

WHO IS THE PERSON RESPONSIBLE? (Toward a Social Psychology of Responsibility Attribution)

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Abstract

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

Keywords: Responsibility, Social Psychology, Responsibility Attribution

Özet

Bugün baskın olarak kabul gören sorumluluk modeli; sosyal psikoloji kaynaklı eleştirel bir perspektifin sonucudur. Sorumlulukta temel nitelik bireyin ne olduğu ve ne olacağına yönelik fiziksel ve sosyal alandaki rolleridir. Bu rolleri sorumluluk niteliği modeline bağlı olarak; (1) kendisi için anlamlandırdığı uygun sorumluluk alternatifleri, (2) yetişkin onayını dikkate alan kurullarla uyumlu bir sosyal psikoloji yaklaşımı ve (3) "ikinci derecede roller" karşı "baskın roller" çalışmaları için sosyal psikologlara fırsatlar sağlanmasıdır. Roller, dışarıdan gerçekleşen bir etki ya da özel duruma bağlı olmadan bir davranış esnasında süreç içerisinde değerlendirilir. Sorumluluk niteliği, bilişsel psikoloji ve gestalt yaklaşımına bağlı olarak değerlendirilmiş ve bu alanda yapılan çalışmaların az oluşu dikkate alınarak bir sonraki yapılabilecek olan çalışmalar için önerilerde bulunulmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sorumluluk, Sosyal Psikoloji, Sorumluluk nitelikleri

INTRODUCTION

It is frequently said, by way of commendation, that someone is a responsible person; or someone is thought to have behaved irresponsibly and is urged to be more responsible in future. Responsibility is a central issue in law, in the organization of social groups, and in everyday life. The development of

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responsibility may be cited as an aim in the practical activity of education; while serious theoretical writers, notably among moral theologians, have put forward the view that a (if not *the*) primary ethical requirement of a man is that he be responsible, and have spoken of the moral outlook they are advocating as an "ethic of responsibility" (Bonhoeffer, 1971:194).

The psychological literature on responsibility attribution emerged from roots in cognitive psychology and gestalt approaches to perception. This intellectual framework, for all its richness, provides an incomplete picture of the major determinants of responsibility judgments. In its most common usage, responsibility refers to a decision about *liability for sanctions based on a rule*. The sanctions are usually negative ones. According to the perspective I wish to propose, the inputs to the decision are the rule itself, the actor's deeds, and the expectations of others regarding what the actor should do. In other words, an actor is judged on the basis of causality (what *was* done) and expectations (what *should have been* done). For adults, the key issue in causality is intent, what the actor meant to do (cf. Piaget, 1965). Psychological attribution research has focused heavily on degree of intent and on severity of consequences of action as empirical determinants of responsibility. Yet the other determinants, the expectations of others for one's actions, have been neglected by psychologists, though they have a long and honorable history in sociology. Such expectations are defined by the actors' social roles, and the present paper argues that inclusion of roles in an understanding of responsibility judgments is much needed. It is also consistent with linguistic analysis of the concept of responsibility and with the way responsibility is treated by legal rules (Hamilton, 1978:316).

The notion of responsibility and irresponsibility with which I am concerned is itself one of the categories or dimensions in terms of which we can make favourable or unfavourable assessments (often if not always moral) of persons. It is not, of course, a purely evaluative notion (though perhaps it is occasionally used as if it were); rather, the attribution of responsibility in this sense is the attribution of an approved quality either to some instance of conduct or, dispositionally, to a person. Accordingly, I shall label this notion "Virtue-responsibility". Since we shall need to see how this sense of responsibility is related to others, I shall briefly pick out and label other senses of responsibility which are treated in the literature (Hart, 1968:214). Hart's (1968) linguistic analysis of meanings of responsibility also includes another major use of the term which he in fact calls "role responsibility." He defines it as follows:" ... whenever a person occupies a distinctive place or office

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

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

First, a person is held to be a responsible agent in the *capacity* sense if he possesses certain normal psychological capacities of understanding, reasoning and control over his own behaviour, the possession of which is commonly held to be a precondition of the appropriateness of moral praise or blame. One who is responsible in the capacity sense may further be held responsible in the *liability* sense (and hence blamed or praised) for some particular occurrence, if certain conditions relating him to that occurrence are fulfilled. One condition, commonly, is that the agent's action or omission is involved in the causation of the event. Probably derived from this condition, there is a purely *causal* sense of responsibility, carrying no implication of praise or blame, such that to be responsible for something is simply to be the (or a) cause of it. Still a further sense of responsibility is also often involved in the attribution of liability-responsibility. If I say "Smith is responsible for leaving the garden in a mess" I attribute liability-responsibility; but such an attribution would probably be inappropriate were it not that Smith is in a position such that he in particular should have kept the garden in good order. And *that* might be expressed by saying "Smith is responsible [perhaps: *to* his employer] for keeping the garden in good order". In Hart's terminology, one here attributes a *role-responsibility*; one picks out a certain responsibility which Smith has in virtue of [or: as constitutive of] his having an assigned task or role. His having that responsibility does not in itself, of course, commit one to any favourable or unfavourable assessment; but it does leave scope for assessment of the way in which he discharges it (Haydon, 1978:47).

The definition of role involves the expectations of others for one's behavior. The reliable performance of a social role is often described in terms of responsibility, as when we speak of a person as a "responsible—" or an "irresponsible —" (naming some role such as citizen, worker, or safety patrol).

Reliability refers to the performance of explicit expectations of others, explicit obligations held by the occupant of a social role. Obligation, however, has a broader scope than performance of explicitly delineated tasks. It is also possible to speak of relatively diffuse obligations, of the positive or affirmative standards or "responsibilities" of a social role. The notion of obligation normally implies that failure to perform will be blamed or punished, while performance will not be praised (cf. Flathman, 1970). Diffuse obligations or responsibilities, however, shade over into what philosophers commonly refer to as a morality of aspiration: standards to which individuals should aspire rather than standards to which they must be held (e.g., Fuller, 1964). For simplicity, here I shall use *reliability* to refer to specific performance requirements and *obligation* to refer to more diffuse requirements that may embody others' aspirations as well as their expectations. Both of these role-related meanings of responsibility—both reliability and obligation—refer to standards for behavior, to "shoulds" rather than deeds. The assessment of role responsibility, of the fulfillment of social expectations, is a contribution to both positive and negative sanctioning processes. Just as negative sanctions rest on falling below the expectations of others for one's behavior, positive sanctions depend on fulfilling or exceeding those expectations (Kelman and Lawrence, 1972:179).

But that assessment may itself be made along the dimension of responsibility and irresponsibility ("Smith's neglect of the garden is quite irresponsible"). Thus one may be led to suggest, as Hart suggests, that the relation of the virtue sense of responsibility to the others consists in a specific relation to role-responsibility. In the next section, I shall argue that while Hart's interpretation of virtue-responsibility as "taking responsibilities seriously" (which I shall abbreviate as "the *TBS* interpretation") does cover many of the ways in which the notion is commonly used and understood, nevertheless (i) even for it to cover that much, we must begin to detach the *TBS* interpretation from the reference to *roles* which is explicit in Hart's account; and (ii) there are aspects of the notion of virtue-responsibility, as frequently understood, which it is at least unhelpful to try to bring under the *TBS* interpretation (Downie, 1964:32).

I. RESPONSIBILITY PROCESS

A. The Attributional Status of Social Roles

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

1. Taking seriously the responsibilities of roles.

Hart's treatment of virtue-responsibility is as follows: A "responsible person", "behaving responsibly" (not "irresponsibly") require for their elucidation a reference to role-responsibility. A responsible person is one who is disposed to take his duties seriously; to think about them, and to make serious efforts to fulfill them. To behave responsibly is to behave as a man would who took his duties in this serious way. It is clear from the rest of Hart's discussion of role-responsibility that the duties in question are those which a man has in virtue of occupying a distinct role, and which we refer to as his responsibilities. A similar interpretation is present in Downie's claim that ". . . when a person is described as conscientious, responsible or irresponsible in his actions . . . he is being assessed from the point of view of the morality of his role-enactment. . . . The contrast between the careless and the trustworthy or responsible performer is ... a contrast brought out by the model of role-enactment. Without doubt many instances of assessment in terms of responsibility do have reference to a person's performance of a role. In using 'responsible' as equivalent to 'reliable' or 'trustworthy'⁵ we do usually have in mind, I think, that a person can be relied on to carry out—so far as it is in his power—the responsibilities of a job or of some assigned task. More especially, the reference to role-enactment is apparent in the common use of a

phrase such as 'responsible family man', which might be expanded, following Hart, as 'family man who takes seriously the responsibilities which he has *qua* family man'. But the responsible family man (if this interpretation is correct) will not necessarily be responsible in dealings outside and not affecting his family; so will not necessarily qualify as a responsible person *simpliciter*. So it is not yet clear whether reference to the responsibilities *of roles* is as helpful as Hart thinks in elucidating the notion of a *responsible person*, often used with no apparent reference to any role, or even to a multiplicity of roles. It may be said, of course, that the responsible person is one who is disposed to take seriously all his responsibilities in whatever roles he occupies; but then some indication must be given of how widely the notion of *role* is to be taken. In the next two subsections, without leaving the scope of the *TRS* interpretation, I notice (i) a conception of responsibility which requires no extension of the notion of a role beyond common sociological usage (if anything it narrows it); and (ii) an element in many conceptions of responsibility which calls for a wider understanding of a man's *responsibilities*, which the *TRS* interpretation must accommodate either by extending the notion of a role indefinitely or by allowing that responsibilities can be understood without reference to roles (Haydon, 1978:48).

2. Conforming to role-expectations.

In assessing whether a person takes his responsibilities seriously, someone (I shall call him *X*) might suppose that a person's responsibilities are exhaustively given by his major social and occupational roles. Behaviour which falls outside the scope of these roles, as commonly understood, *X* will at best consider irrelevant in the assessment of the person's virtue-responsibility. Then *X* will call the person responsible if and only if *X* judges him to be taking seriously the responsibilities pertaining to the central (and socially approved) roles which he occupies. Moreover, if *X* takes this view of a person's responsibilities, he may also take the content of the responsibilities to be given by generally-held expectations as to behaviour within the role. And if those expectations seem clear-cut and undemanding, *X* may assume that a person is not taking his responsibilities seriously unless his overt behaviour does conform to expectations; he will not then consider the way that the *agent* sees his situation, and will not leave room for the possibility that the agent might, in all seriousness, interpret his own responsibilities in a way that ran counter to expectations. Then *X* will be taking conformity to

generally-held role-expectations, not simply as controvertible evidence of responsibility, but as the criterion of it.

3. Taking seriously obligations in general.

Hart would accommodate a wider view of a person's responsibilities than that of *X*, by extending the notion of a role. He would classify as cases of role-responsibility fugitive or temporary assignments with specific duties [which] would not usually be considered by sociologists, who mainly use the word, as an example of a "role". So "role" in my classification is extended to include a task assigned to any person by agreement or otherwise. It is not clear to me from this just how far Hart is willing to extend the notion, but I suspect that if we try to treat as a responsibility involved in a role everything which a responsible person, as such, might be thought to take seriously, we will be leaving no useful purpose to the notion of a role.⁶ On the other hand, we need not assume that the notion of responsibilities has sense only in a context of roles. I suggest that while the responsibilities constitutive of a role are paradigmatic for "role-responsibility", 'responsible' can be used in the same sense without reference to a role (Loudfoot, 1972:4-6).

4. Being conscientious.

It may be that the TBS interpretation as so far developed is adequate for many conceptions of responsibility. But it may be inadequate for certain other conceptions, in that it still makes judgments of responsibility and irresponsibility applicable only to a person's behavior and attitude with regard to particular responsibilities, i.e., responsibilities which are identified by referring to some aspect of a particular person's relation to particular people at a particular time. Thus this interpretation will not allow for the judgment that a person is responsible or otherwise in his undertaking of a responsibility (so long as it does not conflict with prior responsibilities)⁹ nor for the possibility noticed above, that a person's decision or action might be judged responsible even though it runs counter to those particular responsibilities which he does have. As against the TBS interpretation, some talk of responsibility, including much of the treatment of the notion among advocates of an ethic of responsibility, appears to treat the requirement of responsibility as an ever-present moral demand, necessarily incumbent on any person *qua* person (or *qua* moral agent) prior, logically, to particular responsibilities (Haydon, 1978:51).

B.Roles and Rules for Responsibility

One universal characteristic of human societies is the existence of hierarchies of authority-subordination. In such hierarchies, authorities have both the power and the acknowledged right to control the action of subordinates (cf. Peabody, 1968). Weber (1947) argued that authority in modern societies was increasingly vested in bureaucratic structures which rested on rational-legal bases of legitimacy. Blau's (1968) modification of Weber's argument stressed that authority in a rational-legal system can involve professional expertise as well as bureaucratic control. In short, some modern authorities guide behavior through their expertise; others control behavior through their bureaucratic position; still others combine these two bases of authority. Since Hart (1968) discusses "role responsibility" largely in terms of bureaucratic obligations, it would appear fruitful to search through the social structure for the presence of authority to find role-related differentiation of sanctioning rules. A modern industrialized society contains a bewildering array of possible roles, even within the arena of the workplace alone. The workplace is a convenient domain to examine for evidence of different responsibility rules, however, because of the importance and relative clarity of the roles involved. In addition, the relative prestige of occupations appears quite consistent across persons, across time, and across cultures (e.g., Duncan, 1961; Hodge *et al.*, 1964). And occupational prestige, although a concept traditionally distinct from authority, can be used as a rough indicator of whether or not one is in a position of authority. The highest prestige jobs are high in professional authority (e.g., physician) or bureaucratic authority (e.g., top managerial position); medium-prestige jobs involve some professional training or bureaucratic control (e.g., sales or clerical positions); low-prestige jobs tend to require little formal training and typically involve being ordered or supervised by another (e.g., manual laborer, janitor). Having a high-prestige job generally requires more education and returns more income. The issue is whether it alters the rules according to which one may be sanctioned.

Consider three common versions of what responsibility means: blame (liability) for rule breaking, reliable performance in role, and diffuse obligation to act. Social roles of differing prestige can be seen as embodying different mixtures of these principles or versions of responsibility. Low-prestige jobs are conceived of and administered in terms of compliance with minimal job standards; the major feedback provided to occupants is punishment after the fact for deviations from rules. Medium-prestige jobs involve a web of expectations and feedback focused on re-

liable performance. High-prestige jobs— those with major “responsibilities”— entail expectations that the occupant fulfill diffuse and internalized obligations to act or to oversee others' actions. (See also Fox, 1974, and Kohn, 1969, for similar arguments.)

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

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

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

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

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

To date, sociological interest in socialization to occupational roles and in occupational prestige itself has not spurred social psychologists toward an interest in how variation in roles may affect crucial cognitive judgments. Direct evidence

concerning the impact of actors' social roles on responsibility attributed to them is scanty, as previous social-psychological studies of responsibility attribution have been relatively sociologically "naked." The stimulus person in developmental studies has characteristically been a child; in accident studies, most frequently an automobile driver. Only rarely in relevant studies have actors' status or roles themselves been treated as experimental manipulations, as in Chaikin and Darley (1973). Given a roles-and-deeds perspective on responsibility attribution itself, however, it would appear natural for social psychologists to begin exploring just how roles can alter the rules under which responsibility is judged (Hamilton, 1978-321-323).

CONCLUSIONS

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

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

Individual differences among perceivers appear likely when conflict exists over whether an in-role behavior is normative. Given the centrality of authority-

subordination as a dimension of roles, I examined a potential normative conflict over wrongdoing committed by subordinates under orders. Two ways of judging the situation—and indeed of describing the situation—were identified. One focused on the actor's causation of blameworthy consequences, the other on the actor's motive of obedience. The potential generality of these patterns remains to be tested (Özen, 2009:192).

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

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