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When do circumstances excuse? Moral prejudices and beliefs about the true self drive preferences for agency-minimizing explanations



Simon Cullen

Princeton University, United States

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ABSTRACT

When explaining human actions, people usually focus on a small subset of potential causes. What leads us to prefer certain explanations for valenced actions over others? The present studies indicate that our moral attitudes often predict our explanatory preferences far better than our beliefs about how causally sensitive actions are to features of the actor's environment. **Study 1** found that high-prejudice participants were much more likely to endorse non-agential explanations of an erotic same-sex encounter, such as that one of the men endured a stressful event earlier that day. **Study 2** manipulated participants' beliefs about how the agent's behavior depended on features of his environment, finding that such beliefs played no clear role in modeling participants' explanatory preferences. This result emerged both with low- and high-prejudice, US and Indian participants, suggesting that these findings probably reflect a species-typical feature of human psychology. **Study 3** found that moral attitudes also predicted explanations for a woman's decision to abort her pregnancy (3a) and a person's decision to convert to Islam (3b). **Study 4** found that luck in an action's etiology tends to undermine perceptions of blame more readily than perceptions of praise. Finally, **Study 5** found that when explaining support for a rival ideology, both Liberals and Conservatives downplay agential causes while emphasizing environmental ones. Taken together, these studies indicate that our explanatory preferences often reflect a powerful tendency to represent agents as possessing virtuous true selves. Consequently, situation-focused explanations often appear salient because people resist attributing negatively valenced actions to the true self. There is a person/situation distinction, but it is normative.

The concept of the *true self* plays a central role in folk psychology (Strohinger, Knobe, & Newman, 2017). Beliefs about the true self predict people's intuitions about personal identity (De Freitas, Cikara, Grossmann, & Schlegel, 2018; Prinz & Nichols, 2016, chap. 26; Strohinger & Nichols, 2014, 2015), what a person values (Newman, Bloom, & Knobe, 2013), whether a person is happy (Newman, De Freitas, & Knobe, 2014; Phillips, Misenerheimer, & Knobe, 2011), weak-willed (Newman et al., 2014), morally responsible (Newman et al., 2014), and leading a meaningful life (Schlegel, Hicks, Arndt, & King, 2009; Schlegel, Hicks, King, & Arndt, 2011). Moreover, beliefs about the true self appear to moderate intergroup bias (De Freitas & Cikara, 2018) and decision satisfaction (Kim, Christy, Hicks, & Schlegel, 2017). Collectively, these studies reveal a powerful tendency for people to attribute characteristics they perceive as virtuous to the true self; immoral characteristics tend to be represented as more superficial aspects of the self (De Freitas, Cikara, Grossmann, & Schlegel, 2017; De Freitas, Tobia, Newman, & Knobe, 2016). For example, when participants consider an evangelical Christian man who believes homosexuality to be immoral while also finding himself sexually attracted to men,

prejudiced participants are less likely to represent the agent's sexual orientation as part of his true self (Newman et al., 2013).

This paper explores the role that beliefs about the true self play in what may seem an unrelated area of psychology—the study of the cognitive processes that incline people to explain behavior in more or less situational terms. The distinction is a familiar one. Both common-sense and scientific psychology distinguish actions that arise from within an agent from those that are attributable to the circumstances in which the agent acts (e.g., Frankfurt, 1971; Heider, 1983/1958; Jones & Davis, 1965; Kelley, 1973; Smith, 2005; Watson, 1996). To help make the distinction more concrete, consider Darley and Batson's classic (1973) finding: seminary students could be made six times less likely to help an apparently injured person simply by being placed in circumstances where they felt they had to hurry to give a sermon. When we consider one of the hurried seminarians rushing off to give his sermon, ignoring the injured man, we tend to see his callousness as caused by his randomization into the Hurried experimental condition (Darley & Batson, 1973). To borrow a common metaphor, the experimental manipulation may seem to 'externally determine' the hurried seminarians' antisocial behavior (Batson, Darley, & Coke, 1978).

E-mail address: scullen@princeton.edu.

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Intuitions like this one appear to be widely shared (Kunda & Nisbett, 1986; Ross, 1977); however, the cognitive processes that underlie such intuitions remain unclear (Sabini, Siepmann, & Stein, 2001). How do people classify actions along the ‘person/situation’ dichotomy? A major theoretical tradition in social psychology holds that people locate the causes of actions and events in much the same ‘commonsense’ way that scientists do—namely, by assessing whether they occur only in the presence of an external pressure, or whether they also occur in the absence of that pressure (Kelley, 1967, 1973). Applied to our previous example, such accounts hold that we judge the seminarian’s callous behavior to result from ‘the situation’ because we believe he would have acted benevolently in sufficiently many other sufficiently similar circumstances (Hewstone & Jaspars, 1987; for philosophical insights see, e.g., Lewis, 1986; Woodward, 2006).

Theorists have developed this basic picture in many ways, but they have tended to agree that laypeople, like scientists, aim to rely on causal-statistical (‘covariation’) information when explaining morally valenced human actions. However, recent research on the concept of the true self suggests that people may rely on strikingly unscientific considerations for this purpose. In particular, the degree to which an action appears to arise from features of the agent’s circumstances may depend on whether the action appears to express the agent’s true self. If we represent agents as fundamentally virtuous, our *explanatory preferences*—i.e., whether we tend to emphasize more agent- or more situation-focused factors when explaining an action—may in turn depend on our moral attitudes towards the action. That is, we may prefer situation-focused explanations to the extent that we perceive a mismatch in the moral valences of the agent’s action and true self.

To illustrate this idea, consider again one of the hurried seminar-ians. On the hypothesis to be explored here—the *mismatch hypothesis*—people tend to explain his callousness in terms of the experimental condition into which he was randomized, to the extent that they believe (a) his action was immoral, and (b) his true self is virtuous. On this view, our beliefs about how valenced actions covary with features of the situation should have a small impact on our explanatory preferences relative to the impact of our beliefs about whether actions are *essence-disclosing*. (Psychologists often use ‘self-disclosing’ to refer to any behavior that expresses something about an agent. In philosophical action theory, the term is used more narrowly to refer only to actions that express something about an agent’s *true self*. To avoid confusion, this paper uses the unfamiliar term ‘essence-disclosing’ in this narrower, action-theoretic sense.)

While the mismatch hypothesis has not been explicitly discussed or explored in previous research, several independent lines of evidence suggest that it warrants investigation. Jones and Nisbett (1972) famously hypothesized that we prefer to explain *our own* actions in terms of features of the situations in which we act, while we prefer to attribute *other agents’* actions to their ‘internal’ dispositions. The mismatch hypothesis predicts this asymmetry in the case of immoral behaviors. For, researchers have consistently found that we tend to regard ourselves as morally better than average (Epley & Dunning, 2000; Klein & Epley, 2016), which suggests that the valence of any given *immoral* behavior is somewhat more likely to conflict with our assessments of our own true selves than with our assessments of other agents’ true selves. Thus, the mismatch hypothesis predicts the traditional actor-observer asymmetry when the target action is immoral. However, parallel reasoning suggests that the mismatch hypothesis predicts the opposite asymmetry for virtuous behavior—since good actions are *less* likely to conflict with our assessments of our own true selves than with our assessments of other actors’. Consistent with this prediction, an authoritative meta-analysis found no evidence for a morally neutral actor-observer asymmetry (Malle, 2006). Rather, the classic asymmetry appeared in studies where participants explained negative events, but reversed in studies where they explained positive events, as the mismatch hypothesis predicts.

The same reasoning appears to apply to intergroup explanatory preferences. If in-group members tend to think of themselves as having

morally better true selves than out-group members, the mismatch hypothesis predicts that they will be more likely, compared to base rates, to produce agent-focused explanations for their own members’ praiseworthy acts and situation-focused explanations for their blameworthy acts. Members of the out-group will get the opposite treatment. Social psychologists have coined the phrase ‘ultimate attribution error’ to describe this very patterning (Pettigrew, 1979). Taylor and Jaggi (1974) first investigated intergroup attribution in southern India, against the backdrop of Hindu-Muslim conflict. They asked Hindu participants to imagine themselves in various situations with either a Hindu or a Muslim interlocutor. In all scenarios, Hindus were more likely to give agent-focused explanations for the virtuous behavior of another Hindu agent. The study was replicated in Malaysia with Malay and Chinese subjects (Hewstone & Ward, 1985). If the tendency of in-group members to regard themselves as, on average, morally better than out-group members (Ellemers, Pagliaro, Barreto, & Leach, 2008; Leach, Ellemers, & Barreto, 2007; Levine & Campbell, 1972; although, cf., De Freitas & Cikara, 2018) extends to assessments of their *true selves*, the mismatch hypothesis appears to predict the patterning of intergroup explanatory preferences. (Note that the model does not assume all agents are represented as maximally or equally virtuous.)

The present studies

The patterning of laypeople’s explanatory preferences suggests that the mismatch hypothesis is a promising initial account of the conditions that incline people to emphasize more agent- or situation-focused explanations. However, previous research has not investigated the influence of people’s beliefs about the true self on their explanatory preferences. The present studies begin exploring this question.

Studies 1–3 found that participants’ moral attitudes towards an action predict their explanatory preferences far better than their beliefs about how causally sensitive the action is to features of the agent’s circumstances. This is true both for Western (North American) and non-Western (Indian) participants. Studies 4 and 5 supported the hypothesis that these surprising patterns reflect a more general feature of folk psychology identified in recent research, namely, a bias to represent agents as possessing morally virtuous true selves. The results indicate that people often prefer situation-focused explanations because they resist attributing negatively valenced actions to the true self. Study 4 tested this hypothesis by examining the conditions under which moral luck undermines the perception that an agent is fully responsible for his actions. Study 5 tested the hypothesis in the context of partisans’ explanations of in-group and out-group political identities.

1. Study 1: Explaining gay sex

Consider the following vignette, adapted from Newman et al. (2013):

Mark was born into a Christian family that eventually deteriorated, leading his parents to divorce. After being pushed out of home early, Mark met a new group of friends, some of whom were in same-sex relationships. Mark believed that homosexuality is morally wrong, and he encouraged his new friends to resist their attractions to people of the same sex. However, Mark himself was attracted to other men. He openly acknowledged this to his friends and discussed it as part of his own personal struggle. Mark believed that it was his duty to resist his feelings for other men, and he vowed to live a morally decent life the only way he could—by remaining celibate. But Mark sometimes failed to live up to his values. For example, one day, after a bad fight with his father, Mark went to see his friend Bill. They shared a bottle of wine and talked for hours. That night, Mark hit on Bill and they ended up having sex.

Many explanations for the agent’s action are possible. On the one hand, his encounter with Bill plausibly depended to some degree on

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