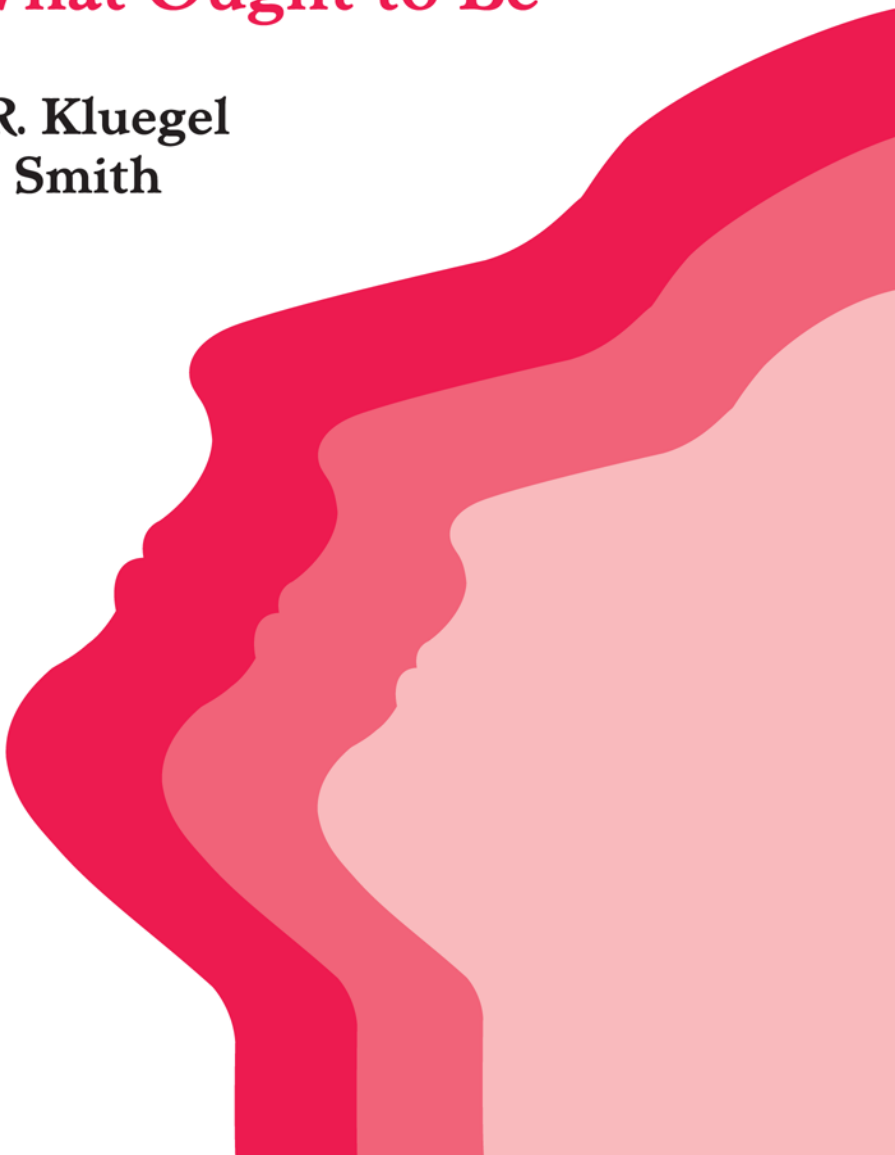
BELIEFS ABOUT INEQUALITY

Americans' Views of What Is and What Ought to Be

James R. Kluegel
Eliot R. Smith



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James R. Kluegel

Eliot R. Smith

1

INTRODUCTION

Why are some Americans richer than I am? Do they work harder to succeed, or are they more talented than I am? Why are others poor: Are laziness and bad moral character primarily responsible for poverty or are lack of education and social and economic discrimination? Are the situations of the rich and the poor fair or unfair? And how am I to understand my own position in society? Perhaps my degree of economic well-being reflects my basic worth as a person, or perhaps I have experienced unusual barriers that have unfairly held me back from greater achievements. In the long run, do welfare programs or affirmative-action policies aid the disadvantaged, or do they undermine motivation and weaken the basis of the economic system? How much discrimination do racial minorities or working women experience today—isn't discrimination largely a thing of the past?

Americans of all political views and economic levels frequently consider these and similar questions about the current structure and implications of economic inequality in our society. Some of these issues seem to be important aspects of understanding the world in general; children often ask basic questions about wealth, poverty, and fairness, for example (Leahy, 1983). Others become important in the political process, as governmental policies aimed at one or another aspect of inequality are proposed and debated. All the questions together, and the tentative, incomplete answers that people construct, form the roots of the American consciousness of inequality, the subject of our investigation in this book.

It has often been remarked that Americans' attitudes about social welfare and other inequality-related policies have an inconsistent and sometimes seemingly contradictory quality. The most recent example is, of course, the sharp change in direction of federal policy associated with the Reagan administration's goals of curtailing many of the redistributive programs developed since the New Deal. There are other examples as well. Americans generally accept the idea that blacks and other minorities have suffered from discrimination and maintain an abstract commitment to equal opportunity—coexisting with widespread white opposition to specific policies to implement equal opportunity

(e.g., busing to desegregate schools, affirmative-action programs). Although Americans highly value equal citizenship rights and democratic politics in the abstract, in practice the right of the wealthy to wield disproportionate economic and political power is unchallenged. Finally, in the face of a general commitment to ameliorative measures for the very poor and to the right to be paid a basic living wage (floor limits on earnings), there is a widespread unwillingness to place an upper limit on incomes or inheritances. These aspects of contradiction and compromise in Americans' beliefs and attitudes about inequality have stood as puzzles since at least the time of Alexis de Toqueville, drawing opinions from a variety of analysts and commentators.

Motivated by the desire to explain how Americans perceive and evaluate inequality and related programs and policies, we conducted a national survey of beliefs about social and economic inequality. Here we present the results of our research on the structure, determinants, and certain political and personal consequences of these beliefs. Our presentations in this book serve two major goals: to *describe* and *explain* the central features of Americans' images of inequality.

A DESCRIPTION OF AMERICANS' BELIEFS AND ATTITUDES

Our first goal is to provide a current, comprehensive description of Americans' beliefs and attitudes about inequality, including evidence concerning stability and change in such beliefs. The data collection for our survey, which was funded by the National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Mental Health, took place in the summer and fall of 1980, mainly during the campaign that ended with the initial election of Ronald Reagan to the presidency. Telephone interviews averaging over 45 minutes long were conducted with a total of 2212 Americans, scientifically selected to represent the entire United States population aged 18 and over.

A comprehensive description of what Americans believe, based on this survey, and of recent changes in beliefs may help explain some apparent inconsistencies and contradictions. Some inconsistency may simply be illusory: This is a danger to the degree that our current knowledge about Americans' beliefs is based on data from restricted or otherwise unrepresentative samples. Further, the seeming inconsistency and contradiction may be the product of a period of transition in beliefs about inequality. Recent events—the shift from the steady economic growth of the 1960s to the stagflation of the 1970s, agitation by the civil rights and women's movements, debates about the successes or failures of antipoverty and other Great Society programs—may have substantially changed the ways Americans view aspects of

inequality. The need to assess the impact of these events, many of which are unprecedented in American history, underlines the value of a current portrayal of public views. Another possibility is that younger people may adhere to substantially more liberal beliefs and attitudes than older ones. Age-group and over-time comparisons will allow us to test such hypotheses.

On many aspects of inequality, even the most rudimentary descriptions of public beliefs and attitudes are currently lacking, though other areas, such as "class consciousness" and some aspects of economic policy preferences, have been the subject of some research. There are several reasons for the failures of existing research to fill the gaps in description. The focus of research is fragmented among individual studies, as each investigator tends to study a single aspect of beliefs about inequality (opportunity alone, or social class alone, or income inequality alone). Data are available only sporadically, and often only on topical issues, as survey researchers ask questions related to current political issues or events. Samples tend to be small and unrepresentative, often restricted to specific cities or states, and sometimes questionably representative even of such limited areas. Finally, and perhaps most important, sociologically based research on beliefs and attitudes concerning inequality (e.g., Jackman & Jackman, 1983) often narrowly has focused on the single area of class perceptions as the central element of popular views on inequality, and often on a single question (Centers, 1949) as the measure of that construct (Kluegel & Smith, 1981). Identification with a social class (whether "middle" or "working") is one facet of an individual's views on the American economic system and his or her location in it, but exclusive attention to this construct has been harmful to a general breadth of focus in theoretical and empirical work.

Our survey of Americans' beliefs and attitudes about inequality permits a more comprehensive description than does past research, for two reasons. First, our data are drawn from a representative sample of the population in general, unlike most existing studies such as Verba and Oren's (1984) recent examination of beliefs about inequality in a small sample of "leaders." We also collected additional data to permit more adequate descriptions of two theoretically important subgroups: blacks and the affluent. Demands for civil rights and equal opportunity by blacks and other racial minorities have been among the most important forces toward change in the American consciousness of inequality, so black–white comparisons on various beliefs and attitudes are of great interest. Also, the power held by the affluent in many institutions of politics, the professions, communication, and other areas makes their views on inequality of special concern.

The second major characteristic of our study is its description of public beliefs and attitudes on a wide range of inequality-related issues and policies, rather than just a few topical issues. Objective, comprehensive survey data can give a broader and more reliable picture of Americans' beliefs and attitudes about inequality than other sources of information, such as inferences from election results. Different analysts tend to read different implications in election results, and it is clear that a voter's choice in an election reflects many complex and interacting factors about the voter, the candidates, and the current political situation. From an election outcome, it is difficult at best to infer reliably the particular views on economic inequality that might have contributed to voters' decisions.

There are many reasons for interest in the ways people think about inequality. Though public opinion obviously is not the sole determinant of public policy on such matters as the level of welfare spending or the nature of affirmative-action programs, shifts in public opinion are temporally related to the passage of relevant legislation (Burstein, 1979; Page & Shapiro, 1982; Monroe, 1983). In addition, appeals to public opinion are a potentially powerful resource for groups working for social change (civil rights or women's rights groups, for example), and for presidents seeking to apply pressure to Congress. Popular views on inequality and related issues also shape perceptions of the fairness of policies, which can help or hinder the implementation of policy. Consider, for example, the widespread public views of busing for school desegregation as unfair and illegitimate and the resulting turmoil and difficulty in implementing that policy in some cities; or the public dislike for welfare programs, which often diminishes their effectiveness (Wilensky, 1975).

Beyond the scope of public policy per se, individuals' views on inequality, opportunity, and related issues shape their private actions in important ways. An example is a small employer who is faced with a request from female employees for more equitable salaries in relationship to those of male employees. Such individual decisions, multiplied by thousands daily, are important in maintaining or reversing sex differences in economic outcomes. A different sort of example concerns individuals' efforts toward economic advancement. Views of the relative effectiveness of various routes to mobility (education, joining a union, starting one's own small business) will affect the specific direction of the ambitious individual's efforts.

In sum, one central aim of this book is to present a current and comprehensive description of Americans' views on social and economic inequality and related policies, including information about the extent, distribution, structure, and determinants of particular beliefs and attitudes.

A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

The second major goal of this book is to present a general theoretical perspective on beliefs and attitudes about inequality, along with empirical evidence for many aspects of the theory. Our perspective provides, we believe, a viable explanation for many characteristics of public opinion on issues related to inequality, including the fluctuating, inconsistent, and seemingly contradictory quality of public attitudes toward inequality and related programs. In Chapter 2 we will present our perspective in detail. Here we summarize its major features to provide an overview of the issues we will be addressing in subsequent chapters.

We propose that attitudes toward economic inequality and related policy are influenced by three major aspects of the current American social, economic, and political environment: *(a)* a stable "dominant ideology" about economic inequality; *(b)* individuals' social and economic status; and *(c)* specific beliefs and attitudes, often reflecting "social liberalism," shaped by recent political debates and events. First, beliefs and attitudes concerning inequality reflect the stable influence of general explanations of the workings of the American stratification system, widely held by the public, which others have labeled the "dominant stratification ideology" (Huber & Form, 1973). It might also be called the "logic of opportunity syllogism," for it provides a deductive argument that justifies inequality of economic outcomes. The major premise in the argument is that opportunity for economic advancement based on hard work is plentiful. From this premise two deductions follow. Individuals are personally responsible for their own economic fate: Where one ends up in the distribution of economic rewards depends upon the effort one puts into acquiring and applying the necessary skills and attitudes and upon the native talent with which one begins. As a consequence, since individual outcomes are proportional to individual inputs (talent and effort), the resulting unequal distribution of economic rewards is, in the aggregate, equitable and fair.

Second, attitudes toward inequality are shaped by a person's objective position in the stratification system. We will examine the influence of such factors as income differences, class differences in the conditions of work (in terms of autonomy, power, etc.), sex, race, age, and education. Social and economic status, of course, provide one basis for assessing an individual's self-interest in supporting or opposing particular inequality-related policies. One's social status also influences personal experiences of various kinds, such as the experience of poverty or affluence, fair or unfair treatment on the job, and so on, which may lead to generalizations about inequality and its bases and effects.

Third, attitudes toward inequality are shaped by "social liberalism," an acceptance of social and political equality with groups such as blacks

and women, without the bases of economic inequality being called into question. These attitudes have arisen in large part from recent political and economic changes, including the massive movement of women into the labor force, the social and political changes arising from the dismantling of legalized racial segregation, and an awakening to the presence of poverty in the midst of affluence, particularly in the 1960s. The impact of these events on contemporary attitudes is of two principal kinds. First, by many indications, beliefs and attitudes in several specific areas related to inequality have changed substantially in a liberal direction. The right to an old age with a decent standard of living and basic medical care through Social Security and Medicare has become so widely accepted that even the mention of benefit reductions elicits strong public protests—as in the early days of the Reagan administration. Survey data demonstrate marked reductions in traditional racial prejudice: overt racial bigotry and support for the denial of equal rights to blacks (Taylor, Sheatsley, & Greeley, 1978). And there is survey evidence for a similar trend of diminished support for sex-role traditionalism: belief in the appropriateness of a priori limits to women's social and economic opportunity (Miller, Miller, & Schneider, 1980, pp. 177–178).

However, effects of recent political trends are often multiple, not limited to increases in social liberalism. The recent history of intergroup conflict over social and economic inequality, even as it has won increasing general acceptance of minority rights, has produced negative emotional responses, based on race, that color contemporary evaluations of inequality-related policy. Whites' attitudes toward policies and programs that benefit black Americans may be the area where such negative intergroup emotions have been the most consequential. We will comment on the influence of this factor throughout the analyses presented in this book.

One proposition is a key element of our perspective. *The prevalence and stability of belief in the dominant ideology, in the face of enduring objective features of the stratification system and changing beliefs and attitudes in some areas related to inequality, produces the inconsistency, fluctuation, and seeming contradiction in the attitudes toward inequality and related policy found in the American public.* On balance, the dominant ideology disposes people to a conservative evaluation of welfare and other redistributive programs. Such programs are perceived as unnecessary because the stratification system currently presents ample opportunity to better oneself by individual efforts. Even if the necessity of such programs is admitted, their acceptance still depends on their conformity to the dominant ideology's emphasis on individual responsibility and on the necessity of economic inequality to motivate people to achieve. On the other hand, many enduring objective features of

social inequality, and changing beliefs and attitudes in some specific areas such as racial equality of opportunity, dispose people to what is conventionally labeled a liberal orientation. To achieve public acceptance, inequality-related policy must accommodate both the liberal orientation that provides the impetus for their existence and the conservative implications of the dominant ideology.

The need for accommodation is particularly strong because the conservative and liberal beliefs and attitudes are often found within the same person. Indeed, one aspect of the prevalence of the dominant ideology is that *most people adhere to it to a greater or lesser extent.* If the American population were composed of consistently liberal and conservative individuals, then fashioning inequality-related policy would be much simpler. Consistent policies could be designed, and their adoption would depend in part on the political balance between liberals and conservatives in the population. The absence of individual-level consistency, however, means that most policies and programs must accommodate both liberal and conservative beliefs, often a difficult matter. Welfare payments for support of dependent children provide a telling example. Our liberal sympathies urge us to support children in poverty because they are not responsible for the circumstances in which they were born. The dominant ideology, on the other hand, leads to such distrust of the personal character of parents receiving welfare that the restrictions and stigma attached to its allocation may act, according to some analysts (e.g., Feagin, 1975; Williamson, 1974a), to perpetuate a life in poverty for the children we intend to help.

Another important element of our perspective is the proposition that *the ambivalent orientation to inequality and related policy, produced by the coexistence of liberal and conservative beliefs and attitudes within the same person, does not necessarily require resolution toward consistency.* Put another way, one of the serious flaws of attempts to read general liberal or conservative trends into the outcomes of elections or changes in single beliefs over time is the implicit assumption of a drive toward cognitive consistency among all a person's beliefs, attitudes, and values. Recent research in social psychology suggests that rather than being invariably a consistency seeker, a more appropriate model of the person is as a "cognitive miser" (Taylor, 1981). People may allow their beliefs to remain inconsistent to reduce cognitive effort, as long as important goals are not threatened by inconsistency. This and other reasons for an ambivalent orientation toward inequality and related programs in recent American history will be discussed in Chapter 2.

A final element of our perspective concerns the implications of Americans' beliefs and attitudes about inequality for their evaluations

of policies and political candidates. We stress two major implications here. First, our perspective makes specific predictions about the relative public acceptance of different types of inequality-related programs and the social distribution of their support and opposition. The general public acceptance of some equal-opportunity policies and equally general opposition to others (such as busing and racial quotas for job promotion) may be understood in terms of the policies' relationships both to specific inequality-related beliefs and to the dominant ideology. The theory also predicts that views on inequality and related issues will contribute, along with such political orientations as liberalism–conservatism and political party identification, to the evaluation of political candidates. In our data, we will examine in particular the preference for Reagan versus Carter in the 1980 presidential election.

Second, on a more speculative level, our theory has implications both for understanding the past and current political environment and for predicting the likely course of inequality-related policy in the future. The theory emphasizes widespread public ambivalence and inconsistency in views on inequality, which may be partially responsible for the marked changes over time in the electoral fortunes of liberal and conservative candidates in the recent past. The politics of the 1980s and 1990s increasingly may come to be shaped by inequality-related issues, as a growing proportion of the population see inequality as a zero-sum contest, believing that they can gain economically only by forcing corresponding losses on others (Thurow, 1980). This belief, and others identified by our survey, lead to tentative predictions about the general course of inequality-related policy in the near future.

The second goal of the book, then, is to present the outlines of, and some evidence for, a theoretical perspective on the structure, distribution, determinants, and political implications of Americans' views on inequality. The perspective is rooted in general social–psychological principles of belief and attitude formation and change, and it offers what we believe to be a compelling interpretation of many characteristics of public opinion concerning inequality that can be observed both in our data and in other sources.

PLAN OF THE BOOK

The book is organized as two introductory chapters, then three major parts, followed by a concluding chapter. In Chapter 2, we discuss our theoretical perspective in detail and present the social–psychological principles on which it rests.

In Part I, we examine the most basic beliefs about inequality held by Americans, the "dominant ideology." These chapters (3, 4, and 5)

describe both the current distribution and structure of these beliefs and their stability—principally via analyses of age-group differences, but to the extent possible with data from different time periods supplementing our own. Chapter 3 examines opportunity: views of how much opportunity is perceived in general, how it is distributed (equality of opportunity), the effectiveness of different routes to advancement (particularly education), and recent and future changes in opportunity. Chapter 4 deals with the second major aspect of the general American orientation toward inequality, explanations for achievement or its absence. We examine beliefs about the reasons for poverty and wealth, showing the relative prevalence of explanations that emphasize individual characteristics (such as unusual ability or effort or their lack). Links between such explanations and the perceptions of opportunity dealt with in Chapter 3 are emphasized. Finally, Chapter 5 focuses on the third major aspect of the dominant ideology, beliefs about distributive justice, including evaluations of the equity and fairness of the ways economic rewards are distributed in our society.

Part II deals with popular beliefs and attitudes directly related to public policy on inequality. Chapter 6 examines views on redistributive policies: welfare, ceilings and floors on income, and government-guaranteed jobs. Chapter 7 deals with views of minorities and discrimination, attitudes toward affirmative action, and the legacy of white racism and its attitudinal effects. Chapter 8 examines beliefs about women's opportunity, discrimination against women, and views on the place of women in society, including attitudes toward the Equal Rights Amendment. This chapter emphasizes the factors that create similarities and differences in responses to women's and blacks' opportunity.

In Part III, two chapters deal with linkages between beliefs and attitudes about inequality and broader aspects of both political and personal life. Chapter 9 considers linkages to political opinions and behaviors, particularly the presidential vote in 1980. How did beliefs about inequality and various specific policy issues contribute to the vote? How much do such beliefs and attitudes overlap with such traditional distinctions as liberal/conservative or Democrat/Republican? In this chapter, we give special attention to the beliefs and attitudes of the affluent—a group who may exert disproportionate political influence because of their economic power, education, and other attributes. Chapter 10 examines more personal consequences of beliefs about inequality. Beliefs about the causes of one's economic position affect the degree of happiness, satisfaction, frustration, or anger felt in response to good or bad economic outcomes. Beliefs about inequality thus profoundly influence feelings of life satisfaction and general psychological well-being.

Finally, Chapter 11 summarizes the general themes of the book and

brings together a discussion of the underlying commonalities that appear in the analyses of the various chapters. We will speculate, in light of our findings, on the future prospects for current social movements (such as the civil rights and women's movements) and on the possibilities of shaping popularly accepted, stable, and effective social policy on inequality-related issues.

2

THINKING ABOUT INEQUALITY

Our perspective on Americans' views of inequality emphasizes three aspects of the current political and economic environment as major influences on beliefs and attitudes. First, American culture contains a stable, widely held set of beliefs involving the availability of opportunity, individualistic explanations for achievement, and acceptance of unequal distributions of rewards. These beliefs have been labeled the "dominant ideology" (Huber & Form, 1973), and they generally dispose people toward conservative attitudes toward inequality-related public policy.

Second, forces deriving from a person's own position in the hierarchy of inequality shape beliefs and attitudes about inequality by processes involving differential experience and self-interest. People in different positions (defined by status, race, gender, or other social distinctions) will be expected to react differently to social inequalities that affect them.

Third, "social liberalism" has grown in response to the social and political struggles and events of the past 25 years. As we shall see in Chapters 7 and 8, Americans' beliefs and attitudes on some aspects of poverty, race relations, and women's role in society have become markedly more liberal. However, the growth of social liberalism has not been uniform; some groups (the young and college-educated, in particular) are more socially liberal than others. Thus, the impact of both socioeconomic status and social liberalism on policy attitudes, while generally pushing people in a liberal direction, is more variable than the impact of the dominant ideology.

Perhaps the key assumption of our perspective is that social liberalism, for most people, is not logically integrated and organized with the dominant ideology. Instead, it has been "layered on," available to shape attitudes and behaviors in particular situations in ways that are potentially inconsistent with the consequences of the dominant ideology beliefs. This assumption fits with the picture drawn by modern social–psychological research of the human as a seeker of cognitive *efficiency* rather than complete *consistency* (Taylor, 1981). Research shows, for example, that people frequently use "heuristics"—shortcut methods that efficiently produce reasonably good solutions to prob-

lems—instead of rationally considering *all* relevant evidence to achieve complete consistency in their opinions and judgments (Nisbett & Ross, 1980; Sherman & Corty, 1984; Wyer & Srull, 1980). These points will be treated in more detail as part of the description of our theory in the remainder of this chapter.

BASIC SOCIAL–PSYCHOLOGICAL PROCESSES

As people seek to comprehend inequality and their position in society, a number of basic processes are intrinsically involved. The current understanding of these processes owes much to social–psychological research, often in laboratory settings. Our own perspective is perhaps unique in emphasizing the consequences of these processes for public reactions to inequality, which have not often been investigated. This is due partly to the data limitations discussed in Chapter 1, but also to the usual barriers to communications between different disciplines. Sociological research on responses to inequality has tended to start with the specific question of why the working class (or other disadvantaged groups) accept inequality, a question that leads to certain emphases and certain blind spots in research. We take, instead, the more general question of how people comprehend and react to their social context as a starting point. From this perspective, the relevance of basic social–psychological processes is clear, as they filter and shape the individual's interpretation of other sources of information and influence related to evaluations of inequality.[1]

In this section, we discuss several social–psychological processes that may shape reactions to inequality, along with a sketch of the research evidence for each. In the next section, we draw out some of their implications for specific reactions to inequality.

[1]A limited amount of social–psychological research has addressed the important issue of the cross-cultural generalizability of these "basic" processes (cf. Triandis, 1980). Conclusions are weakened by common, often severe methodological difficulties in cross-cultural research and by the concentration of cross-cultural studies on a limited number of topics to the exclusion of others. (For example, cross-cultural investigation of the "fundamental attribution error" and "just-world" beliefs is almost nonexistent.) However, though the issues remain open, our tentative conclusion is that the social–psychological processes discussed in this section are likely to have some degree of cross-cultural generalizability. Of course, even if they were strictly limited to the North American social and economic context it would be appropriate to treat them as explanatory principles within the scope of this book. But such a limitation would be theoretically unsatisfying, as the possibility would then become salient that these attributional tendencies and other processes simply reflect the overall societal economic arrangements, socialization by elites in their own interests, etc.

Psychological Processes

We present, first, four principles that describe aspects of individual-level psychological functioning. Of course, we omit a whole list of assumed principles of perception, cognition, and behavior that are generally accepted and understood. We cite here only principles that in our view are particularly crucial in determining reactions to inequality. Most of these assumptions are widely shared by social and cognitive psychologists (including Anderson, 1983; Wyer & Srull, 1980; Smith, 1984).

1. The Principle of Cognitive Mastery. People actively seek to understand the social environmental and their own place in it—that is, to construct mental representations [knowledge structures or "mental models"; (Johnson-Laird, 1983)] that they can use to guide their actions. This assumption has been central in modern cognitive psychology (e.g., Anderson, 1983) since the overthrow of behaviorism. Heider (1958), a seminal figure in the modern era in social psychology, wrote that people "grasp reality, and can predict and control it, by referring transient and variable behavior and events to relatively unchanging underlying conditions, the so-called dispositional properties of [their] world" (1958, p. 79). This type of causal analysis (attribution) is central to the ways people make sense of, and are enabled to act effectively on, their environment. Only by understanding causal relationships can reasoned action be planned and successfully carried out. People are particularly likely to seek explanations for unexpected events and for events that are likely to affect them personally (Kelley & Michela, 1980; Hastie, 1984). Since economic inequality is such a salient feature of society and possesses great personal relevance to each individual's life experiences, this principle suggests that people will attempt to understand the system of inequality and their own positions within it.

a. Corollary: The benefits of psychological control. Believing that a particular situation can be influenced by one's own actions can serve to motivate such action, bringing potential benefits if the belief is correct. Trying to act effectively in situations that are actually uncontrollable often carries little cost, compared to failing to act when it would be helpful. Thus, it seems that overall effectiveness in dealing with the environment would be maximized by a tendency to overestimate one's ability to control or influence events. Consistent with this assumption, observation of "superstitious" behavior patterns even in lower animals such as pigeons (Skinner, 1948) seems to indicate that overestimation of the effects of one's own actions on the environment is built in evolutionarily beyond the human species.

The belief that one has control of the environment, independent of the true extent of such control, has important benefits for mental and

physical health. Again, the principle holds for infrahuman species as well. The ability to terminate electric shocks by pressing a lever reduces their harmful motivational, behavioral, and emotional consequences for rats compared to identical but uncontrollable shocks (Maier & Seligman, 1976). Similar effects hold for people, with controllable stressors having less deleterious consequences than uncontrollable ones (Pennebaker, Burnam, Shaeffer, & Harper, 1977; Weidner & Matthews, 1978). One prominent theory of depression (Seligman, 1975) holds that it derives from the perception of inability to control negative events. Other studies show, for example, that nursing-home patients permitted to control even minor aspects of their environments (such as when they would participate in certain activities) function better psychologically and physically than their counterparts who were assigned to activity times (Rodin & Langer, 1977; cf. Langer, 1983). As Lefcourt (1976, p. 424) summarized, "the sense of control, the illusion that one can exercise personal choice, has a definite and positive role in sustaining life."

b. Corollary: The belief in the "just world"—or at least the meaningful world. Lerner and Miller (1978) postulated that a belief in the "just world," that people generally receive the outcomes that they deserve by their actions or moral quality, can serve to maintain perceived control. The belief makes disasters or accidents affecting oneself seem unlikely, since such outcomes only befall people who deserve them in some way. By behaving properly, one can reduce the subjective likelihood of negative events. A consequence of such just-world beliefs is the perception of people in unfortunate circumstances, such as poor people, in negative terms and as personally responsible for their state.

2. The Principle of Cognitive Efficiency. The perceiver interacting with the social and physical world has two general goals: to act effectively on the environment and to do so with some measure of cognitive efficiency (Taylor, 1981). A very large number of facts might be relevant to any particular judgment or decision, so considering them all in order to make the best possible decision risks complete paralysis and inaction. Instead, people consider only a limited number of facts relevant to any judgment and make decisions without an exhaustive search of memory, unless extraordinary circumstances prevail (Smith, 1984; Wyer & Srull, 1980; Chaiken, 1980; Sherman & Corty, 1984). The crucial issue is, of course, which facts or aspects of the object in question are considered. The general answer given by research in social cognition is that a discrete package of beliefs or "schema" (Brewer & Nakamura, 1984; Sears, Huddy, & Schaffer, 1986) is retrieved from memory and guides inferences and judgments. A schema is cued by specific aspects of the situation or object under consideration.

The theory outlined here implies that people may often simultaneously maintain beliefs that are potentially inconsistent, because those beliefs are never considered together. The possibility that inconsistency may be accepted by an individual contradicts some traditional lines of theory about belief systems. Cognitive consistency theories (Abelson, Aronson, McGuire, Newcomb, Rosenberg, & Tannenbaum, 1968) assumed that inconsistency is aversive, creating a motivational drive toward increased consistency of beliefs and attitudes. Related assumptions are found in some theories that presume all beliefs can be scaled along a single dimension (such as liberal–conservative) and in certain Marxist theories that assume working-class people will come to recognize the contradictions between their self-interests and their system-justifying beliefs. However, as we stressed earlier, and as others have argued (Mann, 1973; Huber & Form, 1973; Free & Cantril, 1968; Lane, 1962; Parkin, 1971), inconsistencies are not invariably or even ordinarily resolved by the perceiver. The seeker of cognitive efficiency depicted by contemporary social–psychological theory will often remain unaware of potential inconsistencies between views on different topics and, even if aware, may not proceed to reshape beliefs toward greater consistency.

a. Corollary: Salient or available factors influence judgments. Salient objects or attributes are those that perceptually stand out or attract attention (Taylor & Fiske, 1978), and available factors are those that can be quickly and easily retrieved from memory. The term *salience* is often used in a broad sense to refer to either of these processes. To make a judgment about an object or event (e.g., evaluate it on a good–bad dimension or find an explanation for it) people do not, as noted above, undertake a search of all possibly relevant factors. Instead, they identify a few of the most salient attributes of the object and consider them to arrive at an overall evaluation of the object (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Or they simply pick the most obvious—the most immediately salient—causal possibility, and select it as "the cause" of the event (Taylor & Fiske, 1978). This principle holds across a broad range of judgments and problem-solving tasks, not only the formation of attitudes and explanations (Smith, 1984) and is ultimately related to the workings of the cognitive system as it seeks efficient functioning (Anderson, 1983; Pollard, 1982).

There are three conceptually distinct ways in which a particular concept can become salient. One is perceptual: According to this principle, perceptually salient attributes (such as, perhaps, skin color) may have disproportionate impact on social judgments and social behavior. A number of factors are known to contribute to perceptual salience (McArthur, 1981); the most important for our purposes is the distinctiveness or rarity of an attribute. A lone black in a group of whites (a

lone man in a group of women, etc.) will tend to stand out perceptually and will be perceived in systematically biased ways as a result (Taylor & Fiske, 1978).

Another factor is the long-term availability of a particular concept in a person's memory. For example, authoritarians (Adorno, Frenkel Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950) are sensitive to the dimension of leadership or power in a wide range of situations and disproportionately weight that dimension in making judgments or evaluations. In terms of the principles of social cognition, authoritarians have power-related concepts highly available in memory as a chronic state, whereas other people would be likely to use such concepts only when specific situational cues activate them.

As a third factor, associative links between concepts in memory can influence availability and hence explanations and judgments. As just mentioned, situational cues may make available particular schemas with which they are associated. Besides cues intrinsic to everyday situations of social perception and judgment, such cues abound in the research context as well, including question wording and the content of preceding questions in an interview schedule (Bishop, Oldendick, & Tuchfarber, 1982). So the wealthy might be judged more favorably if the situation (or recent media reports or previous questions) cued concepts related to their (presumed) hard work and individual merits instead of concepts involving the (presumed) greedy nature of landlords and managers of big corporations. Influences of media content on political judgment have been demonstrated and interpreted in these terms by Iyengar, Kinder, Peters, and Krosnick (1984).

Alternatively, a perceiver may have a stereotype—a link in memory between a person or group and a particular trait [e.g., a link between the poor and the concept of laziness (cf. Hamilton, 1981)]. This does not imply that the perceiver will *always* consciously view the poor as lazy. But when an explanation for poverty is called for, the concept of *laziness* will become available in memory due to its associative link to the concept of *poverty*. Laziness will then likely be chosen as an explanation, based on the availability principle. Smith (1984) describes the workings of this mechanism in detail.

In summary, because perceivers generally do not examine exhaustively the implications or properties of an object when making a judgment, they are subject to short- or long-term influences that affect what they consider and therefore the outcome of the judgment process. These influences range from the situational context (e.g., the content of previous questions in a questionnaire or imagery from a recent political campaign or media reports) to stable individual differences (e.g., authoritarianism).

b. Corollary: Persons are seen as the causes of behaviors. One process known to influence causal explanations is the so-called "fundamental attribution error" described by Ross (1977). This is an observed bias toward individual (dispositional) explanations for behavior and away from situational explanations. The bias can be considered as an instance of a salience effect, for persons who perform behaviors are often highly salient as possible causes (Jones & Nisbett, 1972). For example, a person who complies with authoritative instructions to write an essay advocating an unpopular position often is thought by observers to favor personally that position—even if the observers are aware that virtually everyone in fact complies with the instructions (Jones & Harris, 1967). The bias is so extreme and pervasive that the term *error* seems clearly deserved. It has been replicated in a multitude of studies (cf. Ross, 1977; Nisbett & Ross, 1980) and may well contribute to the predominance of individualistic explanations for achievement, an element of the dominant ideology. Pettigrew (1979) has suggested that the fundamental attribution error is exaggerated in intergroup settings, leading observers to make personal (or even genetic) attributions for negative behaviors performed by members of outgroups. For example, criminality or welfare dependence may be perceived as typical of racial outgroups and attributed to internal or genetic factors. Pettigrew (1979) labels this tendency the "ultimate attribution error."

c. Corollary: Personal experiences often may be seen as uniquely caused and not generalized. When one is personally involved in an event, unique factors of one's own personality or situation are often salient as possible causes. For example, losing one's job may be explained in terms of the individual faults or prejudices of one's boss. Explanations based on such local and immediate factors can limit the perception of generalizability, compared with explanations based on the overall state of the economy or other causes that are more global, but less salient and visible.

d. Corollary: Individual and structural explanations are not alternatives. It might be thought that explaining an event by a characteristic of the actor or by an aspect of the situation constitute alternatives, as would explaining poverty by individual characteristics of the poor or by structural characteristics of the society. However, in line with the general ability of social perceivers to maintain inconsistent views simultaneously, research has generally shown that people do not respond as though such explanations are true alternatives psychologically. That is, individual and structural (or person and situation) explanations are roughly independent of each other, rather than being strongly negatively correlated (Taylor & Koivumaki, 1976; Miller, Smith, & Uleman, 1981; cf. Chapter 4). A situation or a survey question that makes certain

aspects of poverty salient (such as laziness or lack of thrift on the part of the poor) may lead a perceiver to judge that individual characteristics are important. In different circumstances different aspects may be salient (such as the lack of job opportunities in the ghetto), eliciting the judgment that structural factors are important. The perceiver may give these responses without any sense of being inconsistent because they are based on the application of different schemas or judgmental principles, cued by different aspects of the stimulus being considered (such as poverty).

3. The Hedonic Principle. This principle hardly requires elaboration: People seek to obtain rewards of many types, including social approval, money, and self-esteem, and to avoid punishments. Many theories (but not ours) hold that self-interest is the basic force motivating most political attitudes and behaviors.

a. Corollary: The principle of self-esteem maintenance. People typically seek to maintain high levels of self-esteem by means of "defensive" biases in attribution and other cognitive processes. Defensive attribution can result in a person overattributing success or positive outcomes to himself or herself personally, while attributing failures or negative outcomes to external, situational factors (relative to the explanations that would be given by a detached observer; Miller & Ross, 1975; Snyder, Stephan, & Rosenfield, 1978; Greenwald, 1980). In this form, the explanations obviously serve to maintain or increase the individual's self-esteem.

4. Principles Regarding Affect and Cognition. The relationships among affect (emotion) and cognition are currently the subject of intense research interest in social psychology (e.g., Clark & Fiske, 1982). Of course, beliefs can shape affect—as when the perception that one is failing to obtain valued rewards causes frustration and anger. However, affect may be partially independent of cognitions such as beliefs and attitudes (cf. Zajonc, 1980; Abelson, Kinder, Peters, & Fiske, 1982). For example, perceptions and beliefs can be biased by preexisting emotional responses to a person or group (as when stereotypes of enemy nations become extremely negative during wartime). A classic experiment by Rosenberg (1960) demonstrated a biasing impact of affect on cognitions. Rosenberg manipulated people's affective responses to the idea of racial integration by hypnotic means, finding that subjects then adopted beliefs and attitudes that were consistent with and supportive of the induced affect. For example, subjects who were hypnotically induced to feel warm and favorable about the idea of interracial social contacts proceeded to give all kinds of sensible reasons that rationally supported their experimentally induced emotional reaction. Thus, affect can causally precede, as well as be dependent on, beliefs.

The Individual in Social Context

An individual's beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors are shaped not only by individual-level processes like those described above. The influences of the individual's culture, society, and particular socioeconomic position are pervasive and are the particular interest of social (as opposed to cognitive) psychologists. Several aspects of the "social embeddedness" of the individual are particularly important for our purposes.

5. *The Socialization Principle.* People come to believe, often unquestioningly, what their society teaches concerning the nature of physical and social reality. For an individual raised in twentieth-century America, reality is composed of atoms and molecules, interacting by means of physical laws including gravitation, electromagnetism, and the like. For an Azande (Evans-Pritchard, 1937), reality involves the everyday experience of witchcraft, and routine steps are taken to avoid being bewitched by one's enemies. As another example, many societies (including our own in earlier times) teach their members that racial minorities are not fully human, not entitled to full social and political recognition. In cognitive terms, beliefs that are socialized early and consistently enough form a basic framework of knowledge that is difficult for an individual even to recognize, let alone overturn.

6. *The Social Identity Principle.* People have social identities, which extend beyond their individual, biological identity to include their group memberships and affiliations as well. A person may identify herself as a particular, named individual but also as a lawyer, a Methodist, a midwesterner, a mother, an American, and so on. Such aspects of social identity can influence the individual's perceptions and behaviors in social situations (Tajfel, 1982).

a. *Corollary: People may seek group interests as well as individual ones.* The hedonic principle mentioned above extends to individuals' social identities as well as their individual ones. People can seek to further the interests of the social groups with which they identify as well as (or even in opposition to) their own individual interests (cf. Bobo, 1983). This principle is related to the distinction between egoistic (individual) and fraternal (group-based) relative deprivation (Runciman, 1966). Feeling that one's group—not only oneself individually—is overlooked and unfairly deprived is a consistent predictor of political behaviors such as voting (Vanneman & Pettigrew, 1972).

7. *Group Influences on Attitudes and Beliefs.* Social–psychological research demonstrates that socialization or group identification can shape beliefs and attitudes. Negative affect such as fear and resentment directed at racial minorities or other groups, based in early socialization, may shape attitudes and beliefs concerning such groups (McConahay

& Hough, 1976). Also, emotions such as frustration or dissatisfaction may generate motivational forces that are expressed in attitudes related to outgroups or to inequality in general; this is the classic scapegoating or relative deprivation analysis of prejudice. Affective factors ultimately based in group identification or intergroup hostility can have a powerful impact on attitudes and beliefs.

Beliefs and attitudes also may be based normatively in group membership and identifications, as well as in purely cognitive processes. The influence of reference groups (groups to which an individual turns for validation and reality-testing of beliefs or attitudes) is well known in sociology and social psychology (e.g., Newcomb, 1963; Merton, 1957; Asch, 1951). The result is a tendency toward uniformity of attitudes and beliefs within groups, at least on issues that are significant to the group.

8. Distributive Justice Principles. Groups seek to mute intragroup conflicts over rewards, often by establishing abstract principles for the division of rewards. Such principles can limit conflicts due to the operation of self-interest (the hedonic principle) when the total sum of rewards is limited (Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978). Several different distributive principles are available, and their use depends on the salience of different aspects of the situation (as discussed under Corollary; Salient or available factors influence judgments, p. 15; Deutsch, 1975). *(a)* Equality is preferred for distribution when people's sharing of the basic human condition is salient, as with food supplies in an emergency. *(b)* Equity (distribution proportional to individual inputs) can be used when people's differential inputs to an enterprise are salient—particularly when the inputs jointly determine the size of the resource to be distributed. Corporate law, in which profits are divided according to the relative size of owners' investments, is an example. *(c)* Need-based distributions are sometimes used when unequal needs for the resource are salient.

Summary: Multiple Functions of Attitudes and Beliefs

This body of principles implies that a particular belief or attitude may serve a number of possible functions for an individual, a theoretical insight that was expressed by Katz (1960), among others. A belief may be approximately *veridical,* describing the world (or the individual's experience of it) in a way that facilitates reasoned action and goal attainment. A belief may serve *social adjustment* functions, as when the individual adopts a belief to conform to a reference group. A belief or attitude may serve *individual or group interests,* such as an attitude favoring a policy that will bring concrete benefits to the individual. *Psychological defense* functions may also be important, for beliefs that bolster the individual's sense of control or mastery over the world.

The multiple functions of beliefs and attitudes constitute a potential motivational basis for inconsistency within an individual's belief structures. That is, believing one thing (say, that the poor are generally the helpless victims of unfortunate circumstances) may be functional in some ways—it may be roughly veridical or agree with the opinions favored by the perceiver's reference groups. At the same time, believing something different or even directly contradictory (that the poor could lift themselves from poverty if they tried hard enough) might be functional for different reasons, such as psychological defense or group self-interest. The individual might have substantial motivation to maintain each of these beliefs and would probably find it both difficult and psychologically costly to bring them into confrontation and resolve the potential contradiction. Research shows that, in general, people do not take this course, preferring to reap the psychological benefits of maintaining both beliefs simultaneously. The potential contradiction carries few if any costs in everyday life, because the different beliefs, being part of different schemas, will be made consciously available by different cues. Thoughts about the helpless poor might be triggered by images of racial minorities facing job discrimination and thoughts about the lazy, undeserving poor by images of welfare Cadillacs. The structures and processes of social cognition thus provide definite bases for potential inconsistency and ambivalence in people's reactions to complex, multifaceted realities such as inequality in society.

CONSEQUENCES OF THESE PROCESSES FOR REACTIONS TO INEQUALITY

The first question concerning reactions to inequality is, logically, are people at all aware of social inequality? Our perspective gives a clear answer: Because social inequality is such a salient feature of the social world and a critically important influence on individuals' lives, we assume it to be a frequent target of individual attention and thought. As the cognitive mastery principle emphasizes, people seek to understand the general causes of inequality and structure their attitudes and actions according to the causal understanding they achieve. This assumption distinguishes our theory of responses to societal inequality from the suggestion that acceptance of social inequality (particularly by the disadvantaged) results from a lack of awareness of inequality.

The essential argument in the thesis of unawareness is that people implicitly accept aspects of social reality that are so far removed from their immediate experience as to lack much substance for them. We do not claim that Americans have a detailed awareness of all aspects of social inequality. Indeed, we shall argue that in some areas (such as aspects of racial inequality) limited awareness has an important im-

pact on policy attitudes. However, many reasons convince us that Americans have a broad sense of the social inequalities that characterize our society. We are a literate, media-oriented people with ample opportunity to receive information about the status and political power of the rich and the circumstances and demographic characteristics of the poor. Examination of even a small sampling of the content of popular media supports this assertion. Another argument is to be found in the writings of contemporary apologists for capitalism and attendant inequalities (e.g., Gilder, 1981), who do not attempt to deny the existence of marked inequalities of income or wealth or the existence of past racial injustices. Instead, they generally characterize such injustices as things of the past and offer justifications for current economic inequalities. The assumption is implicit that inequality is generally acknowledged and that it is salient enough for most people to require justification. In addition, survey data (e.g., studies of class perceptions) suggest that people are broadly aware of the marked inequalities of income, wealth, and power that exist in our society. Finally, the limited amount of work on the development of awareness of inequality in childhood (e.g., Simmons & Rosenberg, 1971; Leahy, 1983) seems to show that awareness develops in the teen years, at about the same time as other aspects of political consciousness.

If we reject the model of unawareness, then, and accept the notion that people seek to understand their environment causally in order to make predictions and act effectively on it, it follows that people are likely to ask questions about social inequality. The questions take two basic forms: How *should* the stratification system work, and how *does* it actually work? Questions of the first type concern what gives rise to economic rewards, whether or not inequality is an inevitable feature of society, what costs and benefits result from inequality, and related questions about the sources and consequences of inequality. Questions of the second type concern whether or not the stratification system is currently functioning as it should. Is there truly equality of opportunity for all groups? Are the typical incomes of different occupations proportional to their contributions to society? Is my personal position fair? Our society provides readily available answers to these questions in the form of the "dominant ideology" identified by Huber and Form (1973) and others, and we proceed next to a discussion of the roots of adherence to the dominant ideology in the social–psychological principles listed above.

Processes Supporting the Dominant Ideology

Our theory emphasizes the role of certain processes in directly supporting belief in the dominant ideology and therefore the acceptance

of existing inequalities. The dominant ideology involves three beliefs: First, that opportunity for economic advancement is widespread in America today; second, that individuals are personally responsible for their positions; and third, that the overall system of inequality is, therefore, equitable and fair.

Socialization. Every member of society is exposed to multiple messages, in childhood socialization and in the mass media throughout life, which have implications for responses to inequality. Marxist and neo-Marxist theories have particularly emphasized the role of socialization in bringing about mass acceptance of economic inequality. From Marx's early writings on "false consciousness" (Marx, 1845/1956) to contemporary writings on "ideological hegemony" (Gramsci, 1971; Cheal, 1979), several themes have been consistent. Elites are said to promote beliefs that support and justify inequality (and therefore their privileged position) through their control over educational, religious, and cultural institutions. General acceptance of these beliefs is said to be important in producing popular support for inequality and other existing societal arrangements.

There is ample evidence that elites do attempt to influence the content of common sources of socialization (e.g., Domhoff, 1978). The dominant ideology itself and the general individualistic bias in American culture that has been noted by many observers (e.g., Weber, 1959; Sampson, 1977) are consistent with the predictions of Marxist theories about the contents of socialization. The predominant beliefs of the American public about the workings of the stratification system have been (Huber & Form, 1973; Feagin, 1975) and continue to be (Kluegel & Smith, 1983; see Chapter 4) predominantly individualistic in character. Wealth is seen as the product of superior individual effort and talent and poverty as the result of deficits in these factors. Consistent with an assumption of early socialization, Ross, Turiel, Josephson, and Lepper (1978, cited in Nisbett & Ross, 1980) found that American children use increasingly dispositional (individual) explanations for behavior as they grow up. Common socialization processes are thus one major potential influence on popular beliefs about inequality, though the available evidence cannot prove the case for intentional elite domination and manipulation. In addition, cross-national evidence finds individualism and other elements of the dominant ideology to be prevalent in several Western societies (Lopreato & Hazelrigg, 1972; Coughlin, 1980). If socialization is the entire explanation, it must involve beliefs that are basic in Western culture rather than beliefs that are specific to American society.

Generalization of Experiences. Quite apart from socialization and mass communication, widespread individual experiences of certain concrete aspects of recent American history appear to confirm parts

of the dominant ideology. Research on occupational mobility (Featherman & Hauser, 1978) shows that while the most common pattern is stability of class position from one generation to the next, upward mobility has also been common and outweighs downward mobility by roughly two to one. The majority of Americans perceive themselves as having experienced improvements upon their parents' standard of living (Kluegel & Smith, 1982; see also Chapter 3). Most Americans thus have evidence for the possibility of upward mobility either in their own experience or in that of family members, friends, or acquaintances. Even those who have not been mobile have benefited, on the whole, from the aggregate improvement in living standards that has taken place since World War II. Lane (1962) held that people generalize relatively benign personal economic experiences to conclude that mobility is possible for anyone who works hard. The ways in which personal experiences dispose people to accept societal inequalities have been emphasized by proponents of such theses as the demise of working-class consciousness, the "embourgeoisement" of the working class, and the "end of ideology" (for reviews, see Blumberg, 1980; Kluegel & Smith, 1981).

Explanations for Economic Outcomes. Those who experience upward mobility or improvements in living standards will tend to attribute responsibility for their gains to their own personal efforts and abilities (as shown by studies of typical explanations for successful outcomes). Their experiences will thus appear to confirm the second aspect of the dominant ideology, that individuals are responsible for their own societal positions. Several reasons support this attributional tendency, including self-esteem maintenance motives or defensive attribution. The "fundamental attribution error" (Ross, 1977) also will contribute to this pattern, leading to individual explanations for observed instances of poverty as well as economic achievement.

When perceivers attempt to explain poverty, there will be a general tendency to attribute it to personal characteristics of the poor and thus to uphold the tenets of the dominant ideology. Lane (1962) emphasized a "fear of equality," particularly among the working class. Living close to the poor (both in the sense of average income and in the likelihood of falling into poverty due to unemployment or disability), working-class people need to distance themselves psychologically from the poor in order to maintain a favorable social identity and self-esteem, according to Lane. One way to do this is to emphasize the lack of moral character, effort, or talent on the part of the poor, in contrast to the more favorably viewed characteristics of the working class. Beliefs in the "just world" (Lerner & Miller, 1978) have the same effect: One who is motivated, by a need to perceive an orderly universe, to see people's outcomes as related to their deservingness will tend to see the poor as personally responsible for their plight. Finally, the benefits of psy-