

PRAGMATICS AND PLURALISM IN EXPLAINING HUMAN ACTION

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ABSTRACT: I am in agreement with Field and Hineline's excellent essay (2008) concerning the limitations of cause–effect explanation and the derivative problems with person-centered accounts of human action. However, their account is simultaneously limited by its constrained view of the aims of psychological theory. If we take a more pragmatic stance toward the function of theory, we also find theoretical explanations may be used effectively both to sustain and to transform society. They may also be employed in the service of social justice and to enrich the potentials for research and practice. To illustrate the enrichment function, I sketch out a form of confluence theory. In all these endeavors, one finds means of accounting for cross-time trajectories.

Key words: pluralism, narrative, relational theory, causal explanation, confluence theory

In their rich and provocative essay, Douglas Field and Philip Hineline (2008) properly point to prevailing limitations in current explanatory practices in psychology. The dependency on simple and immediate cause–effect explanations is prevalent; such explanations draw continuing sustenance from both common language usage and the discipline's penchant for laboratory experimentation. I also find quite brilliant their analysis of the ways in which dispositional, or person-centered, explanation may originate as a compensation for ignorance of the originating conditions for given patterns of action. And I fully concur that this tendency to focus on the immediate causal circumstances restricts the potentials of the science for exploring temporally extended patterns and complexities. Further, I am quite compelled by their proposal that the prevailing dependency on the common linguistic form of subject/verb lends itself to unwitting and potentially problematic separations between independent and dependent variables, agents and action, brain and behavior, and the like.

In what follows I wish to explore some of the broader implications of Field and Hineline's essay from the standpoint of social construction. Although there is a strong liberating thrust to their essay, I want to respond to certain echoes of an empiricist foundationalism that also reverberate throughout the piece. They write, for example, of “a complete account of some thought or overt action” (p. 7), and “we assert that explanations are to be accepted only provisionally and as validated by objectively gathered data.” They also credit the science for empirically

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demonstrating the reliance on dispositional attributions to be in error. I respond to these leanings because in certain degree they limit the range of alternative possibilities for theoretical explanation in psychology. For the social constructionist, the traditional assumption that properly conducted scientific research leads progressively toward a singular or objective truth is both misleading and potentially dangerous. It is misleading because truth posits can never escape the shared ontologies and values that orient those engaging in scientific inquiry; these agreements stand on no other foundation than that of community ascent. It is dangerous because truth posits based on claims to transcendent authority suppress or eliminate the many alternative ontologies and values generated by the world's peoples.

From a constructionist standpoint, the major questions to be asked of scientific inquiry are pragmatic in nature: what are the outcomes of such efforts; what ends do they serve and in what ways; and for whom do they represent advances and for whom are they threatening? It must also be underscored that answering such questions will inevitably bring into play issues of value, politics, morality, and ideology. While a fruitful topic in itself, this is not the proper place for exploring these latter issues. There are many other sources for such discussions (see, for example, Fox & Prilleltensky, 2009; Hepburn, 2002). However, in the present context the constructionist would first highlight the cultural and historical lodgment of the concept of efficient causation, and in the service of limiting its authority, explore its conceptual and ideological shortcomings. In effect, whether one places the locus of cause within the environment or within people's heads is not ultimately subject to empirical outcomes, but rather is grounded in cultural (or sub-cultural) interpretation (as Field and Hine line point out, even researchers demonstrating the "fundamental attribution error" rely on a cognitive explanation for their findings). However, it is worth considering some of pragmatic potentials favored by various explanatory orientations in psychology. In doing so, my hope is that we may come to appreciate the value of a thoroughgoing pluralism in explanatory orientation and the goals of professional activity.

The Pragmatics of Psychological Explanation

At the outset, it should be noted that all forms of explanation will favor certain forms of research methodology and questions of inquiry. To explain human action in terms of external causes, for example, will tend to favor experimentation and to frame research questions in terms of environmental impact. To favor an explanation in terms of epigenetic trajectories will favor longitudinal methods and a focus on similarities and variations of pattern across time. In terms of theory, methodology, and research focus, there is no intrinsic or transcendent merit in any particular orientation to explanation. We are not dealing here with THE adequacy of the science to an obdurate or universal subject matter, but with the pragmatic contribution of such inquiry to the culture more generally. Let us briefly consider, then, several pragmatic possibilities for psychological inquiry.

Predicting Behavior

The prediction of human action is typically viewed as a major goal of psychological research. And in major respects, explanations relying on efficient causation are ideally suited for this purpose. One scientist essentially relies on an event at *time A*, to predict a subsequent event at *time B* (with the absence of A forecasting the absence of B). This is an especially efficacious mode of proceeding when one has access to or control over events at time A, and thus the attractiveness of laboratory experimentation. However, if and when an A/B relationship has been established and event A is no longer present or accessible, then, as Field and Hineline point out, the scientist may posit a theoretical substitute for A in the form of an internal disposition. Yet, while obscuring issues of temporal process and lending itself to the reification of mental process, reliance on such explanations can have a certain degree of predictive utility. Yet, it is also important to point out that not all dispositional explanation is a substitute for the lack of knowledge or availability of the distal circumstances of significance. Echoing Aristotle's concept of "material cause," many psychologists trace the cause of behavior at time B to intrinsic tendencies within the person. Especially salient today are biological explanations based on a combination of evolutionary and neurological theory. Echoing McDougall's (1908) early claims for the instinctual basis of behavior, claims are now made for the hard-wiring of an enormous range of human activities. Putting aside the theoretical and methodological difficulties surrounding such claims (Gergen, in press), their explanatory form is similar to the dispositional studies described by Field and Hineline. They are based on observing a repetitive pattern of behavior and projecting its occurrence into the future. Echoing Field and Hineline, it is conceptual mischief to simply collapse these various forms of explanation together in the service of a "complete account." However, for predictive purposes, one might indeed draw from all repertoires at once. For example, an insurance actuarial using multivariate analysis to predict the likelihood of an auto accident might increase the amount of systematic variance by adding various dispositional variables (biological and otherwise) to situational variables, both immediate and distal.

Transforming Behavior

While prediction focuses on the potential reliabilities in action patterns, it offers less to the culture in terms of change practices. Thus, for example, therapists, organizational change agents, conflict reduction agents, and so on may draw from the explanatory repertoire just discussed, but not all are equal in terms of their offerings to practitioners of change. Dispositional and epigenetic theories may draw attention to cross-time stability in personality or developmental trajectories. However, they say little about how to treat those with dysfunctional dispositions or children who fail to develop properly. In this case, environmental-based explanations may be superior as they point to possible features of the context that could be altered in such a way that change takes place. At the same time, as

practitioners increasingly find, attempts to change people's behavior by systematically altering the conditions is fraught with difficulty. Therapists are taken to task for what appear to be impersonal manipulation; the top-down control orientation in management often alienates the organizational employee. In this case, it has been useful to abandon cause–effect theories of change in favor of what might be viewed as forms of *collaborative explanation*, that is, explanations that focus on the productive potential of participatory processes of dialogue (see, for example, Anderson & Gerhart, 2006; Hosking & McNamee, 2006).

Sustaining a Humane Society

Although not a widely shared goal in psychology, there are significant numbers who do not view the primary aim of inquiry to be either that of prediction or transformation. There are many who would rather agree with Martin, Sugarman, and Hickinbottom's (2010) view that explanations in psychology should “primarily be concerned with understanding action and experience for the purpose of bettering the lives of persons both individually and collectively” (p. v). This broader conception of the discipline invites consideration of a wide number of additional explanatory orientations. For example, humanist psychologists are deeply engaged in protecting and enhancing voluntarist explanations of human action. They strongly endorse a view of human beings as agents of their actions. Although voluntarist explanations are of limited value in terms of prediction—alienated as they are from the deterministic project—they are useful in sustaining practices supportive of the moral order. In stressing voluntary agency, they render support to societal practices (both legal and informal) of holding individuals responsible for their actions. Not only is such an explanatory orientation useful in this way, but as humanists would propose, causal theories are in fact detrimental to such traditions.

In concert with Field and Hineline's concerns with temporally extended explanation, special note should also be made of the current expansion of narrative explanation in psychology (see, for example, Sarbin, 1986; Clandinin, 2006). Here psychologists rely again on long-standing traditions in the culture in which understanding of a given action is achieved by placing this action within a narrative account of relevant events across time. Darwinian theory provides an excellent exemplar. Darwinian theory is essentially a narrative or story about how the human species emerged from a preceding array of events. The theory has little predictive value, but it does render the present world intelligible in terms of a selective account of its historical past. In the case of psychology, however, scholars largely (though not exclusively) employ narrative methods for humane purposes. The first-hand accounts of persons otherwise unknown or alien to mainstream society is a highly effective means of generating a compassionate sense of understanding. In reading or hearing the narrated lives of the obese, the schizophrenic, or the drug dealer, one comes to understand “from the inside.” Exposed to the stories of immigrants, victims of rape or torture, or child soldiers, one is moved to social action.

Achieving Social Justice

Again, while not a widely embraced goal of psychological inquiry, there are significant minorities in the field for whom a major goal of inquiry should be that of achieving social justice. Feminist psychologists, along with gay and lesbian, African American, and Hispanic American psychologists, among others, all share such goals. Although many explanatory tropes may be useful to such groups in formulating critique, explaining prejudice and oppression, and in deliberating on the challenge of social change, the theoretical departures are often broader and more inclusive than found in the major journals of psychology. For example, such theorists may employ implicit forms of systems theory, in which behavior is traced to the lodgment of people within interlocking and mutually supportive social systems (e.g., economic, governmental, religious). Or one may explain the biased outcomes of the justice system by tracing the discursive interchanges and tacit agreements functioning within various levels of the police force, the local government, and the courts.

Enriching Potentials

In an earlier work (Gergen, 1994) I proposed the concept of *generative theory*, that is, theory designed to challenge existing forms of intelligibility and to open alternative vistas for both research and practice. I cited such theorists as Marx, Freud, and Skinner as fostering such theories, ideas that in their time—and for good or ill—were highly generative in their outcomes. In this final section I wish to outline the contours of a form of explanation that could, with suitable expansion, play such a role. I also bring this orientation into focus because it raises interesting points of convergence with Field and Hiline's discussion of refiguring descriptions relating behavior, organism, and environment. They speak of "breaking out of the bipolar constraint that permeates interpretive language" (p. 48) and describe moves in this direction by Resnick, Oyama, Lewontin, and others—clearly generative in the present sense (I view the Field and Hiline proposal for a theory of multi-scaled processes in the same light).

In my recent book *Relational Being* (2009) I have advanced the thesis that virtually all intelligible behavior emerges from its placement within an ongoing relational process. Language is an obvious case in point. Consider, for example, that virtually all explanations in psychological science are based on a language of individual, independent entities (nouns and pronouns). Causal explanations depend on these bifurcations: we identify certain classes of entities or actions as *causes* and others as *effects* (with the class of causal entities or actions also capable of serving as effects, and vice versa). A clear separation between the classes is essential at any given juncture. Yet, it is also the case that the designation of a *cause* cannot be achieved in isolation of designating an *effect*. There are no free-standing causes; they only acquire their status as causes by virtue of one's specifying an effect. In this sense, cause and effect are co-constituting. The same holds for all recognizable actions. To achieve recognition as an action depends on

their relationship to other actions. For example, there is no aggression to be studied in itself, but only within a context of preceding events in which such activity—and by virtue of social convention—can be recognized as aggression, and in which at least some people (and this could include the researcher) respond to such activity as aggression. If an impassioned expression of ardor is uttered by a complete stranger, it is not ardor. If we try to help someone in need, and they retaliate with anger, we have not helped. The same dependency on relationship may be said for altruism, emotional behavior, remembering, mental illness, and so on across the spectrum of the intelligible forms of human activity. In this sense, we may say that all actions are co-constituted.

In the service of expanding on forms of explanation, consider the following: one walks by a park and spies a man throwing a ball into an open space before him. An aimless activity, one surmises, scarcely notable on a summer's day. Now, consider the same action when the ball is thrown to someone wearing a catcher's mitt. Suddenly the individual's action can be identified as "pitching." In effect, there is no pitching until there is catching, and no catching until there is pitching. One looks further to find that there is a man with a bat, bags that form a diamond shape, and other men holding mitts in the field, and so on. At this point we might justifiably conclude that this is a "baseball game." What we traditionally view as "independent" elements—the man with the bat, the bags, the men in the field—are not meaningfully independent. They are all mutually defining. A man standing alone in the field wearing a mitt would not be playing baseball, nor would the bags constitute a game. Alone they would be virtually without meaning. It is when we bring all these elements into a mutually defining relationship that we can speak about "playing baseball." Let us then speak of the baseball game as a *confluence*, a form of life in this case that is constituted by an array of mutually defining "entities."

Resonating with Field and Hiline's concern with temporally extended patterns, it is useful to view each of the "entities" as an arrested moment in what we may term a *vector*. The baseball player appears as a unit within the game, but he is effectively *in process*. He is not the same human who entered the playing field, nor will he be the same person who departs. His playing the game is ultimately a "moment" in the vector of what minimally can be viewed as a life-cycle transformation. Similarly, the batter holds an object that was once a growing tree, then cut and trimmed, and placed into service. At some later point it may be consumed by flames. It serves as a "bat" by virtue of the way it is co-constituted in the contemporary context of the game. In this way we can view the game as a whole as a historically contingent period in which all the mutually defining "entities" are—relatively speaking—momentarily arrested.

Here we have a preliminary sketch of an alternative means of explaining human action. The identification of any unit (entity, action) is always in terms of their co-constitution within a confluence. And, as all "components" of the confluence are vectoring across time, they shift their "thing-ness" along with the continuous transformation of the relational configuration. Here we replace causal explanation with a confluence-based orientation. Replacing the metaphors of

billiard balls and unmoved movers, our concerns as scientists shift to effective compositions. On this account, the professional role of the psychologist would be less that of a mechanic, and more that of a baker or a chemist. The concern now shifts from isolated entities to the particular combination of “elements” necessary to bring about a desired outcome. With a combination of flour, oil, eggs, milk, and a griddle, the baker brings about a pancake. By combining atoms the chemist generates molecules. If the contours of such a formulation were more fully articulated, a new range of possibilities would emerge for both research and practice.

Extending Field and Hineine’s concern with “tripolar relations,” the researcher’s attention would shift from singular entities or behaviors to the full array of co-constituting “elements” essential for bringing about various outcomes. For example, in the educational setting, concern would shift from the individual cognitive capacities of the learner to the array of inter-dependent relationships (teachers/students/families/community/economy/and so on) of which effective education is the outcome. Further, attention would be directed to the shifting character of the confluence, as teacher education practices, community composition, available jobs, and so on are changing over time. In my view, the chief pragmatic gain emerging from confluence theory would be in the domain of behavioral transformation. Multi-party collaboration bringing together insights and information on the necessary collations to bring about change would be invited. In my view, we locate here the potentials for an exciting and generative path to inquiry.

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