When Bad (Good) Things Happen to Good (Bad) People: The Impact of Character Appraisal and Perceived Controllability on Judgments of Deservingness

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When third parties judge the deservingness of outcomes experienced by others, what role does their appraisal of others' character play in their judgments? Two experiments examined this question by locating it within the framework of Feather's (1994a) theoretical analysis of deservingness. In both experiments, participants read 16 stories in which (a) people of good or bad character (b) experienced positive or negative outcomes in events (c) over which they had high or low control, then rated the extent to which each outcome was deserved. All three factors were found to affect ratings of deservingness, but the dominant influence was the Valence of Character $\times$ Valence of Outcome interaction. Outcomes were judged to be deserved when the valences attached to actors' character and their outcomes were congruent (either $++$ or $--$) and undeserved when the valences were incongruent (either $+-$ or $-+$). Most of the results supported Feather's formulations and, in addition, suggested how people integrate several perceptions into a composite judgment of deservingness.

KEY WORDS: deservingness; character; controllability; justice.

A revered young priest dies suddenly. A ne'er-do-well inherits a fortune. A hard-working employee loses her job. A plagiarist wins a literary prize. When such events are observed—when “bad things happen to good people” (Kushner, 1981) or “good things happen to bad people”—what psychological reactions are triggered?

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Does one conclude that the outcomes are undeserved? Does a different set of psychological reactions occur when “good things happen to good people” or “bad things happen to bad people”? If so, then it would seem that one’s reactions to another’s lot is dependent to a significant degree upon that other’s perceived character (i.e., whether the other is perceived as a “good” or “bad” person). We have begun exploring these questions by examining the judgments of deservingness offered by third parties after learning that others, deemed to be of good or bad character, have experienced positive or negative outcomes. Feather’s model of deservingness (1992, 1994a, 1996a) served as the theoretical framework guiding our explorations, and the two experiments reported here were conceived, in large measure, to evaluate some of the previously untested precepts of Feather’s model.

CHARACTER AS A SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSTRUCT

Ever since Gordon Allport declared that “character is an unnecessary concept for psychology” (1937, p. 52)—primarily because there was so little consensus about its meaning—the term has been seldom invoked as a social psychological construct. Yet the character construct, and what it denotes, is commonly used outside the domains of personality and social psychology because it identifies a distinctive and important form of social judgment. More than just an evaluation of personality, character appraisal represents an assessment of the extent to which an individual manifests traits and behaviors that meet the assessor’s standards for proper, even idealized conduct. These standards, from the perspective of social cognition, are embodied in the assessor’s “good person” and “bad person” schema, consisting of those traits and behaviors most prototypical of moral and immoral conduct, as defined as the assessor. As such, character appraisal provides one of the clearest instances in which perceivers’ moral and ethical values are brought to bear on their social judgments.

Many behavioral scientists’ disenchantment with the study of character was also influenced, no doubt, by the conclusions reached by Hartshorne and May (1928), and Hartshorne, May, and Maller (1929) in their classic studies of children’s “character traits” such as honesty and helpfulness. They found little consistency in children’s behaviors across a variety of tasks intended to measure moral behaviors and only negligible correlations between children’s church attendance and their behavior on these tasks. Hartshorne and May concluded that children’s moral conduct in any situation is determined more by the circumstances that attend the situation than by their moral beliefs or training.

On the limited occasions in recent years when the character construct has been included in social psychological research, the term has continued to be used in differing ways, for example, to identify a self-deprecating attributional style (Janoff-Bulman, 1979; Major, Mueller, and Hildebrandt, 1985); as a synonym for social desirability (Egbert, Moore, Wunsch, and Castellow, 1992); to refer to a type of testimony introduced in legal proceedings (Borgida, 1979; Bottoms and Goodman, 1994; Kaplan, 1985; Otto, Penrod, and Decker, 1994). Character, on the other hand, continues to be a commonly used construct among psychohistorians (Barber, 1992; Reeves, 1991; Wilson, 1995) and psychoanalytic scholars (Baudy, 1991), for whom character typically refers to the distinctive and stable modes of adjustment manifested by an individual and, therefore, resembles the construct of personality. In contrast to the psychodynamic use of the term, character is treated in this paper as McClelland recommended, as “an evaluation of a person in terms of some standards” (1951, p. 63).