Compassion and the fundamental attribution error: A reply to Rolfe & Gardner

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SUMMARY

In this reply to Rolfe & Gardner's critical discussion of my editorial I do two things. First, I describe the theoretical context of the Darley & Batson study. This is the situationist perspective in social psychology, which overlaps with the idea of the cognitive unconscious. Second, I defend my account of the Good Samaritan study against Rolfe & Gardner's criticisms.

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Introduction

I am puzzled, though I suppose a little flattered, that Rolfe and Gardner (2014) should expend so much effort on a short opinion piece (Paley, 2013). Given that they thought it worth their time and trouble, it is perhaps less surprising that they have suppressed all the tropes which indicate that it *is* an opinion piece, and treat it as they would an extended discussion paper. There is, in fact, an extended discussion paper available (Paley, 2014a), so the debate will no doubt continue elsewhere.

Opinion pieces are primarily designed to provoke debate (this one, according to the Editor, has been moderately successful in that respect). They are not designed to present a full and systematic case for the author's view, or to catalogue every argument and every bit of evidence that might be relevant. Not in the space of 1200 words.

One might imagine that this would have given Rolfe and Gardner (hereafter R&G) reason to hesitate. For example, did they honestly think that I would base my considered view of the Mid Staffs affair on a single 'forty-year-old social psychology study'? Their paper certainly suggests as much, even though I explicitly drew attention to the extensive psychological literature on prosocial behaviour since Darley and Batson (1973), and cited several examples. R&G do make a throwaway reference to these examples towards the end of their paper, but only after they have created the impression that everything hangs on the Good Samaritan study.

In general, R&G are rather good at creating impressions. Here's another one. Referring again to the Darley & Batson paper, they add: …'which Paley described as "a classic"'. The effect, of course, is to imply that it is only me that thinks so, and they carefully omit my reference (in support of this claim) to the book by Dovidio et al. (2006). The many authors who have described the Good Samaritan study as a classic include, just from the last four years, Preston et al. (2010), Hertwig and Gigerenzer (2011), DeVoe and Pfeffer (2011), Bulbulia (2012), and Ybarra et al. (2013). In any case, the study has been cited 1031 times (Google Scholar); and according to Nosek et al. (2010) any paper cited 1000 times or more counts as a 'citation classic'. So I think the description is probably justified.

In the rest of this reply, I will do two things. First, I will describe the wider theoretical background to the Darley & Batson study. This is the *situationist* perspective in social psychology (Ross et al., 2010), which overlaps – for reasons I will explain – with the idea of the *cognitive unconscious* (Hassin et al., 2005). Second, I will defend my account of the Good Samaritan study against R&G's criticisms, and make another comment on their insinuative rhetorical strategy.

Part 1: The Situationist Tradition

According to Ross et al. (2010, p. 5), one of the principal features of social psychology since the 1960s is the situationist perspective. This is the idea that 'stable personal traits or dispositions matter less than lay observers assume, or at least that they can be outweighed by particular features or manipulations of the immediate situation at hand'. The evidence from a mountain of studies is that 'social situations can have more profound effects on the behavior and mental functioning of individuals… than we might believe possible' (Zimbardo, 2007, p. 211); that behaviour is 'extraordinarily

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sensitive to variation in circumstances' (Doris, 2002, p. 2); and that 'a wide range of human behavior… is under the control of immediate situational forces' (Trope and Fishback, 2005, p. 537). Situationist thinking can be traced back to Lewin's (1935) field theory, and it has become so prevalent that, according to Ross and Nisbett (2011), social psychology can almost be *defined* as the study of situational determinants of thought and action.

The tendency to exaggerate the extent to which behaviour is a consequence of character traits, values, or attitudes – to overlook situational constraints on action in favour of dispositional explanations – has been called the 'fundamental attribution error' (Ross and Nisbett, 2011) or, better, 'correspondence bias' (Gawronski, 2004). People are inclined to infer attitudes or dispositions from behaviour, even when that behaviour is transparently constrained by a particular situation. In one classic study (Jones and Harris, 1967), participants inferred that students who had written essays favourable to Castro had pro-Castro attitudes, despite being informed that the student assignment had been to write an essay defending him. (If R&G are wondering about the 'classic' label, this paper has 1282 Google Scholar citations.) Studies reporting similar results include: Gilbert and Jones (1986), Ross et al. (1977), Kunda and Nisbett (1986). For reviews, see Gilbert and Malone (1995) and Gawronski (2004).

There is a wide variety of things that count as 'situational determinants', and some of them are subtle to the point of being imperceptible. As an illustration of one type of situation, I will cite another 'classic' study (Note to R&G: 3210 Google Scholar citations, which in Nosek et al.'s terms makes it not just a 'classic' but a paper with 'transformational impact').

Bargh et al. (1996) gave participants a scrambled sentence test which included words related to either rudeness, politeness or neither (this is known as priming). The participants were asked to inform the experimenter when they had finished. However, when they tried to do so, they found the experimenter engaged in a staged conversation with a confederate. According to the study protocol, the conversation would continue for 10 min unless it was interrupted. Among those primed for rudeness, 67% interrupted; among those primed for politeness, 16% interrupted; among those primed for neither, 38% interrupted. In post-experiment debriefing, none of the participants showed any awareness of a possible link between the sentence test and their subsequent (non)interrupting-behaviour.

Priming is just one way in which the situational context can influence a person's thoughts, perceptions or behaviour in a way that she is not aware of. Others include: tasks which require a narrowing of the attention (Hyman et al., 2010; Mack and Rock, 2000); what look like irrelevant features of the situation (Levin and Isen, 1975), what look like irrelevant recent events (Grant and Gino, 2010), left/right sequencing (Nisbett and Wilson, 1977), arbitrary 'anchors' (Kahneman, 2012), ambient noise or fragrances (Baron and Bronfen, 1994); the behaviour of other people in the vicinity (Latané and Darley, 1970); social influence (Asch, 1955); subliminal activation (Dijksterhuis et al., 2005); and so on (Dovidio et al., 2006).

To summarise so far: behaviour is shaped by the situational context to a greater extent than we usually imagine, despite the tendency to assume that it is largely a consequence of people's dispositions (the fundamental attribution error, hereafter FAE). Specifically, the conditions under which people do, or do not, engage in helping behaviour are 'largely contextual; they have little to do with character traits, or compassion deficits' (Paley, 2013, p. 1452). This is my principal claim. It is not dependent on a single 'forty-year-old study', and I made a point of spelling it out in the NET editorial ('a series of contextual factors': not 'inattentional blindness').

However, R&G hurry past the 'series of contextual factors' (or 'what Paley calls a series of contextual factors'; as if this, like 'classic', is something I have made up), dismissing it as an attempt to 'explain away' the behaviour of some nurses. According to R&G, then, dispositions and conscious experiences explain. Situations only explain away.

Cognitive Mechanisms

The way in which an aspect of the situation influences someone's behaviour will depend on a particular psychological state or cognitive mechanism. For example, Baron and Thomley (1994) suggest that being in a good mood probably explains why people exposed to pleasant fragrances – from a bakery or coffee shop – are more likely to help than those in the vicinity of a dry goods store. The range of specifically cognitive mechanisms that mediate between situational contexts and behaviour is very wide, including inattentional blindness, cognitive dissonance, conformity and imitation; cognitive biases such as the availability heuristic, anchoring, illusory correlation, the just world hypothesis, social desirability, and the framing effect (Gilovich et al., 2002; Lerner, 1980); implicit attitudes, stereotypes, confabulation, the FAE, self-serving attributions (Carruthers, 2011; Kunda, 1999; Wittenbrink and Schwarz, 2007), and more.

I mention the first three on this list because they have particular relevance to the case in hand. As Paley (2014a) makes clear, I suspect that several interlocking situations and mechanisms were implicated in the Mid Staffs affair: inattentional blindness is just one of them. Since R&G focus on that exclusively, I will say more about it later. For now, I will make a few brief comments on cognitive dissonance and conformity.

There are several variations on the theme of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), but one of them is an inconsistency between a person's beliefs (or values) and their behaviour. A discrepancy of this kind can naturally be resolved by changing one's behaviour so that it comes into line with one's beliefs. For example, drawing attention to an inconsistency between the endorsement of safe sex and a history of past failures to behave accordingly tends to induce behaviour change (Stone et al., 1994). However, an alternative strategy is to modify one's beliefs in some way (Festinger and Carlsmith, 1959). This second option is more likely in certain circumstances — when, for example, negative behaviour conflicts with existing positive beliefs about oneself. The belief that I am a truthful person conflicts with the fact that I have just told another experimental subject that the task they are about to perform is fun when I have already rated it as tedious, and when the experimenter has only paid me $1 to give the other subject this misleading information. I can reduce the dissonance occasioned by this conflict if I amend my belief about the task, and subsequently rate it as interesting. In contrast, participants who were paid $20 to persuade the other subject did not amend their evaluation of the task (Festinger and Carlsmith, 1959). In Paley (2014a), I suggest that a comparable dynamic may be implicated in the Mid Staffs affair.

Conforming to group norms and patterns of conduct is another well-established mechanism of social cognition. Classic experiments by Sherif (1935) and Asch (1961, 3559 citations) show that people will even ignore the evidence of their senses rather than challenge what their peers say. For example, in the study by Asch, participants were prepared to agree with research confederates about a simple perceptual judgement, even when these confederates were transparently mistaken, and to do so 70% of the time. This is another version of cognitive dissonance. Some people recognised the discrepancy between their own judgement and the confederate group consensus but decided it was easier not to step out of line. Others assumed that the group must be right and that their own judgement must therefore be faulty. If this can happen with perceptual judgements, then presumably it can happen with ethical judgements (about nursing care, for example) as well. In Paley (2014a), I suggest that conformity could have been part of the interlocking mechanisms at Mid Staffs.

To summarise: despite the impression created by R&G, my view is *not* that inattentional blindness was solely responsible for the appalling care in Mid Staffs. Paley (2013) spells this out towards the end, and Paley (2014a) expands on it. My point is that many of the contributors to the post-Francis debate have succumbed to the fundamental attribution error; and that a concatenation of cognitive mechanisms and