

# From Attributions to Folk Explanations: An Argument in 10 (or so) Steps

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1. What are folk explanations? They are answers to why-questions given by ordinary folk. Folk explanations of behavior, in particular, play a central role in human social cognition—they help people to derive meaning from others' behaviors and to clarify their own behaviors to others.
2. When constructing folk explanations, people use a conceptual framework of the domain at issue. In the case of behavior explanations, the pertinent conceptual framework has been called *theory of mind* (occasionally *also folk/lay/naïve or common-sense psychology*). This framework conceptualizes behavior as causally related to mental states and thus makes mental state inference a central element of social cognition.
3. For more than 30 years, the standard model in psychology of how ordinary people explain behavior has been attribution theory. This theory assumes that people explain behavior (and all other psychological events) by identifying a cause that either lies in the agent (“person cause”) or in the environment (“situation cause”). Research based on attribution theory has identified factors that influence this choice of citing person or situation causes, such as the kind of information available, one's perspective (actor vs. observer), and one's goals (e.g., self-servingness).
4. However, the attribution model of folk explanations is surprisingly at odds both with philosophical analyses of folk psychology and with recent research on children's developing theory of mind. In these literatures, adults are assumed to offer different explanations for different types of behavior: People explain unintentional behavior with causes, but they explain intentional behaviors with reasons.
5. Until recently, no empirical evidence was available that could decide whether a model based on a cause-reason distinction or an attribution model based on the person-situation distinction is the correct account of people's folk explanations. Compelling evidence has now become available, and with it a number of important implications for social and cognitive psychology.
6. People clearly distinguish between intentional and unintentional behavior, not only in perceptions and evaluations but also in explanations. That is, people explain intentional and unintentional behavior in distinct ways.
7. Unintentional behaviors are explained by “mere” causes—factors that mechanically brought about the behavior in question, in accordance with traditional attribution assumptions. Intentional behaviors, however, are explained by one of three modes, depending on what aspect of the intentional behavior is in focus and what social function the explanation serves.

- 7.1. Reasons are the default mode of explaining intentional behavior, with a frequency of about 75%. When explainers use reason explanations, they refer to the beliefs and desires the agent considered when deciding to act. They thus clarify what the point of the action was from the agent's perspective. More specifically, when ascribing reasons to an agent, perceivers make two conceptual assumptions: the agent is aware of this reason (subjectivity assumption) and the reason, often together with other reasons, presents a rational basis for acting (rationality assumption).
- 7.2. Causal history of reason (CHR) explanations make up about 25% of all intentional behavior explanations. In CHR's, there is no reference to the agent's reasons but rather to the factors that lay in the background of those reasons and brought them about. CHR explanations are offered primarily when the explainer does not know the agent's reasons, considers them obvious, or regards reasons as less suitable for meeting a specific conversational goal (e.g., excusing an agent's action is more successfully achieved with CHRs than with reasons).
- 7.3. Enabling factors specify what made it possible that the agent turned an intention into a successfully performed action, are these explanations are relatively rare (5%). In fact, they are not used at all unless (a) the behavior to be explained was very difficult and/or (b) the conversational context posed a "How was this possible?" question rather than a "Why?" question. These two conditions often coincide in that the performance of a difficult action (e.g., an artistic or athletic feat) usually elicits a "How was this possible?" question.
8. In sum, whereas explanations of unintentional behavior fit the attribution model of (person-situation) causes, intentional behaviors do not.
9. Why then has the person-situation attribution model been so successful in social psychology? One might suspect that it was attractively simple; dichotomies are appealing. But that may itself be too simple an account. At least two other factors play a role.
  - 9.1. First is the accumulation of ambiguities in attribution theory that made the theory look like it was particularly powerful and broad in its applications. For example, attribution theory does not clearly distinguish between behavior explanations and trait inferences (both are called attribution), and, as a result, models of trait inference were mistakenly regarded as models of behavior explanation as well. Also, because attribution theory does not precisely define when an explanation refers to a person cause and when it refers to a situation cause, researchers began to confound person causes with "bad" (wrong, blaming) explanations and situation causes with "good" (correct, charitable) explanations, further expanding the appeal—but also the looseness, of the person-situation dichotomy. Along the same lines, offering a situation cause was mistakenly identified with considering a behavior unintentional whereas offering a person cause was mistakenly identified with considering a behavior intentional, thereby jam-packing distinct concepts into an overly inclusive person-situation distinction.
  - 9.2. The second factor that has made attribution theory so appealing is that numerous interesting "effects" were discovered in its wake: the actor-observer asymmetry, the self-serving bias, the discounting effect, the fundamental attribution error, and several more. But none of these effects has ever been derived from attribution theory. Instead, these effects, which touch upon deep and interesting patterns of social cognition, were merely

*formulated* in the increasingly familiar person-situation language, making it seem as though the theory that dictated the language had revealed the patterns. In reality, these patterns of social cognition exist independently from the person-situation distinction, and research is accumulating that suggests these patterns can be more lucidly described and explained if one discards the person-situation language.

10. What does the new model of folk explanation offer beside a more adequate description and classification of people's behavior explanations?
  - 10.1. The revised classification is not just an arbitrary one that happens to be more adequate. Instead, the model of folk explanations attempts to identify those conceptual categories that correspond to the framework people themselves have about human mind and behavior, which is a fundamental (and so would argue, inevitable) element of human social cognition.
  - 10.2. Knowing about the distinct modes of behavior explanation, we can go below the linguistic surface of explanations to understand the social perceiver's conceptual assumptions that underlie the expressed explanations. For example, a reason explanation such as "She isn't coming to the party *because her ex will be there*" is traditionally classified as a situation cause even though her ex's being at the party is surely not causing (backward in time, as it were) her decision to stay away. Rather, it is the agent's subjective belief that her ex will be there that gives her a rational reason to stay away.
  - 10.3. By delineating important folk-conceptual assumptions, the model sheds light on the various cognitive and social functions that behavior explanations serve. For example, one can predict the pattern of behavior explanations used under different impression-management goals, explanations for desirable vs. undesirable behaviors, behaviors performed by self vs. others, and behaviors performed by groups vs. individuals.
  - 10.4. As a result of this diversity of phenomena that are elucidated, two surprisingly divergent aspects of social cognition—the cognitive and the social—can be better integrated within the folk explanation model. On the one hand, explanations help perceivers create meaning out of the endless stream of behaviors and events surrounding them; this is their cognitive aspect. On the other hand, explanations are also speech acts that are used for various purposes, such as saving face, facilitating interpersonal coordination, or derogating an agent; this is their social aspect. By recognizing the conceptual framework that underlies people's cognition of human behavior, these cognitive and social aspects become integrated, because the same conceptual tools underlie (and constrain) both the cognitive and the social functions of explanation.
  - 10.5. Finally, the folk-theoretical model yields a long-overdue affiliation between social-psychological and developmental research on social cognition. Until recently it would have seemed that children first explain intentional action by beliefs and desires but then "switch" to a person-situation model. Now we see that a person-situation model is only used for explaining unintentional behavior (presumably from childhood on), whereas beliefs and desires represent the *reasons* that children and adults (with increased refinement) use to explain behavior. An interesting question for future research is when during development these fundamentally different modes of explanation emerge.

## Relevant Literature

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