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Universität Hamburg

Hamburger Forschungsberichte zur Sozialpsychologie  
Hamburg Social Psychology Research Papers

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Gollan, Tobias & Witte, Erich H. (2008). <i>A Conceptual Analysis of Justification of Action and the Introduction of the Prescriptive Attribution Concept</i> . (Hamburger Forschungsbericht zur Sozialpsychologie Nr. 81). Hamburg: Universität Hamburg, Arbeitsbereich Sozialpsychologie.
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# **A Conceptual Analysis of Justification of Action and the Introduction of the Prescriptive Attribution Concept**

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This paper proposes a conceptual framework to investigate how people construe justification of their behavior. It is derived on the basis of two lines of thought in Heider's influential 1958 publication: the conception of 'ought and value', and the conception of the naïve scientist engaged in behavior explanation ('reason attribution'). According to Heider, 'oughts' constitute socially shared standards for evaluating behavior as 'right' or 'wrong'. They are, consequently, essential for ethically justifying behavior. It is argued that justification is parallel to the concept of reason attribution regarding logic, and thus can be conceived as 'prescriptive attribution'. Similarities and dissimilarities of both concepts are discussed, research on prescriptive attribution is presented, and strategies as well as the potential merit of future research are shown.

*Keywords:* justification of actions, prescriptive attribution, reason attribution, behavior explanation, practical philosophy, ethics

In 1958 Fritz Heider published his groundbreaking monograph *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations*. For social psychologists it proved to be a rich source for conceptual ideas and gave rise to some of the “grand” theories in the discipline, e.g. balance theory and attribution theory. To our view, however, the book in its theoretical richness is not fully examined, yet. We were inspired to write this article by a chapter in Heider’s book that has not received much attention in scientific literature so far: the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter with the title *Ought and Value*. Heider (1958) conceives ‘oughts and values’ as people’s culturally shared concepts of what should be attained or done. They refer to what people consider to be “right” or “wrong” and are therefore crucial elements in ethical decision-making and action justification. In this paper, we want to adopt the idea of “rights” and “wrongs” in social contexts, and combine it with the ideas of another chapter in Heider’s book which has received attention all the more: behavior explanation. Strictly speaking, our goal is to draw on Heider’s ideas on reason attribution and to transfer its logic to the context of ethical decision making and justification in order to derive a theoretical framework on this matter. While causal attribution yields the answer “It happened because...”, the concept we introduce in this paper – which we will call ‘prescriptive attribution’ – yields the answer “It was right to do it because...”.

The paper is structured as follows: First, we will give a summary of what Heider understands as ‘oughts and values’ and highlight why his conception of culturally shared oughts is essential for the context of ethical justification. We then explicate the similarities of the newly-introduced prescriptive attribution concept with reason attribution, followed by a detailed discussion of its constituting elements and the prospects and potential revenues of its further scientific investigation.

## **1. ‘What is right, what is wrong?’ – The Characteristics of Oughts**

Heider (1958) understands *oughts* as concepts or beliefs of the required-ness of behaving in a specific way. He suggests five properties that define the nature of these beliefs. First, they are experienced as “somebody wants or commands that I [...] do x” (p. 219). In terms of Lewin’s image of force fields, they are like a “vector in the environment [...], which is like a wish or a demand or a requirement”. E.g., if a person drives along a road and sees a car accident,

he knows that he should stop and help. The driver's belief, however, is not grounded in an incidental mood or in a personal preference for helping, but he perceives it as mandatory and inflicted from outside. Hence, the second feature of oughts is that they are impersonal and felt as being objectively existent. They are experienced as if they were established by a "suprapersonal objective order", eventually in the form of a "supernatural being" (p. 219). The third characteristic is a key feature: Oughts are socially shared and have intersubjective validity. They refer to standards of "what ought be done or experienced, independent of the individual's wishes" (p. 219), and consequently form the basis of socially accepted moral judgment. In our example, the driver is well aware of the 'fact' that everybody in his position would be required to stop and help, and that he might get in trouble with the social community if he did not comply with the ought requirement. Thus, in Heider's view "all people then should perceive the same ought requirements in a particular situation" (p. 222). Fourth, oughts are stable and dispositional in character, i.e. the perception of ought has implications for behavior. In the example, the ought requirement most likely influences the driver to stop his car and help. Fifth, and last: Although oughts are socially shared and to a large extent invariant, they still depend on situational factors and only become effective in the context of specific situations. For instance, if the driver's wife is in labour and they are rushing to the hospital, the requirement to stop and help would apply only to a much lesser extent.

Compared to oughts, *values* are linked with actions in a much less specific way. In Heider's view, they refer to the property of an entity or a class of entities – in the form that "x has a specific value v" – with the connotation of being objectively positive in some way (p. 223). Yet, oughts and values are akin to each other because they both have intersubjective validity and induce "force-fields" (p. 225). While oughts indicate how one should behave, values refer to how much an object or goal should be pursued. This means that all persons should attribute the same value to an object and align their behavior with it.

It is important to note that Heider's conception of oughts and values is not congruent with the temporary psychological literature on values. The difference is apparent in a discourse in value research in the 1950s and 1960s, relating to whether values refer to "the desired" (what one 'ought' to do, or what "ought" to be valued) or to the "the desirable" (what one 'wants' to do) (cf. Rohan, 2000). While Heider's view complies with the former, meanwhile the latter perspective

prevails in all current approaches (cf. Braithwaite & Scott, 1990). In these theories (e.g. Schwartz, 1992) the focus lies on the individual differences in value priorities, but not on the normative pressure of values as culturally shared standards. If at all, the normative aspect is represented in conceptions of values on the cultural level. Here, values are seen as attributes of communities or societies, and can be interpreted as group or cultural norms. Most of these approaches, however, (with the exception of Meads “generalised other”) are not explicitly interested in denoting if these averaged value priorities may be perceived as ought requirements and how they may be relevant for individual behavior. In psychological value research, only the recent model by Rohan (2000) holds such a view. She suggests a differentiation between personal values (what a person individually believes is desirable in his or her life) and social values (what the social community promotes to be desirable in life). In her model, social values may exert influence on individual behavior which can be interpreted as an ought- or value-induced force field in Heider’s sense.

For the purpose of this paper, it is not necessary to deepen the discussion on how current value approaches differ from Heider’s understanding of oughts and values. What we consider crucial is his proposition that there are conceptions of oughts or normative values<sup>1</sup> which are culturally shared, and that these conceptions serve as standards on how individual behavior is to be evaluated. In other words, oughts indicate which actions are to be judged right and which actions are to be judged wrong, judgments on this basis are intersubjectively valid, and they are a determining factor in social discourse. Of course, Heider did not invent these ideas and was not the first to think about how people organize social life in terms of what is right and what is wrong. In 1958 when his book was published, the famous sociologists Emile Durkheim and Talcott Parsons already investigated the impact of norms in human experience. Heider, however, was one of the first to discover the topic for a social psychology perspective, i.e. how oughts and values influence interpersonal behavior. Moreover, he thoroughly analysed the characteristics of both concepts, thus paving the way for further research.

In this paper, we address only a limited section in the field of research that Heider’s chapter is able to unfold. For example, we do not ask what oughts

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<sup>1</sup> The word “normative” here does not represent the mere fact that these values are similar for the majority (i.e. “are the norm”), but refers to the pressure that is exerted by the majority position.

there are, or how strong they are perceived under varying conditions. Our interest lies in how people construe justifications of their behavior, in order to let it appear to be congruent with oughts. The underlying rationale is as follows: Oughts constitute a socially standardised framework for evaluating social behavior in terms of do's and don'ts, or rights and wrongs. In social context, human behavior is constantly compared to these ought standards and is evaluated on this basis. In order not to lose the approval of the social community, people can be expected to attempt to behave in ways congruent with these standards. Nevertheless, although ought standards are socially shared and are consequently relatively stable, there are situations when it is ambiguous which standards apply (e.g., the example with the driver and his pregnant wife). Moreover, at times ought requirements are also violated. Consequently, quite often people need to explain why their behavior was congruent with ought standards – or they need to let their behavior appear to be congruent. What people do in either case is construing an 'ethical justification' of their behavior (from Greek 'ethikos': the principles of conduct governing an individual or a group; Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 1993). The main question in this paper is, how do they do this?

Our key assumption is that explaining why an action is to be evaluated good and right in many ways resembles explaining why an action or event occurred. In other words, we suggest that justification of actions is similar regarding logic to explaining actions. Speaking with Heider, who regards a person explaining the causal conditions of other people's actions as proceeding like a "naïve scientist", we regard a justifying person as proceeding like a "naïve ethicist". As explaining behavior by the actor's reasons can be referred to as "reason attribution", we will term the justification of an action by ought-standards "prescriptive attribution".

## **2. Reason Attribution and Prescriptive Attribution**

Consider what causal attribution models state: They hold that people explain events on the basis of non-observable causes. According to attribution theories, they systematically take into account the available contextual information and on this basis select the "right" causal factors, i.e. the factors that were supposedly relevant for the event (e.g. Kelley, 1967; 1972). Thus, with the use

of ‘naïve scientific’ strategies, people constantly try to make sense out of their environment. However, this becomes a highly challenging task if the environment comprises not only inanimate things but purposefully acting agents: Other persons are “perceived as action centers [...]. They can benefit or harm us intentionally [...]; they can act purposefully, and can perceive or watch us” (Heider, 1958, p. 21). Understanding social interaction means, therefore, to extract the “right” reasons, which is to infer the wishes, motives and sentiments underlying the behavior of one’s interaction partners. Thus, according to Malle (2004) it is crucial to distinguish between causal attribution (as the explanation of events) and reason attribution (as the explanation of actions). In this article, we will focus on reason attribution as having instructive parallels with the newly-introduced concept of prescriptive attribution.

Comparing the explanation of action and its justification, it is obvious that both have different objectives: Whereas explanations account for *why the action was shown*, justifications account for *why the action is to be evaluated positively*. While the concept of reason attribution holds that people explain actions by reasons, in prescriptive attribution the idea is that people *justify* actions on the basis of *ethical principles*. We assume that people systematically take into account characteristics of the action to be justified and its context, and on this basis select the supposedly “right” mode of justification, i.e. a justification that is persuasive to others because it is congruent with intersubjectively valid ought-conceptions.

Before we outline the meaning of “ethical principles” and “mode of justification” in more detail, we will work out the similarities of action explanation and action justification by providing a conceptual analysis of both the reason attribution term and the prescriptive attribution term. In the left half of table 1, reason attribution is decomposed into its elements (cf. Witte, 1994), contrasted by the elements of prescriptive attribution in the right half of the table (cf. Witte & Doll, 1995). Both are illustrated by an example.

Table 1: Conceptual analysis of reason attribution (Witte, 1994) and prescriptive attribution (Witte & Doll, 1995), illustrated by examples.

Reason attribution / action explanation		Prescriptive attribution / action justification	
1. There is an action: → A.	→ Monica has a dispute with her little son, John: (A)	There is an action: → A.	→ Paula has an abortion (A)
2. There are potential causal sources related to the reasons for that the person executes that action: → R <sub>i</sub>	→ The reasons refer to the actor him- or herself: (R <sub>1</sub> ) → The reasons refer to the circumstances: (R <sub>2</sub> ) → The reasons refer to the object the action was addressed to: (R <sub>3</sub> )	There are classical ethical positions that can be used for the judgment of an action: → E <sub>i</sub> .	→ One has to follow universal rules that have to be obeyed (E <sub>1</sub> ) → One has to consider for all affected parties the consequences that follow from the action (E <sub>2</sub> ) → One has to do what brings no disadvantages for oneself (E <sub>3</sub> ) → One has to do what seems right to oneself and should rely on one's intuition (E <sub>4</sub> )
3. There are possible arguments, which link the reasons R <sub>i</sub> with the action A: → Ar <sub>i</sub> (A, R <sub>i</sub> )	→ Monica argues with John, because she is a quarrelsome person and is easily irritated: (Ar <sub>1</sub> ) → Monica argues with John, because she had a bad day at work: (Ar <sub>2</sub> ) → Monica argues with John, because John made a lot of trouble: (Ar <sub>3</sub> )	There are possible judgments of an action that are based on the relationship between the ethical positions E <sub>i</sub> and the action A: → J <sub>i</sub> (A; E <sub>i</sub> .)	→ Since every woman (as every human being) has the right to self-determinate what happens with her body, it is right to have the abortion: (J <sub>1</sub> ) → Since Paula does not truly want the baby, it is better to have the abortion, because the baby's need for loving care could never possibly be fulfilled: (J <sub>2</sub> ) → It would not be convenient for Paula to have a baby now, so that it was right to do the abortion: (J <sub>3</sub> ) → Abortion seems to be a good option to Paula, so it was right to do it: (J <sub>4</sub> )
4. There is a subjective differentiation of the arguments with respect to their relevance for the explanation of the action ('attribution strength'): → As <sub>i</sub> [Ar <sub>i</sub> (A, R <sub>i</sub> )]	→ Ar <sub>1</sub> is not a good explanation (because we know that Monica usually is patient and well-tempered with John): (As <sub>1</sub> ) → We do not know, if Ar <sub>2</sub> is good explanation or not, because we do not have information how Monica's day at work was: (As <sub>2</sub> ) → Ar <sub>3</sub> is a good explanation (because John is known to be a very difficult and defiant kid): (As <sub>3</sub> )	There is the subjective differentiation of the judgment according to the importance (I) of the ethical position for the action ('judgment strength'): → I <sub>i</sub> [J <sub>i</sub> (A;E <sub>i</sub> )].	→ J <sub>1</sub> is a persuasive judgment (because it draws on a universally valid principle) : (I <sub>1</sub> ) → J <sub>2</sub> is not a persuasive judgment (because it neglects that the baby's need for loving care may be fulfilled in other ways, e.g. to have the child adopted): (I <sub>2</sub> ) → J <sub>3</sub> is not a persuasive judgment (because the interests of the baby are not considered at all) : (I <sub>3</sub> ) → J <sub>4</sub> is not a fair judgment (because it leaves out any moral considerations, which apply in this situation): (I <sub>4</sub> )
5. There are person-related explanations of the action (EA) which consist of patterns of arguments (As): → EA { As <sub>i</sub> [Ar <sub>i</sub> (A, R <sub>i</sub> )]}	→ "To me, it seems that Monica argues with John, because he is a kid that is not easy to handle": (E)	There is the justification of an action (JA) as "good" or "bad", "right" or "wrong": → JA( I <sub>i</sub> [J <sub>i</sub> (A,E <sub>i</sub> )])	→ "In my opinion, with having the abortion Paula did right, because her right to self-determine what happens to her body outranks all other considerations.": (J)

Even to readers who are acquainted with the “classic” literature on attribution our conceptual analysis of reason attribution in the left half of table 1 might seem unfamiliar. Following Witte (1994), we extended the view on attribution by its preconditions (e.g., the acknowledgement of possible causal sources in the second row, and their connection with the action to be explained in the third row) and by its consequence (a person-related explanation of the action, fifth row). The “core” of causal attribution is represented in the fourth row, where the relevance of the reasons referring to different potential causal sources for the explanandum is inferred from action characteristics and from contextual information. There are various theories suggesting how exactly people achieve this (e.g. Gilbert, Pelham & Krull, 1988; Lalljee & Abelson, 1983; Weiner, 1986; for a review, see Malle, 2004). Although these theories focus on this core element, they assume all other elements depicted in table 1 implicitly. Hence, although the conceptual decomposition may seem unacquainted, it is well congruent with current theories on reason attribution.

Our focus, however, lies primarily on the conceptual decomposition of the prescriptive attribution concept in the right half of table 1: To a given action (A) which is to be justified, an ethical principle ( $E_i$ ) is applied which results in a judgment ( $J_i$ ) of the action as being right, with the respective argumentation. In the example, relating the different ethical principles to abortion yields four different argumentations, why having the abortion was the right choice. These judgments can be differentiated ( $I_i$ ) according to how relevant the respective ethical principle is for the given action, so that some judgments are more persuasive and some are less. In the example, one judgment ( $J_1$ ) is regarded as persuasive, while the other three are not. On the basis of this differentiation (and of other potential factors, to be discussed below), some of the judgments are incorporated into the final justification of the action (JA). Since in the example only one judgment was subjectively considered to be persuasive (probably, because abortion may only be justified very thoroughly), the final justification only refers to this one judgment ( $J_1$ ) and its respective ethical principle ( $E_1$ ). In brief, the conceptual analysis yields a formalised definition of prescriptive attribution (PA) which is represented in a quintuple comprising all elements described above:

$$PA = \{A ; E_i ; J_i(A, E_i) ; I_i[J_i(H, E_i)] ; JA(I_i[J_i(A, E_i)]) \}.$$

This formal definition serves as a guideline for the next sections of this paper, in which we will discuss the elements of the prescriptive attribution concept step by step and in greater detail. For each element we will point at similarities and dissimilarities with their parallel elements from causal attribution. When applicable, we will present research that has already been conducted in order to empirically backup the theoretical considerations, and suggest how the prescriptive attribution concept can be further investigated.

### 3. The Elements of the Prescriptive Attribution Concept

#### 3.1. Actions (A)

General causal attribution models can be applied to any event that has a set of possible causal origins, which are, indeed, all events that can be conceived. In contrast, both reason attribution and prescriptive attribution are restricted to specific classes of events which are *actions* that were taken *intentionally*. Thus, a major assumption of explaining or justifying behavior is that the actor is *accountable* for it. For instance, if a person is coerced into an action, one would certainly not explain the action by his or her reasons. Concerning prescriptive attribution, however, one could argue that a person might justify another person's action that he himself is not accountable for. In this case, however, the justifier argues from the perspective of the person who did the action and implicitly declares to assume accountability for the same action as if he himself had done it, or would do it. Besides these 'third person justifications', there is another special case of prescriptive attribution to be mentioned: Actions may be justified that have not been carried out yet. Here, prescriptive attribution refers to a future action. For this case, we propose the term *ethical recommendation*, rather than 'ethical justification of a future action'.

Although both prescriptive attribution and reason attribution are restricted to actions that the actor is (at least seen as) accountable for, there are also differences in the scope of actions they can be applied to. In contrast to action explanation, justification is only reasonable in situations that are at least in part

*characterised by ought requirements.* One could also term these situations ‘moral’ or ‘value-laden’ situations. For example, it makes no sense to ethically justify sitting in a public bus – unless an old lady must stand and you are physically in much better shape than she is. Usually, these situations occur when harm to other persons or creatures is involved. However, whether a situation is a moral one or not also depends on the respective culture and on historical change: While there is cross-cultural consensus that one ought to behave in ways not to harm other human beings, oughts referring to preserving the life of specific animals and nature in general are culturally more variant. Likewise, from a historical perspective the variability of oughts becomes evident by considering how much a human life was worth in the medieval times. Haidt, Koller, and Dias (1993) showed that there are culturally specific conceptions of morality (which may be interpreted as oughts in Heider’s sense) that may even apply to situations when physical harm plays no role at all. For instance, burning the national flag may be seriously prosecuted in only some cultures, whereas sex among siblings, even if they are both infertile and of full age, is disturbing in almost all cultures.

Besides the presence of ‘ought force fields’, we initially assumed a second necessary condition which is relevant for action justification but not for action explanation. In contrast to action explanation, justification seems (at first sight) only to be applicable to actions that can potentially be evaluated positive at all. For instance, a man who disposes his car’s waste-oil in a forest will have some difficulty in ethically justifying this action. However, there are empirical results casting doubt on this assumption: Halverscheid and Witte (2008) were interested in how acts of war and terrorism can be justified. Their content analyses of political speeches (from the US-American and the German government) and claims of responsibility for terrorist attacks (from Al-Qaeda and the Red Army Fraction in Germany) revealed that even highly condemnable actions are *indirectly* justified by highlighting that the “enemy” has violated the ought-standards of the own community and that the own action is justified as restoring justice and social order. Thus, assuming that ethical justification only applies to actions that can generally be evaluated positive turns out to be questionable - since the evaluation of actions might be highly context-dependant and its scope very ample.

### 3.2. Ethical Positions ( $E_i$ )

At first, the second rows in table 1 do not seem to have much in common. In reason attribution, the reasons indicate “where to look out for causal origins” of the action. Already Heider suggested two types of causal origins – the “personal force” and the “effective environmental force” (p. 82).

In prescriptive attribution, the question is not which causes the action or event can be attributed to, but by which ethical principles the action can be justified. The ethical principles refer to “how to arrive at a judgment of the action” (cf. table 1). One could wonder, however, why ethical principles are relevant for judgments at all. For example, the person from table 1 could simply judge abortion to be right, because denying the woman to have the abortion would mean to violate her right to self-determination. This view may be absolutely persuasive – until another person argues that the killing of an unborn child violates its right to live or the value ‘sanctity of life’. Thus, the situation gets more difficult if there is more than one valuable good at stake so that trade-offs have to be made.

In the history of mankind, different argumentation patterns have emerged that serve as guidelines on how to deal with such more complex, value-laden situations. They were identified by practical philosophy and are referred to as the “classical ethical principles” or “positions”. The principles provide a rationale how to arrive at a judgment as right or wrong, and are (at least implicitly) used *in any kind of moral judgment*. Witte and Doll (1995) reviewed the literature on practical philosophy and developed a classification schema for ethical positions, which is based on two dimensions:

The first differentiation, which is widely-known in practical philosophy, is the division of means-oriented and ends-oriented ethics – the former focussing on the ethical evaluation of the process and the latter lending more weight to the result. The second differentiating factor aims at the level of observation, as both means- and ends-oriented ethics may focus on the individual or on the community. With this 2x2 classification schema, four classes of ethical positions can be stated: hedonism, intuitionism, utilitarianism, and deontology (see table 2).

Table 2: A classification schema of the four classical ethical principles, illustrated by exemplary statements (Witte & Doll, 1995).

	Ends / Consequences	Means / Rule
Personal	Hedonism ("I try to make sure that I'm fine")	Intuitionism ("I am sure this action is appropriate.")
General	Utilitarianism ("I believe one has to consider the consequences an action has on everyone.")	Deontology ("I believe that general principals serve as a guideline for our actions.")

The principle of hedonism holds that actions must not be enforced against the happiness of the individual, and that the individual's happiness should be the point of reference for ethical decisions. The striving for pleasure and conviviality had already been raised to the level of an ethical norm as far back as antiquity (Aristotle's 'eudaimonia'). Following this principle does not imply pure selfishness: Only if the individual's happiness is at the expense of others, then the hedonistic principle would result in pure egoism (cf. Parfit, 1984). In table 1, the hedonistic principle is stated in E<sub>3</sub>.

When judging an action with the utilitarian principle, the points of reference are the consequences for all people who are affected. An action is the better, the more positive the overall outcome is for every one, regardless of its means. With the utilitarian principle, even negative consequences (e.g. for single individuals) can be accepted if they are outweighed by the positive ones (e.g. for the community). Utilitarianism is closely associated with the philosophy of John Stuart Mill, and is very present in current ethical discourses, e.g. on technological impact assessment. In the example above, the utilitarian principle is given in E<sub>2</sub>.

The means-oriented principle of deontology is often seen as the antagonist of the consequence-oriented utilitarianism. Here, the judgment of an action results from its congruence with moral rules, norms and values, whereas the outcome of the action is disregarded. The most famous example of deontological reasoning is the categorical imperative by Immanuel Kant. In table 1, the deontological principle is given in E<sub>1</sub>.

With the fourth ethical principle, intuitionism, an action is judged on the basis of individual insight or the personal feeling that this is "simply the correct judgment". Intuitionism argues that there is no need for further arguing, but that

the judgment simply should be accepted. Hence, an intuitionist argumentation is usually not allowed the status of “real” argumentation. Ewing (1953), however, explicated that without the principle of intuitionism all possible argumentation would be in infinite regress, since any basic assumptions could be questioned anytime. Thus, intuitionism must have its place among the principles of ethical argumentation. In table 1, Intuitionism is referred to in  $E_4$ .

In order to identify the theory-driven differentiation of the ethical principles in empirical data, a questionnaire was developed, comprising twenty general justification statements (see table 2 for four sample items). In several studies, subjects were presented a list of value-laden actions and for each were asked to indicate their agreement with the justification statements from the questionnaire. In all studies, Varimax-rotated factor analyses revealed that the justifications split up into four factors, each referring to one of the four theoretically postulated ethical principles. Scale reliabilities ranged from  $\alpha = 0.69$  to  $\alpha = 0.83$  in Hackel (1995), from  $\alpha = 0.61$  to  $\alpha = 0.93$  in Witte and Doll (1995), and from  $\alpha = 0.60$  to  $\alpha = 0.79$  in Witte and Heitkamp (2005). Thus, the classification of ethical principles underlying ethical justifications already received some empirical support.

### 3.3. Judgments ( $J_i$ )

In the third row in table 1, the first and second rows are linked to one another. In reason attribution, relating the potential causal sources (i.e. the person, the entity, or the circumstances) to the concrete situation (i.e. the action to be explained) results in different arguments, representing different options, how to explain the action. These arguments provide a pool of potential reason attributions in the given situation, each of them having the form “action A was done, because of reason  $R_i$ ” (cf. table 1).

The parallel element in prescriptive attribution is a judgment  $J_i$ . Analogously, it links the concrete situation (i.e. the action) to ethical principles, resulting in a pool of possible ethical judgments of the action to be justified, each of them having the form “action A is right (or wrong) because of ethical principle  $E_i$ ” (cf. table 1).

Of course, there are also differences between an argument and a judgment: A major one is that a judgment unfolds the additional dimension of evaluation. While an argument simply links action and causal source, the linking of action and ethical principles implies an appraisal on the continuum right-vs.-wrong. Thus, in prescriptive attribution the subordinate causal clause “because...” refers to why the action is evaluated as right or wrong, whereas in reason attribution it refers to why the action supposingly occurred. With respect to Heider’s image of the naïve scientist, the absence of evaluation in causal attribution corresponds with the ‘Wertfreiheit’ in the natural sciences, which are interested in causal reasons but not in assessment of value. On the other hand, this is exactly the main aim in prescriptive attribution.

In the example above, all judgments of abortion are positive, regardless of their underlying ethical principle. This is reasonable, since the justification of behavior generally requires its positive evaluation. Nevertheless, deriving judgments of an action on the basis of the ethical principles may of course also yield negative evaluations, and even applying the same principle to one and the same action might yield different evaluations. In the example in table 1, abortion is deontologically judged as right with regard to the universally valid principle of self-determination ( $J_1$ ). At the same time, applying the deontological principle in a different way may result in a negative evaluation, for instance by highlighting the unborn child’s right to live. This example illustrates that ethical principles do not automatically imply one of the alternative evaluations. They are rather an abstract form of ethical reasoning that can variably be filled with information on the action and its context.

However, the linking of certain actions with ethical principles and subsequent evaluations is not entirely arbitrary. Just as specific information on the action and its context yield the attribution on a specific causal factor in reason attribution, specific information on the action and its context might result in preferred application of a specific ethical principle in order to justify that action. These parallels will be discussed in the next section.

### 3.4. Judgment Strength ( $I_i$ )

As described in the section above, in reason attribution there might be not only one but many arguments potentially explaining the reasons for an action. Thus, for a final explanation, people need to select the persuasive (or 'strong') arguments from the 'pool' of all potential arguments and sort out the unpersuasive (i.e. the 'weak') arguments. In other words, they differentiate the arguments with respect to their relevance for the explanation of the action (or their 'attribution strength', see fourth row in table 1). One can say that separating weak arguments from strong arguments constitutes the 'core' of reason attribution. There is a number of behavior explanation models specifying when a reason is regarded as relevant for an action and when not. Common to all these models is the idea that people – like naïve scientists – extract meaning from information on the action and its context in order to determine how persuasive the potential arguments are.

Our idea is that prescriptive attribution operates in a similar way: On the basis of the four ethical principles, there may be many judgments of a given action. From this 'pool' of all possible judgments, the persuasive ones need to be selected and the unpersuasive ones to be sorted out. In other words, and speaking with table 1: People need to make a differentiation of the judgment with respect to the relevance of the ethical position for the action (i.e. their 'judgment strength'). But which information is it that the selection of persuasive judgments in action justification is based on?

According to Witte and Doll (1995), information about the *range of impact* of the action is crucial. With regard to this range, they distinguish three types of actions: In *individual actions*, the actor and the recipient of the action are one and the same person, and no other people are affected (e.g. a man tries to repair his computer, although he is not an expert and might ruin the machine entirely). *Interpersonal actions* affect both the actor him- or herself and other identifiable people (e.g. the same man tries to repair his friend's computer). Finally, *social actions* affect both the actor and the general public (e.g. the man tries to repair a computer in a public computer lab). The difference between interpersonal and social actions is that in the former case, the recipients are identifiable

others, while in the latter they are unidentifiable. We assume that prescriptive attributions vary systematically according to the range of the action's impact, as is depicted in table 3.

Table 3: Range of impact of actions and the associated preferred ethical principles in justification.

range of impact of the action preferred ethical principle	individual	interpersonal	social
Intuitionism	+	+	-
Hedonism	+	-	-
Utilitarianism	-	-	+
Deontology	-	+	+

+ = applies; - = applies not

Individual actions are expected to be justified by ethical principles with a general focus, rather than with a personal focus. Since individual actions only affect the actor, considering the benefit of the broader community (utilitarianism) and following universal norms, values and principles (deontology) may play a less important role. Therefore, ethical positions with a personal focus – orientation towards personal advantage and happiness (Hedonism) and arguing with personal intuition and feeling (Intuitionism) – are assumed to be approved strategies of justification, and thus are expected to be used frequently.

Since in interpersonal actions both the actor and the other affected persons are visible to each other, these situations require the coordination of potentially differing interests. Here, judgments on the basis of the interests of the individual, as posited in the hedonism principle, are probably not well approved. On the contrary, deontology may offer a valuable point of reference for the evaluation of behavior, since it provides generally accepted rules and norms for the negotiation of interests. Because for interpersonal situations rules and norms might often be well-established, internalized and highly salient, people may also be able to judge right from wrong blindfolded. Thus, Intuitionism is expected to be a preferred mode of justification, too. Since the range of impact of interpersonal actions is rather small, a reference to the mean benefit for all might not be reasonable, so that Utilitarianism is probably an uncommon mode of justification.

Social actions affect a broader community. In these situations the mean benefit for all people, as stated in the utilitarian principle, might therefore be an

important point of reference for the evaluation of behavior. Likewise, Deontology might be a preferred mode of judgment of social actions, since their congruence with rules, norms and values can be understood as an indicator if the action is good or bad for the community. Hedonism, however, is not expected to be a frequently used principle, because orientation towards own pleasure or the pleasure of individuals might interfere with the goals of the wider community. Similarly, intuitionism is not expected to be applied to social actions, since it is not necessarily obvious to the actor if effects of the action on the community are received well or not, and are thus to be judged right or wrong. Relying solely on own intuition might therefore not be a persuasive basis for ethical judgments.

So far, we argued that, starting with information on the range of impact of the action in question, a specific mode of ethical reasoning is selected for its justification. Reversing the inference process, however, and starting with a given justification statement, one might also infer the range of impact of the action (or, more precisely, what range of impact the justifying person assumed). Consider the example in table 1: In case Paula justified the abortion with the hedonistic principle (e.g. “It was the best for me to do it”), one could infer that she perceived the abortion as an individual rather than as an interpersonal action, because in her eyes the fetus is not a person with own interests, yet. In contrast, if she justified her abortion by the utilitarian principle (e.g. “Because I would not have been able to care for the baby, the abortion was the best option for all of us”), she would suggest the abortion to be an interpersonal action. Hence, the suggested covariation pattern in table 3 does not imply a temporal or causal sequence, but can be read in two directions. Both deriving justifications from the action’s range of impact and inferring the perceived range of impact from a justificatory statement require (explicit or implicit) knowledge about how action and situation characteristics on the one hand and the various modes of ethical reasoning on the other hand can be connected with each other. In our view, this knowledge represents the expertise of a ‘naïve ethicist’, while making inferences in both directions reflect a naïve ethicist’s ‘methods’.

But does the covariation pattern depicted in table 3 really reproduce the knowledge of ‘real-life’ naïve ethicists? Can it tell us something about how justifications of actions are construed in reality? To answer this question, the suggested prescriptive attribution pattern must prove itself against empirical data.

We will now briefly describe several studies that allow for first conclusions on the correctness of the schema.

Witte and Doll (1995) presented a set of 18 different actions to  $N = 60$  students from West-Germany and asked them to rate the relevance of 20 ethical justification statements for each action (cf. section 3.2 in this paper). All actions were a priori classified according to their range of impact. As theoretically predicted, individual actions were primarily justified by the hedonism principle and, to a lesser extent, by intuitionism.<sup>2</sup> Interpersonal actions were justified by intuitionism, but contrary to expectation, not by deontology. Social actions were justified with the utilitarian position, but surprisingly with hedonism and intuitionism as well. Contrary to expectation, neither in justifications of interpersonal nor of social actions deontology played a significant role. There is evidence, however, that deontology's minor role might be due to the restricted sample. The authors also present the finding that in a total sample of 1300 subjects the West-German participants used the deontological principle to a much lesser extent for the justification of an interpersonal action than participants from former East-Germany (Cohen's  $d = -.51$ ). In contrast, they applied the hedonistic principle to a much greater extent ( $d = .60$ ). Similarly, Hackel (1995) showed that in justifications of individual, work-related actions East-German subjects referred to the deontological and utilitarian principles to a larger degree than West-German subjects (Cohen's  $d = .81$  and  $d = .48$ , respectively). Maeng (1996) compared the use of ethical principles in justifications in Germany and South Korea in interpersonal actions. She found that in the Korean sample deontological justification played a larger and hedonistic justification a minor role in comparison to the German sample. In summary, the prescriptive attribution pattern seems to be sizably influenced by the cultural background. Unfortunately, so far no study has been conducted which systematically analysed all three types of actions across cultures. Such an approach might yield further evidence, if the deviations in Witte and Doll's (1995) empirical data from the theoretically predicted pattern in table 3 can be ascribed to sample characteristics, or if they seriously challenge the theoretical model.

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<sup>2</sup> An ethical position was considered to be 'important' for a class of actions when the mean score of agreement of the respective ethical statements was more than one standard deviation above the neutral point (3.0 on a five-point rating-scale).

### 3.5. Final Justification of the Action (JA)

In the studies on justification described in the last sections, subjects rated the relevance not of only one, but of all ethical principles for a given action. This makes sense because more than one ethical principle can be applied to a single situation (cf. section 3.3). In reality, however, a person justifying his or her behavior usually does not give a systematic review of all his justification options, but brings out only one. This refers to the last element of the conceptual analysis of the prescriptive attribution term: Finally, there is one single justificatory statement, eventually comprising only the most persuasive judgment on the basis of the best fitting ethical principle. In other words: The different potential judgments are integrated on the basis of their judgment strength into a final justification. Again, this can be seen as parallel to reason attribution: Here, the different potential arguments are integrated on the basis of their attribution strength into a final person-related explanation of the action (cf. table 1). It seems reasonable to assume that the reason with the highest attribution strength is incorporated in this final explanation.

In a recent claim, however, Malle (2004) argued that reason attribution should not only be conceived as a pure cognitive process of computing and weighing ‘relevancy scores’ (i.e. attribution strengths) of potential reasons. Rather, behavior explanation also reflects motivational concerns, because it may result in overt verbal actions used for social purposes and, consequently, may play an important role in interaction management. Similarly, we suggest that prescriptive attributions do not reflect pure arithmetic inference-making but that they are strongly shaped by motivational factors such as impression management concerns. Thus, the final justification of an action (JA) may not necessarily be based solely on the judgment with the highest judgment strength, but may also incorporate judgments (and their underlying ethical principles) with lower relevance. We will now suggest three exemplary factors that potentially moderate the integration of the judgments into a final justification statement.

First, since a justification aims at convincing the addressee, the use of ethical principles is probably tuned to the expectations and attitudes of the addressee. For example, if the action is socially desirable and its judgment very likely to be accepted, intuitionism might prevail in its justification. Consider a

pupil who tells his friends that he skipped school on a nice summer day because he “was simply in the mood” and it “simply felt right”. If he had to justify his absenteeism in front of his parents, however, (who are not amused at all when hearing about it from the teacher) he might probably not make use of the hedonism and the intuitionism principle, but rather try to construe a deontological (“If one knows all the topics addressed in that lesson – as I did – it is okay to skip it”) or a utilitarian justification (“Because I already knew the topic, it was better for the teacher that I left the class, so that he could concentrate more on the other learners”). Note that with the shift in the mode of justification from the personal to the general focus (Utilitarianism and Deontology), also the perceived impact of the action is altered from individual to interpersonal.

Second, the final justification might depend on the ‘status’ of the action. Action justification usually implies that the justifying person was the actor him- or herself. But, as already outlined in section 3.1, one may also justify an action of a third person or an action that was not carried out, yet (‘ethical recommendation’). We suggest that own actions are more frequently justified by ethical principles with a personal focus than by those with a general focus, and that the reverse is true for actions that were performed by others or not performed, yet.

Third, the use of ethical principles may depend on the cultural and social background of the justifying person. With regard to culture, some empirical results were already presented in the section above: People from collectivist cultures seem to have a preference for the ethical principles with a general focus, whereas those from more individualist cultures might prefer the principles with a personal focus (Maeng, 1996; Hackel, 1995). With regard to social background, Gollenia (1999) provided evidence that subjects differed significantly in the ethical principles they applied to justify the same action (the permission of the germline therapy), depending on having or not having an education in law, economics or medical science. For instance, economists preferred the hedonism principle, whereas subjects with a background in law or medical science primarily drew on utilitarian justification. Witte and Heitkamp (2005) went one step further: They took a homogenous sample and asked subjects to put themselves in the position of a social role keeper (either a member of an ethics commission, someone affected by the decision, a social scientist, a jurist, a politician, or a health professional). From the point of the imagined social role, subjects then

were asked to justify either a medical (“Should genes be manipulated in order to prevent heredity diseases?”) or an economical (“Should the production be transferred abroad and thus jobs being cut in order to save the company as a whole?”) problem. A 4x6 (ethical principles x roles) ANOVA design yielded a weak but still significant interaction, implying that different social roles led to the use of different ethical principles.

Obviously, the assumptions concerning the impact of characteristics of the addressee, the ‘status’ of the action and individual characteristics of the justifying person require further empirical testing. Moreover, there are probably additional moderating variables to be discovered which affect how judgments are integrated into a final justification statement.

#### **4. Prescriptive Attribution as a Research Paradigm**

In the sections above, we described the prescriptive attribution concept in more detail, guided by the conceptual analysis in table 1. From the systematic depiction one might conclude that justifying an action in real life is a highly systematic process, as well. This view, however would probably attract the same criticism that some models of causal attribution are confronted with: Even if people were provided with all relevant information on the context, they are not likely to consider every single piece of it and perform ‘mental covariation analyses’. Apparently, they rather apply heuristics and schemata, which are quick and save cognitive capacities. Similarly, it is quite unlikely that a person justifying an action considers all applicable ethical principles, systematically relates them to the given context, infers potential judgments and weighs them according to their relevance, and in a last step derives a final justification statement. With regard to moral reasoning in general, Haidt (2001) suggested that the evaluation of an action as right or wrong even precedes the consideration of reasons for the evaluation. In contrast to rationalist models, which focus on the role of a priori reasoning to make inferences about the world, his ‘social intuitionist model’ views moral reasoning as a post hoc construction which is largely affected by the person’s motivational system. With regard to prescriptive attribution, this claim implies that first a positive judgment of the action might be rendered and only afterwards ethical principles are consulted in order to back it up.

Thus, it is important to note that the stepwise, conceptual analysis of the prescriptive attribution concept presented here must not be misconceived as a process model of ethical justification. It rather represents a systematic compilation of the elements which are to be considered when dealing with the topic. The decomposition of the prescriptive attribution concept into its elements primarily serves as a framework to identify starting points for further empirical research.

In our view, besides the conceptual analysis in table 1 there is another guidepost for research on ethical justification: the research on behavior explanation. As outlined above, there is one important parallel between reason attribution and prescriptive attribution: In both cases, people either consider information on the action and its context and from that derive action explanations or justifications, or they know one of the latter and from that infer the contextual information. In other words, they may take both contextual information or justification (or explanation, respectively) as the dependent *or* the independent variable. Hence, research on prescriptive attribution may benefit from research strategies that are already established in reason attribution research.

Research on prescriptive attribution is still in its very beginning. Most of the influencing factors described in the sections above still await further empirical testing. Moreover, there might be a variety of other moderator variables yet to be discovered. For instance, mood effects and effects of cognitive load on ethical justification might be promising fields of investigation. Moving away from a phenomenological perspective, it would be desirable to explore the process-related characteristics of prescriptive attribution, too. For this purpose, applying strategies from implicit cognition research (e.g., priming methods) may provide valuable insight in what cognitive and affective processes take place in action justification.

The prescriptive attribution framework may also provide a theoretical basis for research questions in applied contexts: Since politicians, managers and scientists make far-reaching decisions on a daily basis, society has the right and is well advised to be informed about why these decisions are reasonable and 'right'. An applied psychology of ethics may provide competent assistance in reaching and evaluating these justifications. There are already a few studies which built on the prescriptive attribution concept with the perspective on ap-

plied contexts: Witte and Mölders (2007) were interested in how exceptions in the German Income Tax Law are justified. They conducted a content analysis of 71 official papers from the German 'Bundestag' from 1953 to 2004 with regard to which ethical principles are used for their justification. Contrary to expectations (and also contrary to a desirable way of public justification), the majority of exceptions were justified by intuitionism and a special form of utilitarianism that took into account only the interests of a special group ('particular utilitarianism'); real utilitarianism (taking into account the interests of the whole society) and deontology played only a minor role. Two other studies focused on the impact of situational variables on the process of ethical decision-making in groups, as it may occur in ethics committees. With the use of different group moderation techniques, Gollenia (1999) showed that the higher the degree of elaboration of an ethical problem is, the higher the quality of the final group decision and the more manifold (in terms of different ethical principles applied) its ethical justifications became. Witte and Unger (2007) developed a computer-based moderation-technique for groups which yielded similar improvements compared to a control group. Both studies provide recommendations on how the process of ethical decision-making and justification in ethics committees can be improved.

## **5. Summary**

This paper introduced the prescriptive attribution concept, which provides a theoretical framework for the research on justification of actions. It was derived from two lines of thought in Heider's influential 1958 monograph – first, his ideas on 'ought and value', and second, his ideas on causal attribution. We first outlined Heider's understanding of oughts and normative values as intersubjectively valid standards of requiredness to perform a certain action or pursue a certain goal. We then focused on the question, how people construe justifications of their actions so that they are in congruence with such socially valid oughts requirements. The model of prescriptive attribution builds on the idea that people achieve this in a similar way as they make reason attributions. On the one side, information on the action plus its context and, on the other side, action explanation or action justification statements are both informational entities that can be inferred in both directions. The capability to make such infer-

ences qualifies people as naïve scientists and naïve ethicists, respectively. Following the conceptual decomposition of the prescriptive attribution concept, its elements were discussed in detail and first empirical results were presented. Finally, the prospects and potential revenues of future research on prescriptive attribution and ethical justification were pointed out. We hope that the prescriptive attribution framework will prove useful to gain a deeper understanding on how justifications of actions are made, and to improve processes of moral judgment and justification in applied settings.

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