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Accountability moderates member-to-group generalization: Testing a dual process model of stereotype change

Stefania Paolini [a,*], Richard J. Crisp [b], Kylie McIntyre [a]

[a] School of Psychology, University of Newcastle, Callaghan, NSW 2308, Australia
[b] Richard Crisp, Department of Psychology, Keynes College, University of Kent, Canterbury CT2 7NP, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

According to contemporary models of accountability [Lerner, J.S., & Tetlock, P.E. (1999). Accounting for the effects of accountability. *Psychological Bulletin, 125*, 255–275], when individuals are warned that they will be held accountable for their decisions, both information processing and judgment vigilance increase. We used an established generalization paradigm [Garcia-Marques, L., & Mackie, D.M. (1999). The impact of stereotype incongruent information on perceived group variability and stereotype change. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 77*, 979–990] to extend the application of these principles to the process of member-to-group generalization in stereotype change. As predicted, across the three studies (*Ns* = 60, 78, and 101), accountability was found to amplify generalization under control conditions, both when the member information was stereotypical (Experiment 1) and counterstereotypical (Experiments 2 and 3). Accountability was found to attenuate generalization (Experiments 2 and 3) when a meta-judgmental cue discredited the validity of the member information for the group judgment. Ancillary evidence from Experiments 2 and 3 suggests a mediational role for the cognitive fencing-off of the member information from the group schema. The implications of the observed interplay between stereotyping and meta-cognitions for theory and policy are discussed.

On February 13, the Australian opposition leader, Brendan Nelson, told Parliament the dramatic story of an Aboriginal girl separated under duress from her mother on a dusty road of the New South Wales Outback. Soon after, Mr. Nelson joined Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in his formal apology to all of those Aboriginal people forcibly removed from their families by White police and bureaucrats over the last 70 years. These events will make history, but they also raise important psychological questions: Can the story of a *single* Aboriginal girl really make a difference in the mind of a highly accountable politician and help overturn half a century's tenacious resistance from Mr. Nelson's political party to giving a formal (intergroup) apology?

The research reported in this article focuses on accountability, a defining feature of most roles of leadership and responsibility (Pinter et al., 2007; Tetlock, 1992). Specifically, we extend principles of accountability established in more general research into judgment and decision-making to models of stereotype change. We investigated the impact that accountability has on the process of *member-to-group generalization* whereby people generalize their salient and immediately accessible experience with a limited number of group members to the judgment of the group as a whole (Paolini, Hewstone, Rubin, & Pay, 2004). Three experiments are reported that used an established member-to-group generalization paradigm (Garcia-Marques & Mackie, 1999) and tested two basic principles of contemporary models of accountability (Lerner & Tetlock, 1999; Tetlock, 1992): that accountability increases both extensive information processing and judgment vigilance. In so doing, this research is the first to identify conditions under which accountability amplifies member-to-group generalization and conditions under which accountability attenuates generalization.

Accountability deepens information processing and increases judgment vigilance

Politicians, priests, sporting stars and many of those who exert considerable influence in various constituencies of our society go through the everyday burden and thrills of social scrutiny. They carry with them an implicit or explicit expectation that they may be called on to justify their attitudes, beliefs, and actions toward others. They know they may suffer serious sanctions if they fail to provide satisfactory justifications for what they do, but also that they may enjoy considerable rewards for providing compelling accounts of their actions (Simonson & Nye, 1992). Accountability has captured the imagination of researchers and policy makers because it interfaces the individual to the institution, but also because of its promise as a panacea to biased decision-making. The hope was

* Corresponding author. Fax: +61 (0)2 49216980.
E-mail address: Stefania.Paolini@Newcastle.edu.au (S. Paolini).

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that making people accountable would solve the problems of poor judgment, whether this be in health, criminal justice, or economics (Simonson & Nye, 1992). Recent comprehensive reviews, however, have returned a more complex and nuanced view of accountability effects (Lerner & Tetlock, 1999). There are many types of accountability (Tetlock, 1992), and accountability effects depend on a complex set of moderators, including the cause of a given bias (Simonson & Nye, 1992), the roles (Pinter et al., 2007) and the characteristics of the decision maker (Mero, Guidice, & Anna, 2006).

Complexity, however, does not preclude clarity – at least when it comes to pre-decisional accountability to an unknown audience. Lerner and Tetlock (1999) provide a model of accountability effects that invokes two distinct and parallel psychological processes that we call here 'accountability correlates'. Accountability encourages (1) extensive and effortful information processing and (2) self-critical awareness of one's judgment processes. Tetlock and Kim (1987), for example, found that when asked to form impressions of target individuals, accountable participants drew from more information and developed more integrated impressions (information–processing correlate). These accountable participants, however, also showed *less confidence* than non-accountable participants when predicting the individuals' behavior in domains not directly covered by the initial information. This demonstrates that accountability can increase both the amount of information processed to form an impression, as well as an analysis of the quality of that information. That is, participants' focus on whether the informational basis for their judgment is adequate (judgment–vigilance correlate).

A few things about this dual process account of accountability effects are pivotal to our research. First, the judgment–vigilance correlate is both meta-judgmental and socially normative in nature (Tetlock, 2002): To avoid appearing foolish when questioned by their audience, accountable individuals increase their monitoring and their reactivity to *all* the cues they believe may influence their judgment (Lerner & Tetlock, 1999). These meta-judgmental cues can be explicit and bound to the information content (Skitka, Mosier, & Burdick, 2000), as in the case of a barrister stating in front of the court the irrelevance of a piece of evidence. Often, however, they are subtle and belong to the realm of the information's rhetoric structure, context, and interpretative framework (e.g., Bless, Bohner, Hild, & Schwarz, 1992; for an overview, see Hilton, 1995). As elusive and subtle as they may be, especially to accountable individuals, these meta-judgmental cues signal whether the judgment under construction meets certain socially shared criteria of validity (Leyens, Yzerbyt, & Schadron, 1992). They point towards context-specific social norms sanctioning the materials and the process used to build one's judgment.

Most times, the two accountability correlates converge towards a common judgment outcome. In a study that manipulated accountability *and* meta-judgmental cues orthogonally (Tetlock, Lerner, & Boettger, 1996), accountable participants integrated available information in their predictions more than non-accountable participants when no explicit meta-judgmental cue were available (see Tetlock & Boettger, 1989), and even more so when a conversational prime validated information integration. These results suggest that the information–processing correlate may be the *default* process when there is accountability in the absence of an explicit meta-judgmental cue; and remains the *dominant* process when meta-judgmental cues confirm that the available information can be trusted. Importantly, however, Tetlock et al. (1996) found also evidence for a more complex accountability × meta-judgmental cue interaction. When the conversational prime warned participants *against* information integration, the basic accountability effect was completely reversed: instead of integrating available information more, accountable participants integrated information less. This means that, when the meta-judgmental cues *discredit* the informational basis of the judgment, increased judgment vigilance can reverse or nullify the default judgment outcome of the information–processing correlate.

Our research further investigates the dissociation between the two accountability correlates. Contrasting and sometimes counter-intuitive joint effects are well documented in person perception and in several other judgment and choice paradigms (for an overview, Lerner & Tetlock, 1999). Little, however, is known about how the two correlates translate and interact within member-to-group generalization. This research took on the challenge of a first systematic investigation in this area. We start by discussing how the dual process account embedded in earlier accountability research led us to predict that the information-processing correlate should lead to generalization *amplification* while the judgment–vigilance correlate to generalization *attenuation*.

This research: accountability can both amplify and attenuate generalization

Generalization from instances is probably the simplest and most pervasive form of everyday inductive reasoning (Nisbett, Kranz, Jepson, & Kunda, 1983). In the social realm, people's ability to utilize salient and immediately accessible information about members of stigmatized groups forms the basis for both stereotype formation (Park & Hastie, 1987) and stereotype reduction (e.g., Kunda & Oleson, 1997). Hence, as with most basic social cognitive processes, member-to-group generalization is neither intrinsically good nor bad (Paolini et al., 2004). We grounded our predictions in an established generalization paradigm: Garcia-Marques and Mackie's (1999) 'impression formation paradigm'. This paradigm, which we adapted only slightly, focuses on the stereotypical views of academically 'hardworking' students. Participants begin by providing (via a computer program) group judgments through a so-called 'hour generation task'. In this participants estimate the number of hours studied per week for each of a large sample of students randomly drawn from the target student population. The advantage of this procedure is that, while the mean of the numerical estimates still provides an overall index of group stereotyping for the experimenter, it avoids participants' concerns about providing direct and repeated group judgments (see Garcia-Marques & Mackie, 1999). Typically, after baseline and pre-manipulation hour generation tasks, participants are asked to form an impression of a single individual group member (or a small number of group members) from limited and highly controlled information, and then to provide a group judgment again using the same procedure as described above for baseline assessment. Member-to-group generalization is measured by within-subject changes in group judgments before and after receiving the information about the single individual group member. The larger the within-subject change the larger the member-to-group generalization.

When imported to this kind of generalization paradigm, we argue that the two accountability correlates will lead to contrasting generalization outcomes: The information-processing correlate should encourage 'generalization *amplification*' (i.e., accountable individuals should display *larger* generalizations than non-accountable individuals); whereas the judgment–vigilance correlate should encourage 'generalization *attenuation*' (i.e., accountable individuals should display *smaller* generalizations or generalization of similar size to non-accountable individuals).

The rationale for these predictions is as follows. If accountability typically encourages extensive information-processing of all the information available at the time of making the judgment (Skitka et al., 2000; Tetlock & Kim, 1987), individuals accountable for their group judgments should process the individual group member's information more thoroughly, and as a consequence, rely more