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of Deservingness

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Studies in the Psychology of Deservingness

Norman T. Feather

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Studies in the Psychology
of Deservingness

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For Daryl and Mark again

Preface

When we say that a person deserves a positive or negative outcome, we are making a judgment that is influenced by a number of variables. We would certainly take into account whether the person was responsible for the outcome or whether the outcome could be attributed to other sources. We would also consider whether the actions that led to the positive or negative outcome were actions that we would value or actions that would meet with our disapproval. We might also be influenced by the person's own positive or negative characteristics, by our knowledge of what kinds of groups or social categories the person belonged to, and by whether we like or dislike the person. Information about these different variables has to be considered and integrated in some way, and our judgment of deservingness follows that psychological process, a process that involves the cognitive-affective system.

Values, Achievements, and Justice is about deservingness and about the variables that affect the judgments we make. I use the term “deservingness” although I could equally have referred to “deservedness” or “desert.” The terms are all virtually equivalent in meaning, although dictionaries may separate them by using fine distinctions. I assume that the sorts of variables I have just described will affect our judgments of deservingness, and I further assume that a judgment of deservingness is most likely to occur when these variables fit together in a consistent, harmonious, and balanced way.

This book may be seen as forging links between concepts and theoretical approaches that come from social psychology, the psychology of motivation and emotion, cognitive psychology, and the psychology of personality, as well as conceptual analyses that have been presented by legal theorists and philosophers. I make no claim to be an expert as it concerns the latter disciplines. It is clear, however, that legal concepts such as mitigation, justification, responsibility, deservingness, and blameworthiness are relevant to the way we judge outcomes, not only in

regard to outcomes that relate to other persons but also for outcomes that relate to ourselves. They have a place in the psychological literature. In an important sense, therefore, this book attempts to span different disciplines, bringing in variables and theoretical ideas that will clarify how judgments of deservingness are determined at the psychological level.

The first part of the book is mainly concerned with clearing some conceptual ground. I consider the meaning of deservingness and responsibility and describe how these concepts have been discussed and differentiated in the relevant literature. I then move on to an analysis of the concept of value, to a description of the content and structure of the domain of values, and to a consideration of how our values affect the way we construe specific actions and outcomes in terms of their attractiveness and aversiveness or, to use more technical terms, their positive and negative valence. Research findings are presented that support the linkage between the general values people hold and the valences of specific actions and outcomes within defined contexts.

I then present a structural model of deservingness that relates a person's judgments of another's deservingness for an outcome to the other's perceived responsibility for the action and its outcome, to the person's positive or negative evaluations of the action and the outcome, and to like/dislike and ingroup/outgroup relations between the person who is judging and the other being judged. I assume that the relations between elements within this structural model tend toward a state of harmony or balance in Heider's sense of this term and that judgments of deservingness or undeservingness will tend to occur when, under conditions of perceived responsibility, a person's evaluations of the other's action and contingent outcome are balanced or unbalanced respectively. Relations between person and other are then assumed to moderate these judgments, with maximum deservingness occurring when all parts of the total structure of relations are balanced.

The second part of the book presents studies from my research program that relate to this model and test its implications in two different types of context—one where positive or negative outcomes (successes or failures) occur in achievement-related situations, the other where negative outcomes (penalties) occur within the context of retributive justice. The latter studies concern how people react to the perpetrators of offenses and the penalties that are imposed on them. They test a social-cognitive process model that includes deservingness as a key variable. I also present the results of studies that investigate the effects of like/dislike relations between person and other, the effects of shared or different social identities, and the effects of differences in the perceived moral character of the other person on reactions to the other's positive or negative outcome.

The final chapter presents a summary of the main contributions made in regard to the theoretical analysis and the research program, bringing out the distinctive features, and it also indicates possible further extensions relating both to theory and future research.

Throughout the book I try to demonstrate how theory generates research and how findings from empirical studies feed back into theory. It will be evident that the theoretical approach I propose explicitly considers both person and situation variables, together with their interaction. In that way my theoretical approach owes a debt to Lewin. It also focuses attention on the important role that values play as influences on the way we evaluate actions and outcomes, whether these actions and outcomes relate to others or to self. I am committed to the view that values and justice variables have an important place in social psychology, influencing the attitudes that we hold and the way that we react both cognitively and affectively to events and outcomes in the social world.

In presenting the results of studies from my research program, I have borrowed liberally from articles that have been published in the *Australian Journal of Psychology*, the *British Journal of Social Psychology*, the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, the *European Journal of Social Psychology*, the *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, and *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*. I thank the editors and reviewers for their comments on the initial versions of these articles. This book presents these studies as a coherent and cumulative body of research that is unified by a common set of theoretical ideas.

Many people have contributed to this research, not the least of whom are the participants in each of the studies who were willing to give time to complete the questionnaires. I thank them for their assistance. I also thank my students Leanne Atchison, Sara Dawson, Nick Deverson, Margaret Norman, and Deanna Oberdan, who joined with me in some of the studies. I also wish to thank Ian McKee, my research assistant, for his efforts in data analysis and for his thoughtful contributions in discussions with me. Carol McNally, Joan White, and Kay Douglas have my special thanks for sharing the typing of the manuscript with efficiency and good humor.

Finally, I am indebted to the Australian Research Council for providing funds to support the research that is brought together in this book.

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