three groups of participants read an actual case history of a psychiatric patient. Participants in a control condition simply read the case history, whereas other participants were told to generate an explanation for why the person’s prior behavior might have later led him to either become involved in a hit-and-run accident or become a candidate for city council. Afterward, all participants indicated how likely it was that these two events would occur.

Figure 4.6 presents some of the results from this investigation. The data show that participants who explained how the patient’s past might have led him to become involved in a hit-and-run accident subsequently believed that outcome was more likely to occur than did participants who did not explain why such an outcome might transpire. The same was true for participants who explained why the patient might have later run for city council. These findings show that generating an explanation for why an event could occur makes the event’s occurrence seem more likely (Koehler, 1991; Sherman, Zehner, Johnson, & Hirt, 1983).

4. Belief Perseverance: Explained Outcomes Resist Disconfirmation

A final research area examines what happens to people’s beliefs once they have explained an outcome. To set the stage for this research, let’s consider a scene familiar to anyone who has ever watched a courtroom TV show. A jury hears testimony from a witness, only to be told later that the evidence is inadmissible and that they should disregard it. How adept are people at putting aside what they have heard when forming a judgment? Are they really able to revise their beliefs when they learn that the evidentiary basis of those beliefs is faulty?

An investigation by C. A. Anderson and colleagues addressed this issue (C. A. Anderson, Lepper, & Ross, 1980). In the first part of the experiment, participants read evidence regarding a link between risk-taking behavior and success as a firefighter. Some of the participants were led to believe that risk takers make better firefighters, and others were led to believe that risk-taking behavior was an undesirable quality in a firefighter. After receiving this information, participants generated an