from 1 (strongly against) to 7 (strongly in favor).

Finally, subjects completed the 28-item Attributional Complexity Scale (Fletcher et al. 1986).6 They indicated their level of agreement with each of the items on scales ranging from −3 (strongly disagree) to +3 (strongly agree). Complexity scores are determined by adding up subjects’ responses to each of the questions after reverse scoring half the items such that agreement indicates the more complex response. Thus overall, higher scores indicate higher levels of attributional complexity.

RESULTS

The primary purpose of the present research was to examine the role of attributional complexity and confidence in the attitude attribution paradigm. In the following discussion, subjects’ attitude estimates are examined first. These findings are compared to those in the existing attitude attribution literature. Then subjects’ confidence judgments in their attitude estimates are considered. Attitude estimate data were expected to replicate the existing attitude attribution research. Attributional complexity was not expected to interact with the essay position or essay assignment manipulations on the attitude extremity measure. On subject’s confidence judgments, however, attributional complexity was expected to interact with essay

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6 The Attributional Complexity Scale is made up of seven subscales, each containing four items. These subscales are designed to measure what Fletcher et al. (1986) believe to be the theoretical components of attributional complexity. The subscales correspond to the following attributional constructs: motivational component, preference for complex explanations, metacognition, behavior as a function of interaction, complex internal explanations, complex contemporary external explanations, and use of temporal dimensions. Because these subscales are not of primary interest to us, we will examine only subjects’ overall attributional complexity scores.
direction and essay assignment. As argued previously, confidence judgments may allow subjects to manifest uncertainty in their attributions and therefore may provide a more sensitive index of the degree of correspondence of subjects’ attributions (cf. Jones and Davis 1965; Miller et al. 1984).

**Attitude Estimates: Replicating the Overattribution Effect**

Subjects’ attitude estimates were submitted to an essay direction (pro vs. con) x essay assignment (free choice vs. assigned) x attributional complexity (high vs. low) between-subjects factorial. As in previous research, the position taken in the essay influenced subjects’ attitude estimates. Subjects who read the pro essay estimated the essay writer’s attitude to be much more favorable toward federal support for AIDS research (M = 5.88) than did those who read the con essay (M = 2.71, F (1, 90) = 168.25, p < .00001).

Also replicating previous research was a significant essay direction x essay assignment interaction (F (1, 90) = 17.46, p < .0001). This interaction has been interpreted as showing a greater correspondence of attitude attributions under free choice than under assigned conditions. That is, when the essay writer presumably had free choice of position in the essay, subjects made more extreme ratings in the direction advocated in the essay on the attitude estimate scale (pro = 6.28, con = 2.09) than when the essay writer presumably was assigned the position (pro = 5.48, con = 3.33). The effect of essay direction, however, was highly significant under the essay assigned conditions (F (1, 47) = 29.33, p < .0001). This finding has been taken as evidence of the overattribution effect; subjects apparently infer correspondent attitudes even when the essay position was assigned. The only other significant effect on the attitude estimate measure was for attributional complexity. Overall, subjects high in complexity made more extreme ratings (M = 4.58) than did those low in complexity (M = 4.01, F (1, 90) = 5.46, p < .02). Attributional complexity, however, did not interact with either essay direction or essay assignment.

**Confidence Measures and the Overattribution Effect**

The attitude estimate data replicate the classic overattribution effect. The confidence data reveal a different pattern, one consistent with the ability and motivation analysis presented in the introduction. Overall, subjects were less confident in their attitude estimates when the essay position was assigned (M = 6.50) than when the essay position was chosen freely (M = 7.79, F (1, 90) = 11.08, p < .001). In addition, subjects were more confident in their estimates after reading pro essays (M = 7.69) than con essays (M = 6.61, F (1, 90) = 7.89, p < .006). This finding is consistent with the notion that the pro essay represents the normative position and therefore the expected position.

The main effect of essay direction, however, was qualified by an essay direction x attributional complexity interaction (F (1, 90) = 8.64, p < .004). Whereas low-complexity subjects were equally confident in their estimates following pro essays (M = 7.13) and con essays (M = 7.18), high-complexity subjects were more confident in their estimates following pro essays (M = 8.27) than con essays (M = 6.05). Most important, the analysis also revealed the predicted essay direction x essay assignment x attributional complexity interaction (F (1, 90) = 4.00, p < .05). This interaction is depicted in Figure 1.

Separate analyses were conducted to examine the essay direction x attributional complexity interactions at each level of essay assignment. Although the essay direction main effect approached significance (F (1, 45) = 3.76, p < .06) when the position advocated was chosen freely, high- and low-complexity subjects’ confidence ratings were not affected differentially by the essay direction (F (1, 45) = 0.55, p < .46). In contrast, when the essay position was assigned, not only did the essay direction main effect reach significance (F (1, 45) = 4.18, p < .05), but the essay direction x attributional complexity interaction was also significant (F (1, 45) = 10.11, p < .003). Overall, when the essayist was assigned the essay position, subjects were more confident after reading the pro (M = 7.13) than the con essay (M = 5.90). Yet the essay direction x attributional complexity interaction reveals that whereas the low-complexity subjects’ confidence judgments were unaffected by the position advocated in the essay (Ms = 6.25 and 6.93 for pro and con respectively), high-complexity subjects were confident after reading the pro
essay (M = 8.00) but not the con essay (M = 4.86). Thus when the essay writer had no choice of position in the essay, high-complexity subjects were confident only when the essay represented the normative position. They expressed much lower levels of confidence when the essay reflected the counternormative position. This finding is important because this situation embodies the conditions that theoretically are necessary to moderate the overattribution effect: ability to engage in complex attributional processing and sufficient motivation to engage in such processing.7

7 All subjects had been asked to report their own personal attitudes toward federal funding for AIDS research and what they believed to be the public's attitude toward the issue. Our pretesting suggested that most subjects were in favor of federal support for AIDS research and that they believed the public to support this position as well. To ensure that subjects' own attitudes or their perceptions of the public's attitudes were not influencing the effects on the attitude estimate and the confidence ratings, we repeated both the attitude estimate and the confidence analyses, treating as covariates the subjects' personal attitude and their perceptions of the public's attitude toward federal support for AIDS research. Neither subjects' personal attitudes nor their perceptions of the public's attitudes had a significant influence on any of the previously described effects.

DISCUSSION

The data provided strong support for the present analysis of conditions necessary to
attenuate the overattribution effect. It was argued that subjects must have both the ability and the motivation to engage in complex causal reasoning and that judgments must be made on scales sensitive to judgmental uncertainty. Using traditional measures in the attitude attribution paradigm (i.e., extremity of attitude), this study replicated the standard overattribution effect. Subjects made judgments of the essayist’s attitude correspondent with the direction of the essay even under conditions in which the essay presumably was not diagnostic of the essayist’s underlying attitude (i.e., when the essay position was assigned).

When I used confidence measures (Jones and Davis 1965), as predicted, I found attenuation of the overattribution effect only for attributionally complex subjects considering counternormative essays written under constraint. In this instance both ability and motivation were present. When ability was high (i.e., in high-complexity subjects) but motivation was absent (i.e., when the essay reflected the normative position), subjects made correspondent inferences and were confident in these judgments whether the position was assigned or was chosen freely. When ability was low (i.e., in low-complexity subjects) neither essay direction (i.e., motivation) nor essay assignment influenced subjects’ judgments; low-complexity subjects made correspondent attributions and were confident in those attributions.

Through the years researchers have been surprised that people seem to manifest biases or errors when making judgments about others. Much theoretical and empirical work has attempted to determine whether the cause of the bias resides in the subjects as insensitive or lazy information processors (Fiske and Taylor 1984; Jones 1979; Nisbett and Ross 1980) or in the situation in which the research was conducted (Miller et al. 1984; Quattrone 1982; Tetlock 1985; Wright and Wells 1988). Most often the effect has been attributed to people’s reliance on simple, overlearned judgmental heuristics. This finding has been viewed as a shortcoming in the way in which people typically process information about others.

It seems possible, however, that researchers have manifested the very bias or error they are studying by assuming that the “shortcoming” existed in the subjects’ cognitive processing rather than in the measurement of the dependent variable of interest in the experimental setting. We agree with Miller et al. (1984) that more attention should be focused on specific measurement issues in the overattribution paradigm. Miller et al. (1984) and Wright and Wells (1988) suggested that the traditional paradigm may “create” the bias rather than reflecting a true bias. If we had used only the attitude extremity scores, we would have concluded along with many other studies that the overattribution effect is strong and difficult to attenuate. Adding confidence measures enabled us to tap into the judgmental uncertainty that Miller et al.’s “not useful” ratings suggest subjects probably experience.

In addition, the present emphasis on ability and motivation factors as potential moderators of the overattribution effect suggests qualifications on the general overattribution effect. All people are not equally able to engage in complex causal reasoning; even those who are able are not likely to do so in all situations. Much of the previous research has not offered subjects a great deal of motivation to generate complex explanations for the essayist’s behavior (Tetlock 1985). In many of the studies neither the pro nor the con essay position was particularly normative or counternormative (e.g., capital punishment, affirmative action), nor were subjects made to feel accountable for their judgments. As a result, it would not be particularly unusual for an essayist to defend either position; as Miller et al. suggest, the paradigm itself legitimizes making the attribution.

Moreover, perceivers have had a great deal of practice in using certain rules, such as attributing attitudes to individuals on the basis of what they say. Jones (1979) suggested that there is ecological validity for making correspondent attributions. Correspondent inferences are often correct; when they are incorrect, perceivers typically either do not receive feedback regarding their inaccuracy or, alternatively, the error does not lead to serious consequences. Tetlock (1985) goes so far as to suggest that the overattribution effect is a function of fairly automatic processes. These processes can be overridden, but only in the presence of high levels of motivation that encourage careful attention to all relevant information (e.g., both internal and external explanations for behavior) available to perceivers.

Although the bulk of evidence suggests
support for the overattribution effect, it is important to compare the present study to other studies that observed an attenuation of this effect (Jones et al. 1971; Tetlock 1985). Tetlock (1985), for example, manipulated subjects' personal accountability for explaining or justifying their attributions to others. The accountability manipulation was effective in eliminating the overattribution effect only when it was presented before the subjects read the essay. Tetlock argued that accountability sensitized subjects to potential shortcomings in the views they hold and helps to highlight alternative ways of viewing events. His analysis suggests that the accountability manipulation does much more than simply make salient the constraint information and in this way his study differs from the typical attitude attribution study. Studies that attempted merely to highlight constraint have not produced diminution of the overattribution effect (Jones et al. 1979; Miller et al. 1984; Miller and Rorer 1982; Snyder and Jones 1974). Exactly how personal accountability leads to attenuation of the effect remains unclear, however.

Tetlock’s results are not consistent with other attempts to eliminate the overattribution effect by manipulating subjects’ motivation level. Quattrone (1982), for example, found that neither monetary incentives nor positive feedback incentives (e.g., possessing valuable interpersonal skills) were sufficient to eliminate the overattribution effect under constraint conditions. The reasoning that such incentives would be sufficient to eliminate the effect presumes that subjects know what constitutes a “correct” or a “good” response.

What should be considered a correct response in the attitude attribution paradigm, however, is at best ambiguous. Subjects appear to have a different concept of a good response than do the experimenters conducting the studies. Miller et al. (1984) argued that if subjects are sensitive to the constraint information and discount the essay, their attitude estimates should approach the midpoint of the scale. These findings are highly consistent with the confidence data in this study. Miller et al.’s second study, however, suggests that subjects associated positive characteristics only with those who made relatively extreme attributions in the standard paradigm. Perhaps the pressures built into the experimental paradigm to make dispositional attributions encourage subjects to perceive relatively extreme attributions as “correct” responses.

The most important question raised in the present research is what evidence should be taken as diminution of the overattribution effect. In the traditional paradigm, the only condition that was required to support the overattribution effect was that pro and con essays prepared under constraint elicited attitude attributions that differed significantly from each other. The rationale for this standard of comparison is not clear, however. In addition, the fact that subjects’ attributions were less extreme in the assigned than in the free-choice conditions, although always noted, has not been interpreted fully. Subjects in this paradigm have been responsive to the constraint information—but how much of a shift away from the free-choice ratings should be sufficient to reflect sensitivity to the constraint information? The literature suggests that the correct response for subjects evaluating essays prepared under constraint is to make judgments near the midpoint of the scale (e.g., Jones and McGillis 1976; Jones et al. 1971; Miller et al. 1984; Tetlock 1985). This analysis suggests that an alternative way to approach the diminution of the effect would be to examine the extent to which attitude attributions under constraint conditions differ from the midpoint of the scale or from some empirically established normative response.8

It is beyond the scope of the present paper to analyze completely which responses should be taken as evidence of diminution of the overattribution effect, but the confidence data (see also Miller et al. 1984; Wright and Wells 1988) suggest that it would be prudent for researchers to reexamine the traditional measures of the overattribution effect. Alternative measures in conjunction with the ability and motivation analysis of the attribution process may help to identify more clearly the conditions under which people can be ex-

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8 When viewed from this perspective, the present study supports diminution of the overattribution effect even on attitude extremity scores. That is, only high-complexity subjects considering counternormative essays prepared under constraint showed a diminution of the overattribution effect on attitude extremity scores. These subjects’ mean attitude attribution scores did not differ significantly from the midpoint of the scale. Subjects’ attitude attribution scores in each of the other conditions of the study were significantly different from the midpoint of the scale. These findings are highly consistent with the confidence data in this study.
pected to fall back on well-practiced, heuristic rules and under which they may engage in more complete causal reasoning. Perhaps it is a hopeful sign that researchers have been surprised that our subjects seemed overly susceptible to errors and biases in making judgments about others. This type of puzzle has motivated researchers to search for a more complete understanding of this phenomenon.

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