SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY AND THE EMERGENCE OF DISPUTES

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There is growing interest in the role that individual judgments play in moving people to seek recompense for perceived injuries. Social psychological theory and research may provide valuable clues about the types of judgments that are important in the development of disputes, and the facts that influence these judgments. In this paper, we describe relative deprivation, perceived control, equity, and attribution theories. We also discuss the relevance of these theories to dispute development, differential rates of problem perception, and the making of claims for redress. We conclude with suggestions for future research on the emergence of disputes.

I. INTRODUCTION

If we wish to understand dispute behavior fully, we must look more closely at the individuals in disputes and examine the psychological process affecting their judgments. Most dispute processing research, including anthropological studies of other cultures (Kawashima, 1969; Nader and Todd, 1978) as well as research on disputing in the United States (Felstiner, 1974; 1975), has focused on cultural and sociological factors to explain variations in contentiousness and other dispute behavior. Such variables are important, but it is also necessary to explore the role of psychological mechanisms in dispute decisions. This paper examines the relevance of social psychology to understanding the emergence of disputes.

This is an exploratory essay, designed more to identify the need for research than to report on a developed body of theory or a set of empirical findings. Social psychologists have just begun to examine dispute processes. A rich variety of theoretical approaches in social psychology could potentially be applied to understanding the emergence, development, and

* This research was supported in part by grants from the Graduate School of the University of Wisconsin and grant number 80-IJ-CX-0034 from the National Institute of Justice. The authors would like to thank David Trubek, Richard Miller, and Stewart Macaulay for their thoughtful comments on an earlier draft of this article.

LAW & SOCIETY REVIEW, Volume 15, Number 3-4 (1980-81)

resolution of disputes. However, there has been no systematic effort to relate these theories to all aspects of disputing behavior, or to test their practical implications. Most of the available empirical research has taken place in artificial laboratory settings and is conceptually limited in scope. The potential of the social psychology of disputing is thus largely unrealized.

One obstacle to progress has been the lack of an appropriate conceptual framework to organize knowledge about the psychological dimension of disputing. The work of Felstiner, Abel, and Sarat (1981) offers such a framework. Felstiner *et al.* propose a way of looking at disputes which both highlights the importance of individual psychology and provides a way to organize our knowledge of the psychological processes which affect disputing. They examine the emergence and transformation of disputes through three key stages: naming, the perception of an experience as an injury; blaming, the formation of views that some person or entity is responsible for the injury and obligated to remedy it; and claiming, or asserting a demand for redress. The study of transformations through these stages, they say, "places disputants at the center of the sociological study of law; it directs our attention to individuals . . ." (Felstiner *et al.*, 1981: 633). While these authors stress that individual decisions to name, blame, and claim are influenced by a variety of factors, including aspects of culture and features of social structure, their approach accepts the importance of psychological dimensions.

Our purpose is to integrate social psychological theory and the dispute transformation model. We begin by presenting a general overview of some relevant social psychological theories, noting how variables specified by these theories may influence judgments about the various dispute transformation stages. We then discuss pertinent research results in an attempt to evaluate the potential of the theories for predicting and explaining dispute behavior. A concluding section discusses issues for future research.

II. SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY AND DISPUTES: INTRODUCTION

What areas of social psychology are most useful to understanding how individuals perceive injuries, decide that some other is responsible for the injury, form a sense of "entitlement" to some kind of redress, and assert claims? In

this section of the article we describe four areas of theory which seem to bear on these issues in a general way: relative deprivation, equity, perceived control, and attribution.

Relative Deprivation

Felstiner *et al.* (1981) point out that many people are exposed to some negative outcome or experience, but only some will engage in "naming"—that is, only some will decide that they have been injured in some way. Relative deprivation theories (see Cook *et al.*, 1977, for a review) indicate that the temporal and social comparisons which individuals make are very important determinants of how satisfied they will be with a given event. It is when people get less than they have gotten in the past, or less than similar, relevant others are getting, that they tend to feel dissatisfied. A woman who works for a male-dominated firm may not be very upset to learn that a man was chosen over her for a promotion. She has received few promotions in the past, has seen very few female employees make it up the corporate ladder, and so treats her present rejection as par for the course. On the other hand, a woman employed by a more feminist-oriented company may be enraged at discovering she has lost out to a man. Compared to the favorable treatment she has received in the past and has seen other women get, the same rejection seems unacceptable.

There is considerable research to support the basic proposition that the relative value of an outcome is more important in determining people's judgments of it than is the absolute value (Brickman and Bulman, 1977; Brickman and Campbell, 1971; Brickman *et al.*, 1978; Crosby, 1976). In a classic example of this process, Stouffer *et al.* (1949) found that airmen were more dissatisfied with their promotion system than were military police, despite the fact that the airmen had a much higher probability of being promoted. The airmen also had more promoted peers to compare themselves with, while the police had fewer. Research reviewed by Crosby (1976) and Cook *et al.* (1977) further demonstrated that individuals' satisfaction with their salaries, their jobs, and other outcomes is very much influenced by the temporal and social comparisons they are making. Such comparisons, therefore, may provide an important clue to understanding why, among a group of potential disputants all of whom notice some problem or event, only some become disgruntled or dissatisfied by it.

Theories of relative deprivation also specify what course of action people will take once they perceive an experience as

injurious. However, there is considerable disagreement as to which variables influence any subsequent action, and only inconsistent support for currently available predictions (Cook *et al*., 1977; Mark and Cook, 1979). However, it is interesting to note that in attempting to predict the behavioral reactions to relative deprivation, many of these models borrow concepts from equity, perceived control, and attribution theory—to which we now turn.

Equity

People may perceive an event as injurious, but still feel that they deserve what they got, and so fail to blame or claim against some adversary. Felstiner *et al*. (1981) indicate that infringement on one's "sense of entitlement" plays an important role in heating up dispute transformations. Equity theory makes specific predictions about just what people feel their entitlement is. The basic tenet of equity theory (Adams, 1965; Homans, 1961; Walster *et al*., 1976) is that people calculate the ratio between what they give to a relationship and what they get back in return. As long as the ratio is the same for all members of a relationship—that is, as long as everyone is receiving outcomes proportionate to their inputs, a state of equity exists, and the relationship is perceived as fair. A woman may be upset by losing a promotion to a man, but if she believes he has better qualifications, she is also likely to see his more favorable outcome as equitable. On the other hand, if she feels his inputs are equivalent to or less than her own, she will feel unfairly treated. According to the theory, under such conditions the woman would attempt to restore equity, either by demanding better outcomes for herself or by reducing the quality of her own inputs.

Our sense of entitlement is not based on equity considerations alone. Other factors, ranging from social and cultural standards to current political rhetoric, can also influence our judgments of just desserts (Gurr, 1970; Miller and Sarat, 1981; Sabini and Silver, 1978). People may feel it is fairer to distribute outcomes equally, or on the basis of need, than according to individual contributions (Rawls, 1971; Staub, 1979). But research indicates that equity is very commonly seen as the more just distributional rule (Austin, 1977; Brickman *et al*., 1980). In the emergence of disputes, therefore, a sense of violated entitlement may develop when people feel they are getting less than others whom they regard as no more than equally deserving.

Perceived Control

In recent years, social psychologists have given considerable attention to the role played by perceived control in determining human behavior and emotional reactions (Rotter, 1966; Seligman, 1975; Wortman and Brehm, 1975). In order to be effective actors, people must see themselves as having considerable control over outcomes, or at least expect to gain such control. When people feel they have little control, they become helpless, depressed, and inactive. Perhaps the most obvious implications of this theory are in the stages of claiming and pursuing a dispute, since the theory would predict that such actions are most likely to be taken by people who feel they can effectively influence or manipulate outcomes.

III. ATTRIBUTION THEORY

Of all the theories mentioned here, attribution theory is probably the most directly applicable to dispute development. Attribution theory holds that people prefer to find order and meaning in the world, and usually develop explanations for why events happen and why people behave as they do (Frieze, 1979). The explanations people use, or more particularly the causes they see as underlying events or behaviors, are what social psychologists call attributions. Theorists have attempted to specify both how people form these causal explanations, and the emotional and behavioral consequences of different types of attributions. In the context of dispute development (Felstiner *et al*., 1981), attribution theory may therefore help to explain two key transformations: blaming some other for an injury and asserting a claim against that other.

Attributions and the Decision to Claim

Two people exposed to the same event can form very different views about what caused that event. A man who suffers a loss because of a defective purchase may attribute the loss to his own lack of care in making the purchase or to action of the seller. If he believes the seller to be responsible, he could conclude either that the seller deliberately cheated him or innocently sold the product without being aware of the defect. The consumer has suffered a loss, but the attribution of cause will probably influence what action, if any, he takes in respect to that injury.

The particular attributional model most frequently used to explain the relationship between perceived causes and

subsequent actions (e.g., Abramson *et al.*, 1978; Frieze and Bar-Tal, 1979; Crosby, 1976) was developed by Weiner and his colleagues (Weiner, 1972) and later amended by Rosenbaum (1972). The model consists of a three-dimensional scheme for representing the possible perceived causes of an outcome. Causes assigned for events can vary in terms of being *external* or *internal* (i.e., something about the actor or something about the outside environment); *stable* or *unstable* (i.e., capable of changing or not capable of changing in the future); and *intentional* or *unintentional* (i.e., foreseen and willful or accidental and not consciously desired). Figure 1, based on research by Valle and Johnson (1979), shows how some typical attributions of disgruntled consumers fit into this three-dimensional scheme.

Figure 1. Examples of Attributions Following Dissatisfaction with a Purchase*

	INTENTIONAL	
	INTERNAL	EXTERNAL
STABLE	"It's my fault, I'm always looking for bargains."	"I was taken in on a planned 'con' scheme."
UNSTABLE	"I didn't spend enough time shopping around."	"The salesman saw a quick opportunity to unload this piece of junk."
	UNINTENTIONAL	
	INTERNAL	EXTERNAL
STABLE	"I just didn't know enough to make a wise choice."	"The people at that place don't have the training they need to fix things right."
UNSTABLE	"I was too tired to inspect the product carefully."	"It's just bad luck, I got stuck with a lemon."

* Adapted from Valle and Johnson (1979)

This model has the advantage of summarizing in a few categories the wide range of specific causes that people might see as precipitating an event. The theory also holds that there will be emotional and behavioral consequences associated with each attributional category, and it is this feature of the theory that may be employed to predict how people will respond to a grievance. First, people who blame themselves for an injury are not likely to make claims against others. Theorists and researchers agree that people are most inclined to pursue disputes when they make some type of external attribution for their problem (Crosby, 1976; Felstiner *et al.*, 1981; Mark and Cook, 1979; Patchen, 1961).

However, some types of external attributions are more likely than others to be associated with claiming. As suggested by Figure 1, people can make external attributions to either stable or unstable factors. The extent to which the stability of an attribution will influence claiming may depend upon the nature of the grievance and the desired solution for it. With some types of problems—for example, a damaged car—people are primarily concerned with gaining compensation. With others, such as a neighbor's loud parties, they are primarily concerned with gaining cessation. For many problems, people may want both cessation and compensation.

The stability of an external attribution for an injury may be largely irrelevant to claims for compensation. The person with a dented car is not likely to care very much whether the other driver struck him because of a temporary distraction or because of chronically poor driving ability. However, the stability of problem attributions is likely to play an important role in claims for cessation. The less stable the assumed cause of the problem, the more optimistic people will be about its eventual cessation (Frieze, 1979; Valle and Frieze, 1976). Therefore, we might expect a curvilinear relationship between the stability of external attributions for a problem and claiming for cessation. If people make very unstable attributions for the injurious experience, they are more likely to conclude that it will go away without any effort on their part, and perhaps just tolerate it. If they make very stable attributions for the problem, they are likely to feel that nothing can be done to stop it, and perhaps become depressed or try to escape (Abramson *et al.*, 1978; Frieze, 1979; Wortman and Brehm, 1975). But when people make moderately stable attributions for the problem, they are likely to be both concerned that it will continue without some intervention, and convinced that there is some possibility it can be corrected. Thus, either very stable or very unstable attributions may lead people to simply tolerate or escape cessation-type problems, while less extreme attributions will lead them to make a claim.

Finally, individuals may believe that others injured them deliberately or unintentionally. Generally speaking, people are most angered by intentional harm-doing or problem-causing, and have a greater desire to punish such behavior (Reed and Reed, 1973; and Shaw and Reitan, 1969; Carroll and Payne, 1977). Usually, then, we would expect people to be more inclined to make a claim when they feel others have purposely hurt them. However, we may also see unintentional harm-

doers as more willing than deliberate offenders to resolve the problems they have created. So, in situations where the voluntary cooperation of the other party is necessary to correct some injury, or our own capacity to force resolution is low, we may be more likely to complain if we believe the harm was done intentionally. Under such conditions, the probability of gaining cessation or compensation from a deliberate harm-doer may seem very low, so that making a claim would be futile.

To summarize, we have argued that certain types of attributions for perceived injurious experiences will influence claiming. External attributions are more likely to prompt a claim than are internal attributions. Claims for cessation are most likely to follow from external, moderately stable, intentional attributions. Claims for compensation are more difficult to predict from attributions for the problem. Generally, we would expect more claims for compensation when external, intentional attributions are made for the injury.

Disputes can emerge from an almost infinite variety of perceived injurious experiences, and the predictions above may not apply in all cases. Certainly, distinctions other than cessation/compensation can be drawn which could help to clarify how attributions may differentially affect dispute emergence. Nonetheless, several observers do cite blaming as crucial in dispute development (Felstiner *et al.*, 1981; Miller and Sarat, 1981), and attribution theory can offer tentative predictions of how such blaming may affect later dispute transformations. But what about the blaming transformation itself? When do people blame others for problems, and how do they formulate such causal explanations?

Attribution Theory and Blaming

Theorists and researchers have long been interested in how people form causal explanations, and their work has important implications for understanding the blaming transformation in dispute development (Felstiner *et al.*, 1981). While several formal models have been proposed to explain attribution formation (Heider, 1958; Jones and Davis, 1965), the work of Kelley (1967; 1972) has been most influential. Kelley presents humans as very rational information processors, determining causes in ways similar to those used by scientists. According to Kelley, when we observe someone else in a particular behavior—for example, selling us a defective product—we ask ourselves three questions. First, does this salesperson sell defective products to most people or just to

me? In this way, we establish what Kelley calls the *distinctiveness* of the behavior, or the extent to which it is uniquely related to a particular stimulus—in this case, ourselves. Next we ask, do most salespeople sell me defective products, or just this one? This question helps us to decide on *consensus*, or the extent to which most people in this situation engage in similar behavior. Finally, we would perhaps consider whether the salesperson has sold us other defective products. This question would help to clarify *consistency*, or the extent to which the actor performs similar behaviors at different times and in different situations. When there is high distinctiveness, high consensus, and high consistency, we attribute the behavior or event to the stimulus—in this case ourselves ("The salesperson seems to sell bad merchandise only to me; most salespeople sell me bad merchandise; and they always sell me bad merchandise. There must be something wrong with me"). When there is low distinctiveness, low consensus, and high consistency, we attribute the behavior to the actor ("This salesperson shoves off bad merchandise on a lot of people; most salespeople don't do that; and this one seems to do it to me all the time. The salesperson is no good"). Finally, if there is high distinctiveness, but low consensus and consistency, we will attribute the outcome to the situation or circumstance at the time ("This salesperson sold a defective product only to me; most salespeople sell me good merchandise, and this one has always sold me good products in the past. I guess he didn't realize this was a faulty product. Maybe he was tired or distracted").

Laboratory studies have shown that the dimensions specified by Kelley do generally influence people's causal judgments (McArthur, 1972; Orvis *et al.*, 1975; Weiner *et al.*, 1972). However, most of these studies have presented people with very simple phenomena to explain, and very clear indicators of distinctiveness, consistency, and consensus. For real-world events, it may be more difficult to establish these causal parameters, because the information needed is either not available or indiscernible. When people are without the information they need to establish consensus, distinctiveness, and consistency—according to Kelley—they entertain several possible causes but are reluctant to accept any as *the* cause. It is not too difficult to imagine potential disputants, caught in such causal ambiguity, who simply decide to forget about the problem because they cannot determine who is at fault, if anyone. But more recent work (Metalsky and Abramson, 1979;

Nisbett and Ross, 1980) indicates that people will form attributions even when confronted with causal ambiguity. Relying on personal theories and selective evidence, people usually devise some kind of explanation for significant events in their lives. Even when there is not substantial causal ambiguity, the explanations people develop may not be reached in the considerate, rational way Kelley suggests. Rather, attribution formation seems to be biased in certain consistent and systematic ways (Ross, 1977; Nisbett and Ross, 1980). Many of these biases are likely to promote attributions that will heat up disputes; other biases may have more of a cooling-down effect.

An important attributional bias which may promote disputes is the common tendency to blame personal rather than circumstantial causes. Research has shown that people often ignore consensus information in forming causal judgments; they blame others for behaviors that are more likely caused by the situation (McArthur, 1976; Nisbett and Borgida, 1975; Nisbett *et al.*, 1977). Theorists have called this "tendency to overestimate the importance of personal or dispositional factors" the "fundamental attribution error" (Ross, 1977: 184). People may be even more likely to ignore relevant information and jump to personal and intentional causal explanations for actions or events that have a negative personal impact on them (Jones and Davis, 1965). It follows from this research that potential disputants, having defined some experience as injurious, would move rather quickly to the blaming stage by ignoring possible situational causes and placing responsibility on some group or individual.

If the injured party makes a claim against the person who is perceived as responsible, the latter is also likely to make biased attributions. There is evidence that both harm-doers and uninvolved observers will often distort available information in order to convince themselves that victims of negative events are in some way responsible for those events (Lerner and Simmons, 1966; Shaver, 1970; 1975; Walster, 1966). The perpetrator's tendency to blame the victim is presumably motivated by a need for self-justification; in observers, by a need to convince themselves that they are "better" than the victim and so will not end up facing the same unpleasant consequence. Obviously, with the victim blaming the offender and the offender the victim, a rather intense dispute is in the offing. This heating-up process could be further accelerated by the divergent perceptions and attributional patterns of actors

and observers. Jones and Nisbett (1972) point out that for actors, the situation or the environment is more salient than their own behavior, with the result that they are more inclined to attribute their actions to external factors. Observers, on the other hand, are more likely to notice the motion and behavior of the actor, and are often unaware of preceding events or future plans affecting the actor, with the result that they attribute the actor's behavior to underlying dispositional causes. This final attributional bias suggests an even more vehement dispute process, with each party inclined to see itself as the innocent victim of circumstance, and the other party as possessing a very stable and intentional tendency to cause trouble.

If the attributional biases described above were the only ones operating on people's causal judgments, it might be expected that virtually everyone who had some perceived injurious experience would find someone to blame, make a claim against, and dispute with. But there may be attributional biases which incline people to be less, rather than more, disputatious. Wortman (1976) reviews extensive research which indicates that victims of negative events ranging from the loss of a dice game to the development of cancer have a surprising tendency to blame themselves for their misfortune. Subsequent research has demonstrated a substantial amount of self-blame among a variety of victim populations, such as individuals paralyzed in accidents, rape victims, and battered wives (Janoff Bulman and Wortman, 1977; Janoff Bulman, 1979; Frieze, 1979). This self-blame for negative events may be motivated by the human need to maintain perceived control, since making internal attributions, and particularly internal-unstable attributions, can enable us to feel that the cause of some negative outcome can be directly manipulated by us. Obviously, internal attributions may lead to the comforting conclusion that we can avoid future encounters with such misfortune, while external attributions are likely to leave us feeling more vulnerable (Wortman, 1976). Despite all the human tendencies toward pinning the blame on someone "out there," an even stronger tendency toward accepting blame ourselves seems to exist. Obviously, such a tendency would mean that many potential disputes never go beyond the naming stage, a point on which there appears to be considerable agreement (Felstiner *et al*., 1981).

The same types of information and biases that influence the formation of attributions may also serve to change

attributions over time. For example, someone who originally sees a neighbor's loud party as the result of unstable causes is likely to view the offensive behavior as more consistent if the parties persist. This change in consistency judgments would probably also result in more stable attributions for the parties. As the repeated parties become more disturbing, the afflicted individual will also be more inclined to conclude that the celebrants are being intentionally malicious. This movement from more forgiving to more hostile attributions may be a fairly common pattern for people who are exposed to repeated threats from others against their comfort or safety. Obviously, as new events or information change judgments of distinctiveness, consensus, and consistency, or initiate or strengthen biased attributional processes, original attributions may change.

Attributions can change or be altered by third-party intervention. Felstiner *et al.* (1981) imply that attributions are always changeable and frequently transient, but there is evidence that some attributions, once made, will not change. For example, even when people are faced with repeated threats to their safety they may blame themselves: the classic example is the battered wife (Frieze, 1979). Self-blame can be very difficult to change even when it is completely unwarranted (Beck, 1967; Walker, 1979). Once formed, attributions may be quite impervious to new or contradictory information. Nisbett and Ross (1980) point out that people seem to stop their search for causes once they have found one that seems sufficient. They do not consider alternative explanations or possibly important additional influences. Other work suggests that humans have a strong hypothesis-confirming bias (Cantor and Mischel, 1979; Hamilton, 1979). Once people have some explanation for an event, they tend to seek out information which supports their hypothesis while largely ignoring or distorting information which refutes it. While the initial attributions made for some perceived injurious experience certainly will sometimes change in the course of a dispute, they may turn out to be quite resistant to change.

IV. EMPIRICAL RESEARCH ON THE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF DISPUTE BEHAVIOR

Our discussion of social psychological theories reveals that psychologists have examined the types of judgments and behaviors which affect naming, blaming, claiming, and subsequent dispute activity. Temporal and social comparisons

and equity considerations may influence naming—the degree of dissatisfaction with some outcome—and blaming, i.e., whether they feel entitled to something better. Similarly, tendencies to find personal rather than situational causes may increase the likelihood that people will assign responsibility to others. However, the effect of such biases on blaming may depend on intervening factors such as the degree of perceived control. Similarly, perceived control and the type of causal explanations formed for an injurious experience will influence the extent to which people will make claims. While social psychological theories are conceptually relevant to dispute development, can they augment our ability to predict or explain naming, blaming, and claiming in specific circumstances? In this section we consider the empirical evidence of psychological influences on dispute decisions.

Since no comprehensive social psychological approach to disputes has been previously developed, few studies have directly tested the impact of social psychological variables on dispute-relevant behaviors. Many available studies have been contrived and artificial laboratory experiments (see, e.g., Austin, 1977; Cook *et al.*, 1977, for reviews). It is often difficult to generalize from results obtained under such conditions to more realistic injurious experiences and disputes. More generalizable results come from surveys of actual or potential disputants (e.g., Best and Andreasen, 1977; Frieze, 1979), but these studies measure rather than manipulate variables, with the consequence that clear causal inferences are impossible to make. In addition, few surveys include both direct measures of social psychological variables and evidence of variation in rates of naming, blaming, and claiming. Obviously, these limitations preclude for the present any definitive validation of social psychological predictions.

Nevertheless we can use available research to help determine whether future tests of a social psychological approach to disputing would be worthwhile. Even if we are presently uncertain of causal direction, is there at least correlational evidence for the predicted relationships between social psychological variables and naming, blaming, and claiming? Where important variables are not measured, are there other relationships in the data which are at least consistent with the social psychological theories? To the extent we can answer these questions in the affirmative, further research on a social psychological approach to dispute development would seem warranted.

Naming

Naming is the recognition that an injurious condition exists. People are more likely to engage in naming when they get less than they have gotten in the past, or less than similar, relevant others are getting. While not addressing quite the same process, surveys which explore problem perception rates among various populations probably provide the most pertinent available information about naming (Best and Andreasen, 1977; Curran, 1977; King and McEvoy, 1976; McNeil *et al*., 1979; Miller and Sarat, 1981; Ross and Littlefield, 1978; Warland *et al*., 1975). Unfortunately, few of these studies include direct measures of social psychological variables, and the measures included are inadequate. Our assessment of the role played by social and temporal comparisons in naming is therefore limited to rather indirect evidence.

Most surveys which include questions about experience with problems that could eventually lead to public or legal disputes have also included some measure of socioeconomic status. While there are many explanations for class differences in problem perception, it would be consistent with relative deprivation and equity theories to find that wealthier, higher-status individuals notice more problems than poorer, low-status individuals do. Wealthier people are used to better services and outcomes, and so are more likely to be dissatisfied with difficulties and defects when they occur (Brickman *et al*., 1978). Wealthier people may also be more inclined to compare themselves with advantaged others, and perhaps to feel that their higher social status represents an investment that should equitably entitle them to the same benefits enjoyed by others of high status (Austin, 1977).

While the surveys vary considerably in the conceptual definitions applied and quality of methodology employed, many show that for both consumer difficulties (Best and Andreasen, 1977; King and McEvoy, 1976; Ross and Littlefield, 1978; Warland *et al*., 1975) and more general problems with litigation potential (Curran, 1977), wealthy people perceive more injurious experiences than poor people do. But other studies of consumer reactions (McNeil *et al*., 1979) and civil legal problems in general (Miller and Sarat, 1981) have shown no significant relationship between income and problem perception. However, even a finding of no relationship is consistent with the proposition that wealthy people will be more dissatisfied with a given negative event than poor people will. Wealthier people live in safer neighborhoods, shop in

better stores, and in all probability have objectively fewer injurious experiences than poor people do (Best and Andreasen, 1977; McNeil *et al.*, 1979; Ross and Littlefield, 1978). If wealthier people actually encounter fewer problems, but report having as many or more than poorer people, they are apparently more sensitive to the difficulties they do encounter. Obviously, this greater sensitivity is not necessarily the result of the temporal and social comparisons available to the rich, but such comparisons do provide a reasonable explanation for the findings and are consonant with predictions made by relative deprivation and equity theories.

In one survey of consumer problem perception (Best and Andreasen, 1977), a measure of social comparison was taken. Respondents were asked whether they had more, less, or about the same number of problems with purchases as other people. Unfortunately, Best and Andreasen report only the distribution of answers to this question, and do not discuss how this variable is related to other measures. But, even if the social comparison measure had been correlated with other indices, the results would probably not have been very informative. Work in social psychology has not advanced to the point of allowing very accurate predictions of just who people will compare with, but "other people" in general do not usually comprise a very salient or influential comparison group. Satisfaction with outcomes is most likely to be determined by comparisons with others who are somehow like us, proximal to us, or pertinent to the outcome (Brickman and Campbell, 1971; Suls, 1977; Gruder, 1977). In equity considerations, the important comparisons of outcomes are expected to be made with others who are providing similar or relevant inputs, whatever we may consider such inputs to be (Austin, 1977). People who feel they have more problems than most are also likely to feel they have more difficulties than relevant comparison groups, and may be particularly unhappy with their situation. But people who believe they have the same or fewer problems than most (95 percent of the Best and Andreasen sample) could still see themselves as worse off than more specific and more important comparison groups. The Best and Andreasen measure of social comparison is inadequate. Unfortunately, the kind of data that would be needed to assess more adequately the relationship between social comparisons and problem perception does not seem to exist. Aside from their study, surveys of problem perception do not include any direct measures of social or temporal

comparisons (e.g., Miller and Sarat, 1981; Ross and Littlefield, 1978), and surveys which include such measures do not focus on problem perception rates (see Cook *et al.*, 1977, for a review).

These problems could be cured by better design. Techniques for assessing relevant social comparisons have been developed (Goodman, 1974) and could be applied in surveys of problem perception. From what we know, such research should prove fruitful. Thus, a few of the studies including measures of temporal and social comparisons at least *suggest* that comparisons may affect naming. As mentioned earlier, past research indicates that satisfaction with promotion opportunties (Stouffer *et al.*, 1949), occupation (Form and Geschwender, 1962), and salary (Wilensky, 1963) is better predicted by social comparison measures than objective outcome levels. While it does not necessarily follow that evaluations in other areas, such as consumer difficulties, will be influenced by social comparisons, these studies provide support for such hypotheses. Temporal comparisons may also influence the extent to which people will simply tolerate some negative event, or become upset about it. The fact that battered wives often voluntarily remain in or return to relationships that counselors and others find untenable (Frieze, 1979; Walker, 1979) may result at least in part from the temporal comparisons available to the wives and observers. From the wife's perspective, another beating is not very discrepant from past experience, and apparently not disturbing enough to terminate the relationship. Compared to the counselor's more peaceful past, enduring such abuse seems something only an insane person would do (Waites, 1978; Walker, 1979). Such post-hoc explanations can never verify that social or temporal comparisons have any impact on the naming process. But, the combined evidence discussed here does suggest an interesting area for future research.

Blaming

Present social psychological theory and research does not allow for global predictions of the extent to which people will blame another party for an injurious experience (Frieze, 1979). Investigations of people's attributions for real-life problems or difficulties have produced mixed results. Some studies indicate high rates of other-blame. In a small study with MBA students, Valle and Wallendorf (1977) asked subjects to write about a product they had been displeased with, and why they were

dissatisfied. Most of the subjects saw the manufacturer or seller as responsible for the problem. Veroff and Melnick (1977) conducted a large-scale survey asking people about the attributions they made for a variety of living problems, such as marital discord. Respondents were likely to blame others more than themselves for such difficulties. However, as noted earlier, other research suggests that people have a surprising tendency to take personal responsibility for negative outcomes (Coates *et al.*, 1979). In a study of paralyzed accident victims, Janoff Bulman and Wortman (1977) found a very high incidence of self-blame for the accident, despite the fact that objective circumstances often did not seem to warrant such attributions. Battered wives (Ball and Wyman, 1978; Hilberman and Munson, 1978; Walker, 1979; Frieze, 1979) also show a high rate of self-blame, as do rape victims (Janoff Bulman, 1979).

Obviously, there is substantial variability in the attributions people make for negative events that they encounter. Nonetheless, it is possible to speculate on the factors differentiating injurious experiences that people blame on themselves from those that they blame on others. For example, when problems threaten people's perceived control and sense of future safety, they may find self-blame more comforting than the alternative belief that they have little power over their lives (Janoff Bulman and Wortman, 1977; Janoff Bulman, 1979; Wortman, 1976). Paralyzing accidents, husband brutality, and rapes may indeed be more threatening than marital discord or consumer difficulties, and may perhaps prompt more self-blame for this reason. It is also possible that people are more inclined to take personal responsibility for expected or predictable events (Miller and Ross, 1975; Ross, 1977). Abused wives, accident victims, and rape victims may receive more warnings and be more inclined to feel, "I should have known better," with the result that they blame themselves more. Disgruntled consumers and quarreling mates, on the other hand, may have initially received promises or harbored expectations that everything would be fine; their problems might therefore seem more unexpected and less attributable to themselves. In any case, it is obvious that attribution formation is a complex process (Nisbett and Ross, 1980), and existing research does not sufficiently clarify when people will engage in the blaming transformation. But even if we cannot predict very well what attributions people will make for a perceived problem, we can still measure the attributions they do make,

and determine the extent to which attributions predict later behavior.

Claiming

We suggested earlier that both control and attribution theories may help us to predict who will make a claim for cessation or compensation from the "other side." For cessation concerns, perceived control and the stability of problem-attributions will be related, and both types of theory predict that people will usually be less likely to make cessation claims for problems they consider unchangeable. For compensation claims, though, perceived control over outcomes will often be unrelated to the stability of attributions for a problem, and perceived control is expected to be more predictive of claiming.

While many studies have reported on complaint rates among various populations, none have included any direct measures of perceived control. Nevertheless, some of the findings from this research are consistent with the prediction that greater perceived control leads to more claiming. For example, Miller and Sarat (1981) and Curran (1977) both find that while in most situations 70 to 80 percent of people with a grievance complain or take some type of corrective action, claiming rates for problems involving discrimination are much lower. Perceived control may explain those abnormally low rates. People who are discriminated against are generally members of less powerful groups in society, and should be particularly likely to feel helpless or unable to control outcomes (Seligman, 1975). There is some evidence that women, for example, have lower perceived control than men do (see Frieze, 1979; Walker, 1979, for reviews). But other results from complaint studies are less supportive of control predictions. For example, it might be expected that rich people will generally have greater perceived control than poor ones, but income level is not a very strong or consistent predictor of claiming (Best and Andreasen, 1977; Day and Landon, 1976; Miller and Sarat, 1981; McNeil *et al*., 1979; Warland *et al.*, 1975). However, other studies indicate that perceived control is only indirectly related to socioeconomic status (Rotter, 1966), and measures of income level are obviously inadequate operationalizations of the control variable. In any case, until we have more direct measures of perceived control, it is difficult to ascertain how this factor influences the development of disputes.

While evidence for perceived control and relative deprivation effects is inferential at best, we do have more precise data on the role of attributions in claiming behavior. Of course, fundamental questions have been raised concerning the relationship between attributions made and actions taken. Some authors have asked whether people even make attributions for events, unless required to do so by researchers (Wortman and Dintzer, 1978). Experiments suggest that at least in some situations, people do not form attributions, but instead resort to ill-considered and incomplete "top of the head" explanations (Taylor and Fiske, 1978). But this finding has only turned up for relatively trival events, such as being made to wait a few minutes longer to use a Xerox machine. When people encounter more serious real-life events, it is likely they will give such events more careful thought and develop more considered explanations. A further objection is that outside of the controlled laboratory, any number of extraneous factors could intervene between attribution and action. Research has shown there is often little consistency between the attitudes people say they have and their actual behavior (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975), perhaps because behavior is often determined by factors other than personal feelings, thoughts, and intentions. Is it reasonable to expect that people's stated attributions will predict their behavior any better than their stated attitudes do? Studies of the relationship between attributions and actions in real-life potential disputant populations are very rare, and clearly more work is necessary before any firm conclusions can be drawn. Attributions are certainly not the only variables influencing claiming, and in many situations other factors may override any impact of attributions. But the available evidence, while sometimes indirect and admittedly limited, does offer fairly consistent support for the hypothesized relationships between attributions made and courses of action taken.

Earlier, we indicated that claims for either cessation or compensation are more likely when people attribute a perceived injurious experience to some external, personal cause. One study with some bearing on this prediction, mentioned earlier, was conducted by Janoff Bulman and Wortman (1977). The population in this study consisted of 29 hospital patients with spinal cord injuries, all of which were the result of some type of accident. All of the injuries were sufficiently massive to leave the patients permanently paralyzed either from the waist or neck down. As the purpose

of the study was to investigate the relationship between attributions made for the accident and adjustment to the injury, specific measures of the extent to which these accident victims claimed, complained, or took other courses of corrective action were not included. Nonetheless, most of the people in this study would certainly qualify as potential disputants. The most common objective cause of the paralysis was an automobile or motorcycle accident, and in the majority of these cases the injured party was only a passenger. The next most frequent types of accidents were injuries sustained from diving into swimming pools and being shot by another person. In nearly half the cases, another person was directly involved in causing the accident, and in many of these cases the potential adversary was a virtual stranger and not a friend or relative.

Most of these victims had been paralyzed in situations which objectively seem ripe for finding fault with another party and demanding some type of restitution. Yet, attributions to other people and attempts to gain compensation were surprisingly infrequent. Respondents rated chance and, unexpectedly, themselves, as most responsible for the accident. While the patients were not specifically questioned about their plans for seeking compensation, the investigators commented that these people were very open about discussing their future plans, and the fairly extensive interviews included an unstructured "small talk" session when the patients frequently mentioned such plans. Only one person indicated that he was actively seeking damages for the injury. These findings are quite consistent with attribution theory. The accident victims did not see other people as responsible for their injuries, and as would be expected, did not for the most part take any persistent action to gain compensation.

The unexpected extent of self-blame among these potential disputants is interesting and relevant, but it does not provide strong support for attribution theory. Claiming was not directly assessed in the study, and it is quite possible that more of the accident victims had complained to the offending party, but failed to mention doing so because their claims were fully met. Fortunately, this is not a problem in the research of Valle and her colleagues (Valle and Koeske, 1977; Valle and Wallendorf, 1977; Valle and Johnson, 1979) who have investigated the relationship between attributions and complaint behavior among dissatisfied consumers. While most of this work has been in laboratory situations, Valle and Koeske (1977) did

conduct a national survey on consumer problems, which they describe in the following way:

> As part of a research project on consumer problems of the elderly, a mail survey was completed by a national sample of 2,849 men and women (62.2 percent of which were over 65 years of age). The respondents were asked to describe the worst buying experience they had had in the past few years. A number of questions probed the nature of this bad experience, specifically: (1) possible reasons for being dissatisfied; (2) who they blamed for the problem; (3) which actions they took because of the problem; (4) why they might have hesitated or failed to complain; and (5) the monetary and psychological costs incurred.
>
> A discriminant analysis was performed to distinguish between those who took action after their bad experience and those who did not. A respondent was considered to have taken direct action if he or she reported doing anything more than complaining to friends or deciding not to buy the product again. The variable most strongly associated with taking no direct action was attributing responsibility to oneself. Taking direct action was strongly associated with attributing blame to the company that sold the product. In contrast, traditional demographic variables, such as income, education, and age, were relatively poor predictors of complaint behavior (Valle and Johnson, 1979: 126, 127).

These results suggest that the internal-external attribution dimension is a better predictor of complaining behavior than are socioeconomic variables. However, these results do not tell us anything about the role which the other attributional dimensions play in claiming. A study that does provide some insight into this area was conducted by Irene Frieze (1979) on the attributions and related behaviors of battered wives. Wife beating is unquestionably the source of many of the complaints and disputes heard in both the courts (Davidson, 1977) and informal mediation centers (Felstiner and Williams, 1978). In the Frieze study, an original sample of battered wives was collected by advertising for women who had filed legal action to remove violent husbands from their homes or who had gone to a shelter for abused women. The study reports on data collected from 42 women who were contacted in these ways. Once this initial sample was collected, the researchers obtained a random sample of women who lived in the same neighborhoods as the abused wives. Of the 82 women in this second sample who were eventually interviewed, 33 percent reported some level of violence in their marriages. The battered women in this latter sample differed from those in the first in that they had not made either direct or indirect public claims against their husbands. And as would be expected from attribution theory, these women, unlike those who had taken some definite corrective actions, were more likely to blame themselves than their husbands for the violence.

Frieze (1979) also investigated how the stability of the wives' attributions for the violence was related to seeking help and leaving the husband. Battered wives are probably most concerned with cessation, and earlier we predicted that claims for cessation would usually be most strongly related to external, moderately stable attributions for the injurious experience. The results of the Frieze study are consistent with this prediction. Wives who saw their own stable personal characteristics as responsible were most likely to seek psychotherapy, and try to correct themselves rather than their mates. Women who blamed their husbands and attributed the violence to more stable causes were more likely to indicate a strong desire to leave. Actual leaving, however, while related to the stability of attributions for the battering, was not predicted by husband blame. When wives made more stable attributions for the beatings, they were more likely to leave permanently, while women who made less stable attributions were more likely to return if they left. These results indicate that very stable attributions are associated with giving up, while moderately stable attributions seem more associated with attempts to "work things out." Of course, for battered wives, even giving up may require making claims in order to initiate divorce proceedings or have a recalcitrant husband forcibly removed.

These three studies do not provide a solid basis for firm conclusions about the relationship between attributions and claiming. Most of the studies did not include adequate measures of claiming, but focused instead on related behaviors. None of the studies included any exploration of the intentionality dimension and its impact on reactions to grievances. Perhaps most damaging of all, the studies provide only correlational evidence, so there is an important unanswered question of causal direction. People may decide that some negative event is their fault or hopelessly unchangeable after they decide to forego claiming rather than before. But it is still impressive that the predicted relationship between attributions and actions would receive fairly consistent support in studies of three very different potential disputant populations. The results suggest that, if used in studies with more careful methodological approaches, attribution theory may provide valuable insights into dispute behavior.

V. FUTURE RESEARCH

We have tried to describe the ways in which social psychological theories and research can predict transformations in the disputing process. No existing research on disputes has made systematic use of such theories, but the broader introduction of such concepts can be accomplished relatively painlessly. Such research should benefit both dispute researchers and social psychologists. Extensive use of social psychological variables in a socially significant domain such as disputing will provide opportunities to test and refine the theories. Although these theories are rich sources of hypotheses, they have generated few empirical investigations with the external validity needed for research on dispute transformations. It is clear that subjects in experimental laboratory studies can and do generate attributions, social comparisons, and judgments of consensus, distinctiveness, etc. But we know little about the impact these comparisons and judgments have on behavior outside the laboratory. The many laboratory and field studies we noted earlier do offer one significant and immediate advantage—they provide a concrete point for the measurement of variables which can test the hypotheses suggested by social psychological theories. Indeed, existing studies can help provide both richer operational definitions of the naming, blaming, and claiming stages in dispute transformation and effective methods for measuring variables that mediate the transformations between these disputing stages.

If we consider dispute research from the point of view of independent, dependent, and mediating variables, the mediating and dependent variable end of the spectrum is perhaps most easily tackled. Many interesting social psychological variables can easily be assessed in survey questionnaire formats. The first integrative steps might simply include incorporating a battery of social psychological questions into existing designs. Each of the theories discussed above suggests a set of variables to be examined. For instance, equity theory and relative deprivation theory indicate a need to first determine which groups individuals select as the basis for comparing and assessing their outcomes. Respondents (whether they happen to be members of a general survey or have been selected because they are actively involved in a dispute) can be asked about the experiences they believe "people like themselves" typically have in situations which may give rise to grievances. They may also be probed about

the extent to which their personal experiences "match" those of their reference groups and be asked to speculate on any observed differences. Perceived control theory suggests the need for questions which would tap respondents' assessments of the extent to which they are likely to obtain redress for complaints.

Attribution theories are perhaps the richest source of dependent variables and, in light of the successes using attributions as predictors, perhaps the most promising source. Weiner's (1972) formulation of attribution theory would call for assessments of external versus internal causes of events, stable versus unstable causes, and intentional versus unintentional causes. Kelley's (1972) attribution model underscores the need for assessments of the perceived consistency, distinctiveness, and consensus regarding causes of injuries. As detailed earlier, these models make a number of distinct behavioral predictions. Thus, appropriate dependent variables might be used both to provide insights into dispute transformations and to test and refine the attribution models under field conditions. Furthermore, the research on attributional biases—such as the tendency to ascribe other people's behavior to internal or dispositional factors (e.g., personality traits), the tendency to blame victims, and the tendency to ascribe fault to oneself—clearly suggests variables likely to promote or inhibit dispute transformations. Measurement techniques such as those employed by Goodman (1974), Janoff Bulman and Wortman (1977), Valle and Johnson (1979), and Frieze (1979) lend themselves well to survey and experimental studies of disputing.

If a sufficiently wide range of injurious circumstances is examined in survey designs, it may also be possible to formulate typologies of injuries likely to yield particular types of attributions and blaming or claiming transformations. The distinction between claims for cessation and claims for compensation illustrates two plausible types of injuries that are likely to give rise to different attributions and disputing behavior. Dispute typologies would be intrinsically interesting, and they might also have value if they suggest different intervention strategies designed to reduce dispute transformations at early stages in the disputing process.

The value of improved insight into disputing behavior can best be indexed by its practical consequences in resolving disputes. In many claims situations there are contacts between potential disputants prior to the development of the claim, and

these contacts may be subject to formal procedures and rules (e.g., procedures for returning defective merchandise). It may be very useful to know the relationship between such procedures and social psychological variables—particularly if (as we hypothesize) the psychological variables mediate and predict the course of the dispute transformation process. For example, businesses interested in repeat buying and satisfied customers, government and social agencies interested in helping a maximum number of those with legitimate problems, and researchers interested in a deeper understanding of dispute development would find such a tool very useful. Programs aimed at increasing access to dispute resolution mechanisms or even resolving disputes might include components to provide people with the information they need to make well-balanced attributions and possibly to alter unrealistic and problematic ones.

Once a claim has been lodged, resolution of the dispute may proceed in a variety of ways. A number of dispute resolution mechanisms are available to disputants (e.g., litigation, arbitration, and mediation). It will be particularly instructive to examine the relationships between resolution strategies and social psychological variables. Intervention strategies can, of course, be treated as independent variables in experimental field studies designed to assess the efficacy of particular forms of dispute resolution. It would be quite informative, for example, to examine the influence of third-party interventions (e.g., mediators versus attorneys) or the impact of mediation versus litigation on attributions, resolution satisfaction, and future disputing behavior. Ideally, such a study would use random assignment of cases to resolution conditions.

Less complex (and more easily managed) interventions can also be examined within the context of mediation or litigation. Mediation strategies designed to air and modify the attributions parties may have made about one another or even about themselves may actually be more useful in dispute resolution than mediation strategies focusing on injuries and the causes of those injuries would be. Resolution strategies might be examined experimentally in other settings. For example, merchants might find that both they and their customers obtain better resolutions if customers are afforded choices (such as resolution procedures or times of meetings or methods of presenting complaints) that might enhance

customers' sense of personal control and reduce attributions which make customers less prone to early resolution.

Existing disputing studies have often fallen prey to the sampling problems of over-representation of certain socioeconomic groups. This has often come about in studies which rely on self-reports of injury and which necessarily reach respondents well after the injury has taken place. One method of avoiding these difficulties would be through the use of a panel study of representative households. Such a study would minimize the sampling problems just noted, and would have the advantage of allowing researchers to examine changes, over time, in attributions, self-blame, social comparisons, and perceived control.

For references cited in this article, see p. 883.