CHAPTER 6

COPING WITH ACCOUNTABILITY: SELF-IDENTIFICATION AND EVALUATIVE RECKONINGS

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It is our thesis that people's problems dealing with accountability are at the core of most dysfunctional behaviors. To be accountable is to be ready to answer for one's conduct. One undergoes an evaluative reckoning about how well one has lived up to particular prescriptions, including responsibilities, duties, and obligations at home, at work, and in social life in general. The result is a judgment and sanctioning of one's conduct by audiences (oneself included) that has repercussions for the outcomes one receives and for one's very identity.

Identity and accountability are intertwined, and the construction and evaluation of identity takes place in the context of accountability. Identity is a theory of self that is formed and maintained through actual or imagined interpersonal agreement about what the self is like (see Schlenker, 1985, 1986a). The identities people establish determine how they are regarded and treated in social life, so people have a stake in constructing and preserving identities that mediate valued outcomes. According to self-identification theory (Schlenker, 1980, 1984, 1985, 1986a, 1987; Schlenker & Weigold, 1989), people strive to construct and maintain desired identity images. These images are neither idealistically glorifying nor faithful to the nuances of evidence as seen by an omniscient observer. Rather, desirable identity images represent a compromise between one's wishes (the personal beneficentiality component, or the extent to which the image serves the holder's values and goals) and reality (the believability component, or the extent to which the image is perceived to be an accurate, defensible interpretation of evidence) (Schlenker, 1980; Schlenker & Weigold, 1989). These images represent what people believe they both should and can be on particular occasions, being "reality-edited" yet somewhat glorified views of the self. People attempt to construct and preserve these images, both privately and publicly, and are threatened when they might be

Preparation of this chapter was supported in part by a Research Development Award from the Division of Sponsored Research, University of Florida, Gainesville.
damaged by events. When potential threats to identity arise, stress is created and people take action to cope with the problem (Schlenker, 1987).

**Self-identification** is the process, means, or result of showing oneself to be a particular type of person, thereby specifying one's identity (Schlenker, 1984, 1985; Schlenker & Weigold, 1989). It is accomplished privately, through contemplation of oneself, and publicly, through self-disclosure, self-presentation, and other activities (e.g., task performances) that serve to construct one's identity for audiences. Fixing and expressing identity involves systematically defining and categorizing oneself, bringing relevant evidence and experiences to bear. As such, self-identification can be regarded as an accounting, conducted for a specific purpose on a specific occasion, in which one's assets and liabilities are selectively documented and evaluated for the benefit of an audience. When people are accountable for particular events, those events have potential implications for identity; when people are not accountable, the implications of events are less meaningful. Consequently, behavior that occurs under conditions of accountability has a greater potential impact on the actor's thoughts, feelings, and efforts (Schlenker, 1986b; Schlenker & Weigold, in press; Tetlock, 1985a).

When people confront threats to identity, as when they anticipate or experience failures, they increasingly attempt to change the timing, terms, and outcomes of their accountability. To do so, people use one or more of three primary strategies: (a) retreating from accountability by avoiding or selectively encountering situations and audiences to whom they would be accountable (e.g., agoraphobia permits avoidance of most external audiences while alcohol or drug use dulls the internal audience); (b) accounting for potential failures with excuses and justifications that try to avoid "worst case" interpretations (e.g., blaming one's troubles on factors other than one's personal skills, such as drugs or hostile coworkers); and (c) using apologies to mitigate the negative repercussions accompanying responsibility for a transgression (e.g., admitting responsibility for the event but expressing remorse and begging forgiveness). With frequent use, the first two strategies can build a wall between one's identity and one's actions, blocking the implications of one's behavior for one's identity. The third strategy involves chronic self-blame of the type seen in depression. The occurrence and communication of symptoms of "psychological problems" can be viewed in terms of their impact on accountability. The cognitive, affective, and behavioral symptoms of most mental illnesses ultimately function to modify the timing, terms, and outcomes of accountability and thereby protect, as best as possible under adverse conditions, the actor's desired identity.

The ideas that responsibility can be frightening (Fromm, 1941; Horoz, 1975), that people try to reduce their responsibility when failure looms (Austin, 1961; Carson, Butcher, & Coleman, 1988; Goffman, 1971; Schlenker, 1980, 1987; Schlenker & Leary, 1982; Scott & Lyman, 1968; Shea, 1988; Snyder & Higgins, 1988; Snyder, Higgins, & Stucky, 1983), and that symptoms of mental illness are communications that influence the reactions of others, often by reducing one's responsibilities (Braginsky, Braginsky, & Ring, 1969; Carson et al., 1988; Scheff, 1966; Schlenker, 1980; Snyder & Smith, 1982; Szasz, 1961; Wood, 1986) have been around for some time. Our goal in this chapter is to place these ideas in the larger social psychological context of people's problems dealing with the nature and implications of accountability. In so doing, we present a model of accountability and try to establish its relevance for clinical symptomology. Further, we examine how people arrange their environments so as to control, as best as possible, the timing, terms, and outcomes of accountability in order to preserve desired identities. The theoretical approach is based on self-identification theory (Schlenker, 1980, 1984, 1985, 1986a, 1987; Schlenker & Weigold, 1989), and the model of accountability is termed the **pyramid model** (Schlenker, 1986b; Schlenker & Weigold, in press).

**ACCOUNTABILITY AND IDENTITY**

Accountability has received relatively little explicit conceptual or empirical attention from psychologists until recently (Schlenker, 1986b; Schlenker & Weigold, in press; Tetlock, 1985a), despite the fact that it is one of the oldest and most important concepts in social science. Historically, accountability has been a central concept in analyses of justice and social control, and substantially predates the notion of personal responsibility, which was introduced in the 18th century as a component of accountability (McKeon, 1957). Any collective, ranging from a dyad to a civilization, must resolve how coordination and cooperation can emerge from a collection of indi-
viduals with diverse goals and interests. Accountability provides the mechanism through which people expect others to perform to certain prescriptions for conduct, judge the performance in relation to those prescriptions, and distribute rewards and punishments based on that performance. Because of accountability, people can exert legitimized control over one another's conduct. We watch, judge, and sanction others, and they do the same to us, thereby ensuring adherence to valued prescriptions for conduct.

Accountability also makes self-regulation possible. When appraising potential courses of action, people take into account how their actions will look in light of the relevant prescriptions, and how they might explain those actions in the event that questions or indictments arise. As C. Wright Mills (1940, p. 906) contended, “Often anticipations of acceptable justifications will control conduct. (If I did this, what could I say? What would they say?) Decisions may be, wholly or in part, delimited by answers to such queries.” Self-regulation—in the form of observing, monitoring, and controlling our behavior according to certain standards, evaluating the resulting performance, and administering self-reward or self-punishment (Bandura, 1982)—entails dealing with accountability.

The Pyramid Model of Accountability

Accountability involves evaluation, and all evaluative reckonings require information about three key elements and the linkages or connections between them: (a) the prescriptions that should guide the actor’s conduct on the occasion (e.g., how one should treat one's children); (b) the event that occurred (or is anticipated) that is relevant to the prescriptions (e.g., how one has treated one's children); and (c) a set of identity images that are relevant (e.g., the type of parent one is). The three elements and their linkages depict a triangle when visualized, so we will call this the triangle component of accountability. When the evaluating audience is added as a hovering eye-in-the-sky, shown in Figure 6.1, the model becomes an iconic Pyramid, and hence is termed the pyramid model of accountability (Schlenker, 1986b; Schlenker & Weigold, in press). We propose that the actor’s evaluation of the worth of the relevant elements of the triangle on the occasion combine with the strength of the linkages of the triangle to determine its impact on the actor's identity. A task is ego involving to the extent that the elements are more important and the linkages are stronger. Briefly consider the constituents.

Elements

Prescriptions are criteria for performance that can be used to guide behavior and evaluate it. They include, implicitly or explicitly, information about what people should try to accomplish (goals), how they should go about doing so (rules), and what level of accomplishment is satisfactory (standards). Prescriptions are more important to the extent that they are regarded as valued principles for conduct (e.g., duties, obligations, moral or personal aspirations) or have high personal consequences (e.g., following shop rules because doing so brings promotions while failing to do so brings dismissal).

Events are the units of action actors and observers regard as a unified segment for purposes of some evaluation (e.g., performance on a task). Accountability has a greater impact when the relevant event is associated with more important consequences (e.g., a greater effect on the lives of other people; greater potential monetary gain or loss).

Finally, accountability has a greater impact when the performance pertains to images that the actor regards as more central and important to his or her identity. For example, accountability on an intellectual task will have a greater impact on people who have pretensions of being an intellectual than those who do not.

Linkages

The perceived strength of the linkages between the three elements represent the actor’s responsibility for the event. That is, people are held responsible to the extent that (a) a clear set of prescriptions should be applied in the situation (the prescription-event linkage); (b) the actor is perceived to be bound by the prescriptions (the prescription-identity linkage); and (c) the actor seems to have (or to have had) control over the event, such as by intentionally producing the consequences with foreknowledge of what would happen (the identity-event linkage).

The prescription-event link refers to the extent to which a clear set of prescriptions is perceived to exist that should govern conduct (e.g., clear laws, commandments, imperatives, traditions, shop rules). The link is weaker to the extent that pre-
scripts are perceived to be ambiguous, conflicting, obscure, or nonexistent, such that there is uncertainty about what should be done or how to go about doing it.

The prescription-identity link refers to the extent to which the actor is perceived to be bound by the prescriptions; that is, to fall under the domain of the particular set of laws, policies, etc. This linkage can exist because of the actor’s resources and attributes (e.g., being of sound mind and capable of understanding the consequences of one’s actions, so therefore having to obey the relevant laws), roles (e.g., being responsible for the actions of one’s child by virtue of one’s role as a parent), and personal convictions (e.g., Christian beliefs). The linkage is strong to the extent that the prescriptions clearly apply and the actor is supposed to be committed to following them.

The identity-event link refers to the extent to which the actor is perceived to have (or have had) control over the event. The link is stronger when the actor seems to have intended to produce the consequences of the event with foreknowledge of what would happen, and weaker when the consequences are unforeseeable, accidental, or uncontrollable (Fincham & Jaspars, 1980; Heider, 1958).

It is proposed that an actor’s responsibility on any occasion is determined by the summed strength of the three linkages. If any of the links can be completely severed, responsibility is eliminated. Reductions in responsibility are associated with weakened or questionable linkages. Our view of responsibility explicitly describes the linkages that constitute it, and is more inclusive than most prior analyses that focus primarily on causality, role obligations, or other delimited aspects without integrating the overall picture. Table 6.1 summarizes the key points in our overview of the pyramid model and indicates for each linkage the state represented by a strong connection, major factors that strengthen the linkage, and accounts that can be used to weaken the linkage.

According to the model, ego involvement is a combination of the worth of the elements and the strength of the linkages. When these are high, the task will have a dramatic impact on the actor; when these are low, the task is trivial or irrelevant. Further, it is proposed that when an event (anticipated or fait accompli) is likely to be regarded positively (e.g., a success), actors will attempt to increase the strength of the linkages in order to create a greater impact on identity. Conversely, when an event (anticipated or fait accompli) is likely to be regarded negatively (e.g., a failure), actors will try to decrease the strength of the linkages or reinterpret the relevant elements. Before examining the ways in which people deal with accountability under threat, we will first consider the nature of threats to identity.

Accountability Is Aversive when Identities Are Threatened

Problems for identity arise when people encounter or anticipate undesired events, that is, events that might seem to contradict important prescriptions and identity images. The magnitude
Table 6.1. Implications of the Accountability Linkages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACCOUNTABILITY LINKAGE</th>
<th>IDENTIFY-PRESCRIPTION</th>
<th>IDENTITY-EVENT</th>
<th>PRESCRIPTION-EVENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State represented by a strong linkage</td>
<td>Obligation; duty; role responsibility</td>
<td>Personal responsibility as control</td>
<td>Task or action clarity; procedural clarity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antecedents that strengthen the linkage</td>
<td>Clear role requirements; self-attention to salient standards; internalization of prescriptions</td>
<td>Feelings of internal or personal control; expectations of success; high need for achievement</td>
<td>Clear goals, rules, and standards; crystallized scripts or procedures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accounts to weaken the linkage</td>
<td>Lower the relevance of prescriptions; &quot;I'm sick, so I can't be expected to follow those rules&quot;; &quot;I'm old and my memory is poor, so you should do it for me&quot;</td>
<td>Diminish personal responsibility; &quot;It wasn't my fault&quot;; &quot;I couldn't help it&quot;; &quot;I was drunk&quot;; &quot;The devil made me do it&quot;</td>
<td>Redefine task or make it appear to be ambiguous; &quot;I didn't know what to do&quot;; &quot;Nobody ever taught me that&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

of the problem is greater as a direct function of (a) the actor's apparent responsibility (i.e., the combined strength of the linkages) and (b) the absolute value of the elements that are involved (e.g., more negative consequences produced by the event, more important prescriptions or identity images) (Schlenker, 1980). Further, larger problems require more extreme actions in order to deal with accountability.

Problems are not threats in and of themselves. Whether a problem is perceived as a threat depends on the actor's expectations that it can be successfully handled (Schlenker, 1987). Outcome expectations reflect the perceived likelihood to the actor that goals will be achieved given the nature of the task (e.g., its difficulty or ambiguity), the audience (e.g., how demanding, critical, or supportive it is), and the actor's perceived skills and resources (e.g., perceived ability, supportive co-performers). (For discussion of factors that affect outcome expectations, see Schlenker, 1987; Schlenker & Leary, 1982; and Schlenker & Weigold, 1989.) When outcome expectations are low, actors feel threatened and become focused on the possibilities for failure and its costly consequences.

Threats create negative affect, potentially debilitating levels of stress and anxiety, and poorer performance (Lazarus, 1981; Lazarus & Launier, 1978; Schlenker, 1987; Schlenker & Leary, 1982). People with lower outcome expectations avoid the task or, if they cannot, procrastinate before starting, work less hard, give up if they encounter impediments to goal accomplishment, and have more negative feelings about the performance (Bandura, 1977; Feather, 1982; Lazarus, 1981). Performance thus declines quantitatively and qualitatively.

Accountability Amplifies Threats

Accountability intensifies the cognitive, affective, and behavioral consequences of threats. Accountability is frequently described as an unpleasant social experience that produces anxiety, reduces creativity, generates task disengagement, and ultimately harms performance. Consistent with this view, accountability has been shown (a) to undermine intrinsic interest in a task and be detrimental to creativity (Amabile, 1979); (b) to distract people from concentrating on a task because of a concern for how they might look to the audience (Baumeister, 1984; Baumeister, Hamilton, & Tice, 1985); and (c) to produce "choking" and poor task performance when the audience has high expectations (Baumeister, 1984; Baumeister et al., 1985). When people try to please those to whom they are accountable, compromises often replace good judgment, and task performance suffers (Adelberg & Batson, 1978; Tetlock, 1985a).

Further, research indicates that people will engage in protective self-presentations when they are accountable and the audience's expectations are excessively high (Schlenker, 1986a, 1987; Schlenker & Leary, 1985). Protective self-presentations are designed to avoid losses for identity, and can be contrasted with acquisitive or assertive self-presentations, which are designed to achieve gains (Arkin, 1981; Tedeschi & Norman, 1983; Sch-
lenker & Leary, 1985). Protective self-presentation techniques are characterized by less communication, less self-disclosure, greater caution in judgments, and task disengagement in which people attempt to avoid the task if possible (Schlenker & Leary, 1985). On occasion when task avoidance is impossible, people become more self-focused, become obsessed with their frailties and limitations, and perform worse (Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1987; Schlenker, 1987; Schlenker & Leary, 1982).

**Accountability Can Be Beneficial**

Accountability amplifies the unpleasant repercussions of threats, but it would be misleading to leave the impression that accountability always has a detrimental impact. Accountability also can spotlight one's strengths and secure the benefits of success. Achievements are more gratifying when people are accountable, and people seem to seek out accountability when they have high outcome expectations.

Research has demonstrated that accountability can have beneficial effects on performance (Schlenker, 1986b; Tetlock, 1985a). It has been found that accountability (a) generates greater learning and subsequent recall of information, provided that rewards are offered for successful task performance (Slavin, 1983); (b) produces more cognitively complex judgment and decision strategies instead of a reliance on simple heuristics (Chaiken, 1980; McAllister, Mitchell, & Beach, 1979; Tetlock, 1983a, 1985a; Tetlock & Kim, 1987; Weldon & Gargano, 1985, 1988); (c) produces data-driven processing of information in which judgments are influenced more by the relevant data than by pre-existing biases (Ford & Weldon, 1981; Mann & Taylor, 1970; Rozelle & Baxter, 1981; Tetlock, 1983b); (d) produces a greater awareness of the strategies that are being employed during decision-making and performance (Cvetkovich, 1978; Hagafors & Brehmer, 1983; Tetlock, 1985a); and (e) produces greater effort devoted to task completion (e.g., Latané, Williams, & Harkins, 1979; Williams, Harkins, & Latané, 1981). When people think they can perform well, accountability may activate resources in the interests of task accomplishment and increase the likelihood of success.

**Heightening Threats and Challenges**

Accountability seems to improve performance when people have higher outcome expectations but seems to harm performance when people have lower outcome expectations. Doherty, Weigold, and Schlenker (1989) tested these hypotheses directly. They led subjects to believe they would serve as division heads in a simulated business enterprise. Performance of the company as a whole would be determined by how well each of the divisions did. Based on bogus feedback on a practice task, subjects were induced to have expectations of success or failure on the major task. Subjects also believed a company meeting would be held in which they would have to explain and defend the performance of their division (accountable condition) or would not have to do so (unaccountable condition). Accountability produced the hypothesized effects on measures of the creativity, quality, and quantity of subjects' responses. When they expected success, subjects performed better (i.e., more solutions that were judged as higher quality and more creative) if they were accountable than unaccountable. The reverse was true when subjects expected failure: They performed far worse when they were accountable than unaccountable. Accountability thus seems to intensify reactions to challenging and threatening situations.

In a second study, Schlenker, Weigold, and Doherty (1989) asked subjects to think of and evaluate occasions on which they did or did not feel accountable (answerable for one's actions or performance) and, if accountable, felt either good, bad, or indifferent. Being accountable for incidents that involved positive affect was associated with perceptions of better task performance, greater task effort, higher self-evaluations, and more positive feelings about being held accountable; subjects also said they sought out these incidents. In sharp contrast, being accountable for incidents that involved negative affect was associated with perceptions of poorer task performance, lower effort, lower self-evaluations, and less positive feelings about being held accountable. Situations in which subjects were accountable but indifferent were associated with intermediate perceptions on these dimensions, and with perceptions that the situation was relatively unimportant. Finally, although lack of accountability was associated with positive self-evaluations, unaccountable subjects also said they expended less effort and were less persistent in the face of obstacles than subjects who were accountable under conditions of positive affect or indifference. These results support the idea that account-
ability can be associated with positive feelings, approach, determination, and achievement, as well as with negative feelings, avoidance, lack of determination, and failure.

In sum, accountability seems to amplify the cognitive, affective, and behavioral reactions that otherwise occur. When people have high outcome expectations, they will work harder toward their goals, concentrate better, and be more likely to take effective remedial action when problems are encountered. In contrast, threats are associated with negative affect, stress and anxiety, self-focus, task distraction, and ineffective coping strategies.

MANAGING ACCOUNTABILITY UNDER THREAT

When people encounter threats to identity, they respond with remedial activities designed to cope with the threat (Austin, 1961; Goffman, 1971; Schlenker, 1980, 1982, 1987; Scott & Lyman, 1968; Snyder et al., 1983). We propose that these activities are ultimately aimed at changing the timing, terms, and outcomes of accountability, and can be grouped into three categories: accountability avoidance strategies, accounting strategies, and apology strategies. First, people can try to avoid being answerable, such as by avoiding threatening tasks and threatening audiences, concealing threatening information, and withdrawing prematurely from threatening situations. These will be termed accountability avoidance strategies. Second, people can deal with threats by providing their own account of what transpired, usually by generating excuses and justifications that protect their identities. These accounting strategies try to change the linkages and/or the elements in the accountability triangle. Third, people can apologize for the problem, thereby attempting to minimize damage to identity and negative sanctions. These apology strategies accept some blame for failure or wrong-doing and try to show, among other things, that one has already self-inflicted punishment, mitigating the need for maximum sanctioning by the audience.

The three types of strategies aim at different facets of what it means to be accountable (Schlenker, 1986b). Being held accountable involves (a) submitting to an inquiry by an audience who will evaluate one’s conduct in relation to certain prescriptions (the inquiry facet); (b) presenting one’s side of the story, in which the actor can describe, document, interpret, and explain relevant information and construct a personal version of the events and why they occurred (the accounting facet); and (c) rendering a verdict, including judgment of the actor and positive or negative sanctions (the verdict facet). In attempting to deal with accountability, people will try to influence each facet as best they can. Accountability avoidance strategies are aimed at avoiding inquiries. Accounting strategies attempt to influence the verdict by constructing self-serving interpretations of events. Apology strategies assume some degree of blame and try to reduce the negative repercussions that will accompany the verdict. These strategies are not mutually exclusive, of course, and are often used in combination. We will now examine each of the strategies and their implications.

Accountability Avoidance Strategies

Accountability avoidance strategies aim at circumventing or eliminating accountability inquiries. In essence, the actor attempts to put off, avoid, or escape from tasks, situations, and audiences that would involve an accounting, especially when an undesired verdict is feared.

The tendency for people to avoid accountability when their identities are threatened is well documented. People avoid tasks that produce embarrassment or involve specific ego threats, even sacrificing monetary rewards to do so (Brown, 1970; Teichman, 1973). People also avoid situations in which they anticipate social difficulties and prematurely leave those that elicit social anxiety (Cheek & Buss, 1982; Pilkonis, 1977; Twentyman & McFall, 1975; Zimbardo, 1977). People also try to conceal events that are potentially embarrassing or out of character, hiding them from public view (Lewittes & Simmons, 1975), and prefer not to affiliate with evaluative others under these conditions (Fish, Karabenick, & Heath, 1978; Sarnoff & Zimbardo, 1961; Teichman, 1973; Watson & Friend, 1969).

Social anxiety, which arises when people perceive threats to their identities (Schlenker & Leary, 1982, 1985), is strongly associated with disaffiliaction-behaviors that decrease the actor’s social contact with others. When experiencing social anxiety, people initiate conversations less frequently, are more reluctant to speak freely, speak for a lower percentage of the time and, in general, participate less fully in conversations (Cheek & Buss, 1982; Leary, 1983, 1986; Slivken & Buss, 1984; Zimbardo, 1977). The tendency to main-
tain distance from others is also suggested by find-
ings that socially anxious people decrease eye con-
tact (Modigliani, 1971; Pilkonis, 1977; Zimbardo,
1977), disclose less information about themselves
(Leary, Knight, & Johnson, 1987; Post, Witt-
tmaier, & Radin, 1978), describe themselves in less
unique terms (Leary et al., 1987), and generally
act in a less sociable fashion (Check & Buss, 1982)
than nonanxious people. Socially anxious people
thereby minimize the extent to which they will be
held accountable by selectively avoiding evaluative
audiences and, when forced to interact, cautiously
avoiding a more complete participation that
would give audiences diagnostic information that
could be judged.

The anxiety disorders (see American Psychiatric
Association, 1987 [Diagnostic and Statistical
Manual of Mental Disorders, 3rd ed., rev. (DSM-
III-R)], particularly social phobias and general-
ized anxiety, involve retreats from evaluative audi-
ences. Because of their generalized disaffiliative
tendencies, socially anxious people report a higher
The generalized retreat from accountability thus
involves a price—social isolation. A dramatic case
is agoraphobia, in which people avoid public plac-
es, preferring to block social scrutiny from which
they cannot escape except for that by family and
close friends, whose regard is usually more as-
sumed. People with avoidant personality disorders
(DSM-III-R) suffer a similar reluctance to partici-
pate in social life. They are fearful of criticism,
interpret others’ remarks as personal rejection and
derogation, and develop a pattern of limited so-
cial relationships (Carson et al., 1988). Yet they
experience distress because they would like to have
friends and dislike their loneliness. Thus, their
sensitivity to and fear of failure cause them to
perceive most situations as threatening, causing a
retreat, but are upset by the social cost that their
strategy involves.

**Avoiding Legitimate Inquiries**

People can also be said to be avoiding account-
ability when they refuse, often belligerently or ag-
gressively, to submit themselves to inquiries by au-
diences who otherwise have a legitimate right to
demand an inquiry. This strategy is typified by the
assertion, “You have no right to ask me that or to
judge me,” and justified by reference to the au-
dience’s inferior status (e.g., a parent to a child;
an employer to an employee), rights (e.g., an em-
ployee asserts that the union contract or job de-
scription does not cover what is being asked),
knowledge (e.g., a teenager tells her mother she
just doesn’t understand what it is like to be in high
school today), or antagonist qualities (e.g., the
audience is prejudiced, hostile, and out to persecute
the actor, therefore disqualifying itself as a fair
judge). In effect, the actor tries to blunt inquiries
by eliminating as an appropriate judge the audience
who would otherwise conduct an inquiry.

In milder form, the tactic is illustrated by
people’s tendency to derogate evaluators who de-
liver undesirable personal feedback, viewing them
as stupid or prejudiced (Jones, 1973; Mettee &
Aronson, 1974). In more extreme forms, the tactic
is characterized by stronger attacks on anyone
who disagrees with the actor. The paranoid per-
sonality (DSM-III-R), for example, is typified by
a rebuking style in which others who disagree are
confronted in an attempt to make them back
down. The paranoid not only refuses to recognize
potentially critical others as judges for his or her
conduct, but also blames those others for per-
sonal failures (Carson et al., 1988; Marmar, 1988;
Schlenker, 1987).

**Dulling the Internal Audience**

Even when people are able to rid themselves of
the evaluative stare of an external audience, they
must still account to themselves (Schlenker,
1986b; Schlenker & Weigold, 1989). People serve
as audiences for their own self-identifications,
using internalized prescriptions for guiding and
judging their conduct (Greenwald & Brekler,
1985; Schlenker, 1980, 1985, 1986a; Snyder et al.,
1983). When people’s identities are threatened, the
self-as-audience can be a potentially harsh judge.
Self-focused attention then can be an unpleasant
state that people want to terminate (Duval &
Wicklund, 1972; Hull, 1981; Hull & Young, 1983;
Wicklund, 1975). As such, people often take ac-
tion to escape rumination about their own ac-
countability for their problems. Self-evaluation
can be reduced through drugs, intoxication, phys-
ical exercise, and meditation. Watching television,
going to the theater, shopping in malls, and an
array of other enjoyable activities may similarly
claim attention and refocus it beyond the self.

Alcohol has historically functioned as a stress
reducer. Hull (1981; Hull & Young, 1983) demon-
strated that alcohol lowers self-focused attention,
which in turn is reinforcing for people who have
experienced recent failures or other negative events. In both experimental and field studies, the combination of threats to identity and chronic levels of self-focused attention leads to increased alcohol consumption (Hull & Young, 1983).

Similarly, Baumeister (1988) has argued that masochistic behavior is an attempt to escape from a higher order awareness of self by focusing attention on immediate sensations (Baumeister, 1988). Besides dulling the internal audience, masochism may also serve as self-punishment in expiation for real or imagined transgressions, thereby being a form of apology (see below).

Accountability Avoidance: Pluses and Minuses

Although accountability avoidance can protect identity, it carries a price, and the price increases when it is used indiscriminately. Accountability avoidance leads to loneliness and isolation when people pull back from others and it leads to unfulfilled potential when people refuse to tackle potentially difficult tasks, thereby dooming themselves to mediocrity. Further, chronic use of accountability avoidance has an impact on the actor's identity. People who avoid others and appear nervous when they must interact gain reputations as being shy, anxious, and weak. People who assertively attack others to disqualify them as judges gain reputations as eccentrics, paranois, or antisocial characters. These identity images then influence the future conduct of audiences toward the actor.

In addition, accountability avoidance is often not a viable strategy because of competing pressures to perform on schedule. A shy businessman may dread the speech he must give at the next meeting, but he dare not fail to show up because doing so would jeopardize his job. There are only so many responsibilities people can avoid without jeopardizing their status as viable actors on the stage of life.

Space does not permit an analysis of the factors that would facilitate or impede the use of the different accountability avoidance tactics, or the use of this strategy as compared with accounting or apology strategies. Considerations that are involved include (a) the believability or defensibility of the tactic (e.g., Can the actor construct an acceptable explanation for avoiding the task or audience that does not force an admission of fear of failure?); (b) the expected value of avoiding the task or audience (e.g., To what extent will avoidance protect identity? How great are the costs of avoidance?); and (c) the expected value of confronting the task or audience (e.g., How rewarding would it be to succeed? How costly would it be to fail? What are the likelihoods of success and failure?). (For discussion of factors that influence the choice of self-presentation strategies, see Schlenker, 1980; Schlenker & Weigold, 1989.) Clearly, such utilitarian considerations play an important role in the use of avoidance strategies. For example, social phobias, such as the fear of public places or crowds, are more common in females than males. Such excessive fears are more compatible with the traditional female role of being helpless and dependent (Carson et al., 1988), whereas males traditionally should be assertive and dominant, so use of such tactics is undoubtedly less costly to the identity of females.

Accounting Strategies

To be accountable is to stand ready to explain one's conduct. An explanation provides an interpretation of an event when its meaning is unclear or might be misinterpreted or misconstrued by audiences (Schlenker, 1982). When people confront impediments to their goals, such as when events threaten identity, they construct explanations that define the potential problem and specify its implications for identity. It is proposed that people attempt to explain events in ways that validate desired identity images and repudiate undesired images (Schlenker, 1980, 1982, 1987; Schlenker & Weigold, 1989). To the extent that this can be accomplished, threats and damage to identity are minimized, the affective consequences are more positive (or less negative), and people can continue to work toward their goals with reasonable expectations of success.

An account is a self-serving explanation that attempts to reconcile an event with the prescriptions that appear to have been violated or unfulfilled (Schlenker, 1982). The extensive literature on accounts offers a social psychological perspective on rationalization, and indicates that people attempt to construct reality in self-serving ways and negotiate that reality with others (Goffman, 1971; Schlenker, 1980, 1982; Scott & Lyman, 1968; Semin & Manstead, 1983; Tedeschi & Riess, 1981; Tetlock, 1985b). Accounts work to interpret selectively (a) the relevant elements in the accountability triangle (the prescriptions, the event, and
the pertinent identity images), thereby influencing the apparent value of the incident and its consequences; and (b) the strength of the linkages in the accountability triangle, thereby influencing the actor's apparent responsibility.

Affecting the Linkages

When undesirable incidents occur, the "ideal" explanation from the actor's perspective is a defense of innocence (Schlenker, 1980). Defenses of innocence sever all connections between identity and event by showing that the actor did not commit the undesirable act or influence its commission in any way (i.e., cutting the identity-event link; e.g., "I didn't do it; I have a foolproof alibi"); or by showing that the undesirable act did not occur (i.e., reinterpreting the event itself; e.g., "His death was a suicide, not a homicide, so I didn't do anything wrong"). When actors use this defense during an accountability inquiry and the audience accepts its veracity, the actor is judged faultless. If the audience does not accept the defense, the actor is either judged guilty and a liar, or judged mentally ill, depending on whether the audience thinks the actor truly believes his or her account. Amnesia, denial, and repression can all function as defenses of innocence by cutting the actor's connection to undesired events, both to external audiences and to the self-as-audience.

Excuses are accounts that attempt to minimize the actor's personal responsibility for potentially threatening events without totally disconnecting the actor from the event. Excuses try to reduce the strength of the linkages between the three elements of the accountability triangle, thereby mitigating the actor's culpability. In a complementary fashion, people use entitlements to maximize their personal responsibility for potentially validating events, e.g., explaining why a promotion was merited and not, as some coworkers insinuate, a matter of politics or ingratiating (Schlenker, 1980). To examine these tactics in more detail, consider each of the linkages.

The identity-event link. The identity-event link is probably the most frequently analyzed facet of responsibility in the psychology literature because it deals with issues of free will, intentionality, causality, and blame. People are held most responsible for events when they appear to be able to foresee the consequences, intentionally act to produce those consequences, and are not under the influence of external pressures (e.g., coercion) or debilitating internal factors (e.g., drugs, sleep deprivation) that would reduce the actor's freedom. Weakening the identity-event link involves trying to show that the actor did not have full control over the event, in that the consequences were unintentional, unforeseeable (or at least unforeseen), accidental, or influenced by external pressures.

When people perceive themselves to be in control of events, this linkage is stronger, producing feelings of greater personal responsibility and therefore greater ego involvement with the task. A stronger identity-event link is associated with increased determination (evidenced by effort and persistence in the face of obstacles) on tasks, which more often than not results in improved task performance (Baumgardner, Heppner, & Arkin, 1986; Weiner, Russell, & Lerman, 1978). Further, feelings of personal control are associated with the effectiveness of problem-solving, as self-appraised (effective as compared with ineffective) problem-solvers see the etiology of their personal problems as largely within their own control and their failures as caused by insufficient effort (Baumgardner et al., 1986). Ineffective problem-solving is related to feelings of little personal control. Moreover, desire for personal control is associated with higher and more realistic levels of aspiration, higher outcome expectations, increased performance motivation on challenging tasks, increased task effort, persistence in the face of problems, and performance attributions that increase motivation on subsequent tasks (Burger, 1985). Finally, people who are high on perceived control are more likely to act on their stated intentions (Schifter & Ajzen, 1985), suggesting that the linkage engages a commitment for one's identity.

Similarly, people who are internally rather than externally controlled (based on scores on locus of control scales) tend to have higher mastery motivation, greater perceived self-worth, greater academic achievement, better job performance, and more work satisfaction, and they expend more effort on tasks and take more personal responsibility for task outcomes (e.g., Phares, 1976; Ryan & Grolnick, 1986; Spector, 1982). Externals are lower on motivation, effort, performance, and job satisfaction, and prefer directive approaches to goal and policy determination (instead of participative approaches), perhaps as a way of decreasing their responsibility and lessening the link between their identities and their job performance (Spector, 1982). These findings all support the
proposition that a stronger identity-event link increases ego involvement, which, in combination with high outcome expectations, increases determination and thereby improves task performance.

When outcome expectations are low, the denial of control is a way of retreating from accountability, thereby disengaging identity from the implications of one’s actions. When people fail (or anticipate failure), they attribute their performance to external factors (e.g., an unfair or difficult test, bad luck, a bad home environment, possession by demons, pressure from others) or unstable, potentially alterable, internal factors (e.g., lack of sleep, intoxication, drugs, lack of training, uncontrollable urges) (Schlenker, 1980; Snyder et al., 1983). These excuses attempt to weaken the link between identity and events and shield the actor from the ramifications of his or her own behavior.

Where excuses are concerned, it is often difficult to discern the truth from a convenient lie, even for the actor. Carson (1969) observed that “the alleged hallucinations of schizophrenic persons might sometimes be merely lies, not qualitatively different from, ‘I couldn’t come to school yesterday because I was sick’” (p. 223). Such excuses permit the user both to avoid difficult tasks and blame possible failures on the symptom. People suffering from factitious disorders willfully produce the signs or symptoms of illness (Eisendrath, 1988). In mild forms, factitious disorders involve fabricating a personal history of medical or psychological symptoms. More serious cases involve elaborate simulations of illness (e.g., pricking one’s finger and putting blood in a urine sample) or ingestion of foreign substances or drugs to produce abnormal physiological states. Factitious disorders are somewhat unusual in that they seem to be the only recognized psychiatric disorders in which psychiatrists concede that the symptoms are manipulatively produced to feign serious illness.

People are often able to convince themselves that their excuses describe real problems, even when the excuses may not have at one time. A paranoid’s headache may help him from accomplishing a task at work, and the headache is, in turn, blamed on the use of an invisible electric ray by a coworker who, the paranoid contends, is jealous. The headache is real; its etiology and impact are constructed. In the case of somatic disorders, stress created by threats produces real physiological symptoms which may, in turn, serve as excuses for subsequent problems. In still other cases, there may be a physiological basis for the problem, which the actor can then employ for purposes of affecting accountability. We do not suggest that psychopathological symptoms are usually feigned or without biological basis. However, given that a person has strange thoughts or performs strange acts, for whatever reasons, an explanation is required. Psychopathological symptoms provide viable excuses for failures and transgressions.

Self-handicapping is a type of anticipatory excuse that paradoxically preserves identity by seeming to increase the chance of failure. Self-handicapping involves placing (or seeming to place) obstacles in one’s own path so that one’s performance cannot provide diagnostic information about relevant skills and abilities (Jones & Berglas, 1978; Snyder & Smith, 1982). Jones and Berglas (1978) suggested that heavy drinking may often function as a self-handicap. If an alcoholic fails, the bottle and not his (lack of) talent can be faulted; fantasies of glorified achievements, if and when he stops drinking, can thereby be maintained. If he succeeds, he must surely be talented, since how else could the obstacle have been overcome? Consistent with this reasoning, males have been shown to use alcohol as a self-handicapping tactic when doubts existed about their performance-related abilities (Higgins & Harris, 1988; Tucker, Vuchinich, & Sobell, 1981). Moreover, actors given the opportunity to self-handicap through alcohol consumption tend to attribute failure more to the alcohol than to personal abilities, and afterward evidence heightened self-esteem (Isleib, Vuchinich, & Tucker, 1988).

Self-handicapping is most likely to occur when people are publicly accountable and fear that their performance will damage their desired identities (Baumgardner, Lake, & Arkin, 1985; Kolditz & Arkin, 1982). In the face of potential failures for which they are accountable, people will cite as handicaps such things as (a) adverse past life experiences (Degree & Snyder, 1985); (b) anxiety (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Paisley, 1984; Leary & Schlenker, 1981; Smith, Snyder, & Handelsman, 1982; Snyder & Smith, 1982; Snyder, Smith, Augelli, & Ingram, 1985); (c) depression (Baumgardner et al., 1985); and (d) physical illness (Smith, Snyder, & Perkins, 1983).

Lack of effort can also be an excuse for failure, and it can function as a handicap when actors actually reduce how hard they try on a task. Decreased effort often follows initial task failures (Bandura, 1977; Feather, 1982; A. Miller, 1985),
as actors begin to disengage their identities after disappointments. A. Miller (1985) suggested that this decrement in effort arises primarily as a means of self-protection. He found that sixth graders’ performance on anagram problems was impaired after an initial failure when the problems were supposed to be moderately difficult but not when the problems were supposed to be extremely difficult. Failure on a moderately difficult task is threatening to the self because it would implicate low ability. Reducing effort provides a plausible excuse for continued failure that can preserve pretensions of ability. In comparison, if the evaluator defines the task as extremely difficult, that designation serves as both an excuse for failure and an indication that the evaluator has lower expectations for performance. Similar results have been reported among adult subjects by Frankel and Snyder (1978).

Many psychological symptoms are regarded by audiences as legitimate excuses for poor performance. For example, Schouten and Handelsman (1987) found that actors involved in domestic violence or job-related difficulties were viewed as less the cause of their behavior, less responsible for the consequences of their actions, and less worthy of sanctioning when the actor was described as experiencing depressive symptoms at the time of his actions than when no information was provided.

In sum, a stronger identity-event link increases ego involvement and, when outcome expectations are reasonably high, increases determination. When failures occur or are expected, however, people can retreat from responsibility by trying to weaken the link. It appears that many psychopathological symptoms function to achieve this goal.

The prescription-identity link. The prescription-identity link describes the extent to which the prescriptions apply to the actor because of external requirements (e.g., being bound by the laws of the land) or internalized commitments (e.g., pledging oneself to follow the Ten Commandments). To say that a person has certain duties, obligations, responsibilities, or moral or personal aspirations is to recognize the existence of a prescription-identity link.

The link is stronger—and hence ego involvement is greater—when the prescription can be clearly applied to the actor and the actor should be committed to following them. Research suggests that people will perform better when they personally accept group goals and rules (Locke, 1968; Locke, Shaw, Saari, & Latham, 1981) or choose their own treatment programs in therapy (W. R. Miller, 1985; Spector, 1982).

When identities are threatened by events, actors can try to reduce their responsibility by weakening the link. Prescriptions can be designated as inapplicable because of the actor’s special identity (“I have diplomatic immunity;” or “I’m the boss’s son”) or because the actor never made a personal commitment to the prescriptions (e.g., “I never promised to do that;” “Those are your rules, not mine”). The “sick role” serves a dual purpose. By “being sick” (physically or mentally), the actor can reduce the identity-event link and blame failures on the “problem.” Plus, the sick role excuses actors from many undesired duties and responsibilities until such time as they are “cured” and able to reassert a normal identity (Braginsky et al., 1969; Carson, 1969; Scheff, 1966).

The prescription-event link. The prescription-event link is stronger to the extent that a clear, well-defined set of prescriptions seems applicable on the occasion; these delineate the appropriate goals, rules, and levels of accomplishment required to perform satisfactorily. The linkage is weakened to the extent that the prescriptions are ambiguous, difficult to prioritize, conflicting, or obscure. A weaker prescription-event link is associated with uncertainty and anxiety, at least when people are expected to do well but do not know how to do so. Indeed, people are more anxious and perform more poorly when prescriptions for performance are unclear but they “should” do well (Hom & Murphy, 1985; Leary, Kowalski, & Bergen, 1988; W. R. Miller, 1985; Schlenker & Leary, 1982). Many excuses for poor performance are addressed to attenuating this linkage (e.g., “I didn’t know what to do;” “You didn’t give me proper instructions;” “The rules were confusing and contradictory”).

Affecting the Elements

Explanations focusing on interpretations of the elements have been called justifications and enhancements. Justifications try to minimize the apparent undesirability of the elements when these could threaten desired identity images, whereas enhancements try to increase the desirability of the elements when these could potentially validate desired identity images (Schlenker, 1980, 1982).
This is done through selective interpretations of (a) the relevant principles and their priority of application (e.g., “I killed her because I loved her and she was in great pain with terminal cancer, not because I wanted the insurance money”); (b) the nature and consequences of the event (e.g., “I stopped her pain and she didn’t suffer”); or (c) the identity images affected by the incident (e.g., “I am an altruist who reduced her agony, not a cold killer”). Through the self-serving interpretation of these elements, the seemingly undesirable consequences of events can be changed quantitatively (e.g., making the amount of harm seem to be less than it otherwise appears to be, as in “I broke the lamp, Mom, but you needed a new one anyway;” or “I hit him but he wasn’t hurt so bad, he’s just a bleeder”) and qualitatively (e.g., transforming the act from one that seemingly violates prescriptions to one that is congruent with prescriptions, as in “It was self-defense, not murder”).

Research amply documents people’s proclivities for explaining events in ways that justify seemingly undesirable conduct. The literature on attitude change following counterattitudinal behavior (Schlenker, 1982; Wicklund & Brehm, 1976) shows that people will change their attitudes in order to justify their behavior when they appear to be personally responsible for producing harm. Similarly, subjects who are given high rather than low choice about administering electric shocks to a confederate, and who therefore appear to be more personally responsible for the harm, later say the shocks were less painful (Brock & Buss, 1962).

Another way to justify one’s conduct is to embed the prescriptions in the context of what people actually do, not what they are supposed to do. The actor tries to show that although the prescriptions say one thing, most people do another (e.g., “Everybody misreports income or inflates deductions for tax purposes”), thereby justifying conduct through social comparison. The implication is that if everybody does it, the act must be reasonably normal and acceptable, and to single out the actor for punishment is unfair. Variations on this theme include (a) projecting one’s own undesired characteristics onto others (Holmes, 1978), and (b) seeking out social comparison information after a failure only when subjects believe that others have done poorly (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & LaPrelle, 1985).

People often set the stage for an upcoming performance by trying to influence the prescriptions that will be applied by audiences to evaluate their conduct. For instance, actors may try to lower the standards that will be used to evaluate them, thereby increasing the odds of success. Research indicates that people will try to lower the expectations of others when they doubt they will perform up to those standards (Baumgardner & Brownlee, 1987; Baumeister & Scher, 1988; Kanouse, Gumpert, & Canavan-Gumpert, 1981; Maracek & Mettee, 1972). Hill, Weary, and Williams (1986) have argued that a primary function of the communication of depressive symptoms is to reduce expectations about the caliber of future performance.

In sum, people often deal with problems created by accountability through their interpretations of the relevant prescriptions, identity images, and event itself. By so doing, they try to make the performance seem less undesirable or even desirable.

Apologies

Apologies provide a third major means of coping with accountability when threats to identity arise. Apologies are admissions of blameworthiness and regret for an undesired event, such as a transgression or failure. From a societal perspective, apologies serve several important functions, including recognizing that rules have been broken, reaffirming the value of the rules, and regulating social conduct by acknowledging the existence of interpersonal obligations and the legitimacy of sanctions (Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Goffman, 1971; Schlenker, 1980). From the perspective of the actor, an apology functions as a remedial behavior that aims to maintain the negative repercussions of an undesirable incident and repair the actor’s damaged identity (Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Goffman, 1971; Schlenker, 1980; Schlenker & Darby, 1981). If the apology seems sincere, the actor appears (a) to be not as bad a person as the incident might otherwise suggest, (b) to have either repented or not intended the incident to occur, and (c) to not require further rehabilitative punishment because the actor has already suffered self-imposed punishment. Through apologies, the actor can appear to be a more self-policing, dependable, and cooperative social participant who does not require external control through sanctions.

In their more complete forms, apologies contain the following elements: (a) the communica-
tion of apologetic intent, such as saying, "I'm sorry"; (b) clarification that one recognizes what the appropriate performance should have been and sympathizes with the application of negative sanctions for not fulfilling the prescriptions; (c) self-castigation, in which the actor disparages the "bad" self that behaved wrongly and rejects the "bad" conduct; (d) a vow to try to do better in the future; (e) an expression of guilt, remorse, or embarrassment, indicating that one has suffered; (f) the performance of penance and an offer to compensate any victims who may have been involved; and (g) an attempt to obtain forgiveness, as by saying, "Can you find it in your heart to forgive me?" (Goffman, 1971; Schlenker, 1980; Schlenker & Darby, 1981). The more of these elements that seem to be sincerely conveyed, the more rehabilitated the actor will appear to be. Minor incidents, such as a trivial breach of etiquette, can be resolved with a perfunctory apology ritual (e.g., a person bumps into someone on a movie line and responds with a quick, "I'm sorry"). More serious transgressions, though, require more elaborate apologies to minimize the potential negative repercussions (Schlenker & Darby, 1981).

Apologeties are effective in controlling damage to identity and reducing punishment after transgressions. Even children as young as three regard situations in which the actor apologizes as better and more just than ones in which the actor is unapologetic (Irwin & Moore, 1971; Wellman, Larkey, & Sommerville, 1979; von Wright & Niemela, 1966). Darby and Schlenker (1982) found that apologetic actors are blamed less, forgiven more, liked more, seen as more remorseful, and actually punished less for their transgressions. Defendants who appear to be sad, guilt-ridden, and remorseful, as compared with those who do not, receive less punishment from jurors (Austin, Walster, & Utne, 1976; Kalven & Zeisel, 1966). The apology-forgiveness script may be such an ingrained aspect of social life that its appearance almost automatically improves the actor's position (Darby & Schlenker, 1989).

Apologeties also can win over the audience and prompt them to terminate the actor's self-punishment, often by going so far as to argue the actor's case. As Goffman (1971) observed about the self-castigation that often accompanies apologies:

Were others to do to him what he is willing to do to himself, he might be obliged to feel affronted and to engage in retaliatory action to sustain his moral worth and autonomy. And he can overstate or overplay the case against himself, thereby giving the others the task of cutting the self-derogation short... (p. 113)

Apologeties are not without their disadvantages. Apologies always involve the admission of some blame for an undesirable event. As such, apologies communicate a willingness to assume, at least temporarily, an inferior status in a relationship, analogous to the misbehaving child who must await the verdict of the more powerful adult. This does not imply, however, that the actor gives up control in the relationship. The control merely shifts from a more assertive, direct approach to a more defensive, supplicant approach. In fact, apologies often communicate a desire to take an inferior role in a relationship, in which the audience is placed in the position of guiding and nurturing the contrite actor. The actor may communicate that he or she truly wants to do well and fulfill the prescriptions, but because of lack of skills, resources, or other deficits, must be aided by others. If played skillfully, the actor can even transfer responsibility for his or her future conduct to the audience, who then must assume a type of guardianship.

The apologetic self-flagellation employed by depressives and highly anxious individuals can be regarded as the use of an apology strategy to handle the pressures of accountability. People who are high in anxiety or high in depression tend to reverse the usual pattern of attributions by taking personal responsibility for failure but ascribing success to external factors such as luck (Arkin, Appelman, & Burger, 1980; Brewin, 1985; Seligman, Abramson, Sengell, & Von Baeyer, 1979). Further, depressives do not simply accept responsibility for failure, but blame it on their character, as opposed to their behavior or to other unstable, more modifiable factors such as lack of training or effort (Peterson, Schwartz, & Seligman, 1981). When accountability inquiry must be confronted, an apology strategy has high utility and defensibility for those who feel incapable of an assertive attack.

Stabilizing Strategies: Chronic Patterns

Everyone develops his or her own pattern of strategies and tactics for dealing with the pressures of accountability. These preferences can be due to the actor's (more or less) stable characteristics,
such as personality dispositions and roles, or they may be guided and reinforced by repeated encounters with similar types of audiences or situations. Over time, these preferences become stabilized and habitual, and are used unthinkingly to influence the timing, terms, and outcomes of accountability whenever threats to identity arise.

Strategies and tactics become dysfunctional when they are used indiscriminately or extremely. Actors may regret so far from accountability that their behavior is distressing to themselves and to others. Actors may begin to regret the costs they incur by (say) becoming social isolates, or they may avoid accountability in such an extreme manner that they lose their jobs or become irresponsible in caring for their families. In addition, when actors lose consensual validation for their tactics but persist anyway (e.g., other people do not accept the validity of the actor’s excuses and justifications), they gain reputations as knaves, oddballs, or even threats to the community. We must all deal with accountability. The art is to deal in such a way as to protect and enhance identity without sacrificing opportunities or paying too high a price.

**SUMMARY**

Accountability is at the heart of social control and self-regulation. It refers to being answerable to audiences, oneself included, for performing up to prescribed standards. When people are accountable they must deal with inquiries about their performance, they must be ready to provide an account to explain or defend their performance, and they must experience a tacit or explicit verdict, including judgment and positive or negative sanctions. People’s outcomes and their identities are influenced by these evaluative reckonings. In fact, identity is constructed via the layering of judgments that emerge from being accountable for events.

It is proposed that people will attempt to influence the timing, terms, and outcomes of their accountability. They will try to arrange their environments such that they validate and protect desired identity images, maximizing their accountability for desired events and minimizing it for undesired events. When identities are threatened by events, people will use one or more of three strategies in dealing with accountability: (a) avoiding accountability inquiries (e.g., avoiding potentially threatening audiences and tasks, and attempting to disqualify certain audiences as judges); (b) using accounting strategies (e.g., excuses and justifications for failures and transgressions); and (c) using apology strategies (e.g., using self-deprecation and self-punishment to atone for the violation and gain forgiveness). Everyone uses these strategies to protect and enhance identity and maximize their outcomes in social life. However, when the strategies are used indiscriminately or in an extreme fashion that is distressing to the actor or others, problems ensue. From this perspective, many psychopathological symptoms represent communications designed to deal with accountability in one of these three strategic manners.

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