Rerum Cognoscere Causas

to Know the Causes of Things

When trying to understand or attribute the reasons or causes for the negative behaviour of others, humans often focus on the personality or dispositional characteristics of the individual engaging in the negative behaviour while neglecting the more foundational source causes for that behaviour (Hewstone, 1990). We often tend to disregard the prominent role of these more root factors in influencing not only the negative behaviour but also the personality or dispositional characteristics of that individual (Ross, 1977; Ross, Amabile, & Steinmetz, 1977). For instance, if we learn about an individual committing a crime such as theft or assault, we may be more likely to assign causal blame to an internal characteristic, such as selfishness or aggressiveness, while neglecting the role of foundational causes, such as a difficult childhood or a mental disorder. Placing most or all of the causal blame on the individual, while ignoring the foundational causes, may result in certain detrimental consequences for society, such as an increase in excessive types of social conflict and a waste of efforts and resources applied toward temporary solutions (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Dripps, 2003; Haney & Zimbardo, 2009; Irvine, 2014; Pettigrew, 1979). Certain cognitive training techniques have been shown to reduce the degree to which individuals neglect the more foundational source causes for negative behaviour (Hooper, Erdogan, Keen, Lawton, & McHugh, 2015; Stalder, 2012).

Note: For possible explanations for why we neglect foundational causes see Appendix A

Negative Consequences

This section will examine multiple examples of interpersonal and intergroup conflict that are likely exacerbated by superficial attributions. Additionally, this section will also discuss how neglecting the more foundationally-focused attributions may negatively influence multiple other highly impactful areas of society such as organizational policy and cultural norms and representations.

Interpersonal Conflict

Within society, individuals may observe what they consider to be negative behaviour from other individuals multiple times a day. From the numerous interactions between acquaintances such as family or co-workers, to random social interactions with pedestrians, merchants, or the media, individuals may perceive self-centred, inappropriate, or just plain harmful behaviour from a variety of these interactions. This perceived negative behaviour can range from mild to severe, unintentional to blatant, and trivial to consequential. However,

whatever the type of negative behaviour, observers may still attribute causal blame to the individual while neglecting the more foundational source explanations (Irvine, 2014). Therefore, this single attributional tendency has the potential to increase unnecessary tension and conflict in just about every area of daily social life. Multiple studies have examined a wide variety of interpersonal relationships and demonstrated how attributions, which neglect the more foundational source explanations, usually increase tension and conflict instead of resolving it.

Within the workplace environment, Aquino, Tripp, and Bies (2001) examined causal blame for offensive behaviour with a sample of 141 government employees. The researchers discovered that when an employee placed personal blame on the co-worker for the offensive behaviour, the employee was more likely to seek revenge and less likely to seek reconciliation. Barlett and Anderson (2011) studied partners working together on projects. The researchers found that when one of the co-workers provoked the partner, feelings of aggression and a desire to retaliate from the partner could be reduced if the partner was encouraged to consider the more foundational causes of the provoking behaviour. The researchers claimed that "giving people mitigating information and teaching people to use mitigating information can reduce aggression and vengeance... changing the perception of a provocation will likely reduce vengeance and subsequent aggressive retaliations that are typically more excessive than the original transgression" (Barlett & Anderson, 2011, p. 1571).

Bradbury and Fincham (1990) reviewed the research regarding attributions in marital relationships and concluded that the higher degree for which an individual attributes selfishness as the cause of the behaviour of their spouse, the higher degree of distress in the relationship. They also make the important claim that the quality of attributions has a direct impact on marriage satisfaction and not the other way around: "Data from experimental, clinical outcome, and longitudinal studies extend the correlational findings and suggest that attributions influence marital satisfaction rather than vice versa" (Bradbury and Fincham, 1990, p. 29). Takaku (2006) found that in road-rage incidents, individuals who attributed more blame to the other driver for the same behaviour experienced more negative emotions, were more likely to hope that the driver would experience bad fortune, and were less likely to forgive the other driver.

Kelsey, Kearney, Plax, Allen, and Ritter (2004) used qualitative and quantitative methods to study the attributions of 619 university students concerning the perceived misbehaviour of their teachers. The researchers discovered that the students overwhelmingly assigned the cause of the perceived misbehaviour to personality or dispositional characteristics of the teacher regardless of the overall communication skills of the teacher. The student usually

neglected situational factors, including influences from the students themselves, which potentially influenced the behaviour of the teacher. McPherson and Young (2004) studied the attributions of 301 university students, and discovered that even when the students acknowledged the role of their behaviour in triggering a display of anger from a teacher, the students would still assign primary causal blame to the teacher. LaBelle and Martin (2014) studied 244 university students and found that students who attributed more causal blame to a teacher for a disagreement were more prone to partake in vengeful, rhetorical, and expressive dissent against the teacher.

Ohbuchi et al. (2004) examined norm violations, attributional blame, and anger within two Eastern cultures (Hong Kong and Japan) and two Western cultures (Germany and the United States). The researchers discovered that perceived interpersonal and societal level norm violations amplified both blame and feelings of anger in all cultures. The researchers also identified the compounding negative reinforcing process between the three variables measured: "The more one blames another for harm, the greater are the angry feelings. However, angry feelings can also amplify attributions of blame" (Ohbuchi et al., 2004, p. 1589). In a similar study, Kam and Bond (2009) confirmed the association between perceived norm violations, attributions of blame, and feelings of anger in Eastern (Hong Kong) and Western (the United States) cultures. The researchers also discovered that attributions of blame for norm violations can occur even when the victim feels the violation was unintentional (Kam & Bond, 2009).

Intergroup Conflict

Even in modern times, intergroup conflict continues to be a prevalent and costly phenomenon. According to Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research, there were 374 intergroup conflicts worldwide in 2018 (HIIK, 2019). In their World Humanitarian Data and Trends 2018, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs claimed:

> The human cost of conflict continued to increase in 2017, with a record
> number of people forcibly displaced by conflict or violence: 68.5 million
> people, compared to 65.6 million people in 2016. The economic cost of
> conflict and violence also increased to $14.8 trillion or 12.4 per cent of global
> GDP. (OCHA, 2019)

OCHA also discussed, in their Global Humanitarian Overview 2018, the probability that intergroup conflict is responsible for even more suffering than natural disasters (OCHA, 2018). Intergroup attributional processes may be a significant factor contributing to the persistent,

prevalent, and destructive reality of intergroup conflicts worldwide. A destructive feedback-loop, involving intergroup attributions, may naturally occur in the majority of instances of intergroup conflict.

Within this feedback-loop, miscommunication and misinformation, from the intergroup divide, leads to misperceptions concerning the behaviour of the out-group. Causal blame for perceived out-group negative behaviour becomes directly attributed to the out-group, while the more foundational source cause for the behaviour is neglected. These disproportionate attributions further the intergroup divide which leads back to more miscommunication and misinformation. Fisher (1989) stated:

> In perceiving the world, there is a degree of selectivity and distortion. We create a filtering process to deal with the confusing complexity...In order to minimize misperception, the decision maker should attempt to examine the world through a variety of possible perspectives. In particular, an attempt to see the world the way the adversary sees it would help interpret the other's behavior...these types of perceptual and cognitive biases not only limit the effectiveness of decision making, but tend to fuel the escalation of conflict. (p. 150-151)

Causal attributions seem to play a core role in this misperception feedback loop which may harden the intergroup divide.

Pettigrew (1979) reviewed the literature and research concerning intergroup attributions and concluded that the correspondence bias and fundamental attribution error were likely enhanced when the perceived negative behaviour was committed by an out-group member. In other words, an observer would be more likely to attribute causal blame to personality characteristics of an individual engaging in perceived negative behaviour, while neglecting external-situational explanations, the more the observer considers the individual to be an out-group member. Pettigrew labelled this manifestation the ultimate attribution error and concluded that the tendency is enhanced when the intergroup memberships are more salient, the intergroup stereotypes are more negative, and the intergroup conflict is more intense and has a longer history (Pettigrew, 1979). A decade later, Hewstone (1990) reviewed 19 subsequent relevant studies and confirmed Pettigrew's conclusions as well as adding that the ultimate attribution error may reinforce negative intergroup stereotypes and restrict efforts to reduce intergroup conflict.

Subsequent studies have yielded additional insight into the dynamics of the ultimate attribution error and this mechanism in which the intergroup divide leads to a greater neglect of foundational attributions, which in turn hardens the divide as the out-group is increasingly

blamed for the tension and conflict. Doosje and Branscombe (2003) found that the more that individuals identify with their country, the more likely they are to place causal blame directly on an out-group country for perceived negative behaviour while neglecting the more foundational source explanations. Furthermore, in line with the explanation that the ultimate attribution error is a heuristic mental shortcut, the researchers found that the more that individuals identify with their country, the more likely they are to stereotype the out-group as homogenous. Stereotyping the out-group as homogenous may make it easier to attribute blame for the intergroup tension and conflict, or any other perceived negative behaviour, directly to any out-group member.

Along a similar line, Ma and Karasawa (2006) found that the less inclusive a group is, the more likely a group member is to place causal blame for negative behaviour directly to an out-group member. Licata, Klein, Saade, Azzi, and Branscombe (2012) confirmed the presence of the ultimate attribution error with regards to religious group identification. The stronger an individual identified with their religion, the more likely they were to blame the out-group for the conflict. Bilali, Tropp, Dasgupta, and Opotow (2012) confirmed the presence of the ultimate attribution error in violent intergroup conflict. In addition to a positive correlation between group identity and out-group blame, the researchers discovered an increase in actual feelings of harm from the out-group. Rozmann and Walsh (2018) discovered that a stronger identification with a perceived group victim was associated not only with out-group blame attributions, but also with a greater approval for out-group punishment.

Causal attributions, which neglect the foundational source explanations of present-day perceived negative out-group behaviour, may substantially increase tension and conflict while hardening the intergroup divide. However, shared in-group memories or representations of past out-group perceived negative behaviour may generate equally detrimental blame attributions which further exacerbate present-day intergroup conflict. Hunter, Stringer, and Watson (1991) discovered that for religious groups with a past of intense conflict, the in-group was much more likely to blame the exact same actions to inherent characteristics when the behaviour was conducted by out-group members. Schori-Eyal, Klar, and Ben-Ami (2017) found that the stronger the shared representation of victimhood for past conflict, the more likely a group will attribute malice toward ambiguous out-group behaviour. Imhoff et al. (2017) discovered that the more that descendants of violent conflict placed causal blame on the original out-group, the worse the in-group attitudes were toward out-group descendants.

Additional Negative Consequences

So far, examples have been provided of ways in which the tendency to neglect the more foundational source causes of negative behaviour likely contribute to countless instances of interpersonal and intergroup social conflict; however, the examples previously discussed are likely only a fraction of the ways in which blame attributions can contribute to negative societal consequences. These superficial attributions can significantly influence other highly impactful areas of society such as economics (Fiore & Lussier, 2015), environmental efforts (Johnson & Levin, 2009), healthcare (Parker & Lawton, 2003) government and private organisational practice to include domestic (Dripps, 2013) and foreign policy (Stein, 2008), as well as numerous cultural norms and representations such as with religion (Li et al., 2012). Furthermore, neglect of the more foundationally-focused attributions often simultaneously influences a combination of both civil policy and cultural norms or representations resulting in extensive and persistent negative societal consequences (Dripps, 2003).

An example of how superficial attributions can simultaneously influence societal representations and government policy involves the representation of retributive justice and the legislative, judicial, and executive branches of the American legal system. Retributive justice, which is popular in many countries such as the United States, is a type of criminal justice which places a strong importance on punishment (Darley & Pittman, 2003). Dripps (2003) uses the term 'fundamental retribution error' when discussing the prevalent impact of the correspondence bias and fundamental attribution error on the American legal system. The neglect of the more foundational source explanations for negative behaviour likely contributes to a strong emphasis on personal blame and punishment. The neglect of mitigating circumstances can influence the formation, execution, and retribution of law and order. Implications in the United States are demonstrated by such consequences as mass incarceration, punishing the mentally ill, and deplorable prison conditions to name a few (Haney & Zimbardo, 2009; Hermann, 2017; Tyler, 2006).

Way Ahead

Different cognitive training techniques have proven effective at reducing the degree to which observers attribute causal blame to individual personality characteristics for negative behaviour while neglecting the more foundational source causes.

Tendency Awareness Technique

The first cognitive training technique is the strategy of attempting to reduce the degree to which a tendency is displayed by simply educating individuals about the existence of that

tendency. Stalder (2012) demonstrated how educating individuals about the existence of the fundamental attribution error reduced not only the degree to which the tendency was committed but also negative emotions typically accompanied with the tendency. The cognitive training technique also proved effective at reducing similar cognitive tendencies. Pronin and Kugler (2007) showed the effectiveness of the technique at reducing the blind spot bias (tendency to believe you are less vulnerable to personal bias compared to others). Nasie, Bar-Tal, Pliskin, Nahhas, and Halperin (2014) were also able to use the technique to reduce naïve realism (tendency to believe your own perception of reality is objective).

Perspective Taking Technique

The second cognitive training technique is the strategy of perspective taking or attempting to visualise something from the point of view of another. When trying to determine the reasons for perceived negative behaviour of others, it may prove helpful to see things from the viewpoint of the other. Hooper et al. (2015) claim to have been able to reduce the degree to which participants committed the fundamental attribution error by administering a perspective taking training exercise.

Situational Attribution Technique

The third cognitive training technique naturally follows perspective training. The situational attribution technique consists of mentally attempting to visualise any possible situational factors that may be influencing the behaviour of another individual. Stewart, Latu, Kawakami, and Myers (2010) developed an application method using this technique and named it the Situational Attribution Training Technique (SATT). The researchers claim that SATT was successful at reducing the degree to which observers focused on stereotypical personality traits.

Dissonance Attribution Technique

The fourth cognitive training technique consists of the strategy of encouraging observers to remember a time when they engaged in a similar negative behaviour as the perceived wrongdoer. Takaku (2001) discovered that in certain conflict situations, perspective taking alone may not be enough to adequately correct unhealthy causal attributions. It was believed that the cognitive dissonance and negative emotions generated from reflecting on your own mistakes may initiate a mental mechanism focused on conceptualising more foundational source causes for that behaviour. Takaku (2001) found that participants who received dissonance-attribution training demonstrated healthier attributions and emotions than participants who received perspective taking training. Takaku, Weiner, and Ohbuchi (2001)

found that dissonance-attribution training was effective in both a Western and Eastern culture. Takaku (2006) demonstrated the effectiveness of dissonance-attribution training in a frustration inducing incident when participants who received the training generated healthier attributions, less negative emotions, and were more likely to forgive the wrongdoer.

Foundational Attribution Technique

The fifth and final cognitive training technique does not appear to have been tested in previous research. This new technique revolves around a potential disconnect in the attribution research. Much of the research seems to discourage either the correspondence bias (automatically assuming innate personality characteristics similar to the behaviour) or the fundamental attribution error (neglecting the external-situational causes for negative behaviour). However, the correspondence bias may not always be inaccurate, and some internally-focused attributions may be considered healthy. For example, an individual may possess a mental disorder which causes the individual to often display a personality characteristic and subsequent behavioural manifestation, such as anger. It would not be inaccurate to assume the behaviour is connected to the personality characteristic; however, a more foundational and healthier attribution would be to place causal blame on the mental disorder. This attribution is still internally-focused; however, it removes causal blame from the individual. Therefore, the technique emphasises that even if a negative behaviour is directly related to a personality characteristic, the observer should attempt to visualise the more foundational causes (internal or external) for that characteristic or behaviour.

Appendix A
Why Do We Neglect Foundational Causes?

There are different explanations for why we focus on personality characteristics while neglecting foundational source causes for the negative behaviour of others. This section will discuss four possible explanations: the error management theory (EMT), the hypersensitive agency detection device (HADD), a heuristic mental shortcut, and the illusory-causation phenomenon.

Error Management Theory (EMT)

The first potential explanation discussed in this section comes from the error management theory (EMT). EMT is centred on the idea that certain tendencies were automatically passed down from past generations due to their ability to avoid detrimental errors in the past environment (Haselton & Buss, 2000; Haselton & Nettle, 2006). With respect to

attribution, EMT would apply the idea that possessing the tendency to assign innate personality characteristics to an individual, simply because of the behaviour of that individual, may provide the observer with an increased probability of avoiding a detrimental error. For example, if an individual observed another individual engaging in ambiguous or potentially aggressive behaviour, the observer may be able to avoid the more detrimental mistake of interacting with a threat by attributing the aggressive behaviour to a persistent or permanent aggressive disposition of the individual, even at the risk of making the less detrimental mistake of avoiding a potential friend. Observers who were more likely to provide the benefit of the doubt may have been more likely to fall victim to threats, such as deception from an adversary.

Hypersensitive Agency Detection Device (HADD)

The tendency to assign innate personality characteristics to an individual simply because of an observed behaviour has been termed the correspondence bias (Gilbert & Malone, 1995). When examined through the lens of EMT, we may possess a tendency to commit the correspondence bias because doing so may have provided and adaptive survival advantage in our past. EMT may also explain another tendency which could influence our drive to assign causal blame for negative behaviour to an individual instead of the more foundational source causes. We may sometimes have the tendency to over attribute agency or intentional control to changes in our environment (Haselton & Nettle, 2006). This tendency has been named the hypersensitive agency detection device (HADD; Barrett, 2000). Applying EMT to HADD would suggest that, in our evolutionary past, possessing the tendency to attribute agency to changes in the environment would have provided the adaptive advantage of a higher probability of avoiding the mistake of ignoring a potential threat (Gray & Wegner, 2010). However, automatically detecting agency or intent in any observed human behaviour may also naturally encourage attributes which assign causal blame to the individual instead of the more foundational sources influences.

Heuristic Mental Shortcut

Another explanation for why we sometimes focus on personality characteristics while neglecting the more foundational source causes of negative behaviour is similar to the explanation provided by EMT in that it may serve the purpose of a shortcut, but not necessarily for the purpose of avoiding a detrimental error. Whether implicitly or explicitly, it may be a sort of heuristic mental shortcut when humans focus primarily on personality characteristics (Heider, 1944; 1958). Heider (1958) stated, "As a dispositional property, a personality characteristic enables one to grasp an unlimited variety of behavioural manifestations by a

single concept. A description of a manifold of interpersonal relations becomes far more systematically simple by reference to such enduring characteristics" (p. 30). In other words, attributing causal blame for a negative behaviour to a personality characteristic may help an observer quickly obtain a better understanding of the uniqueness of that behaviour and potentially predict other behaviours typically accompanied with the respective personality characteristic. Committing the correspondence bias is similar to the heuristic of stereotyping. Unfortunately, also similar to stereotyping, the correspondence bias usually contains mild to severe inaccuracies which can lead to negative societal consequences as discussed later (Hewstone, 1990; Pettigrew, 1979).

Illusory-Causation Phenomenon

A final popular explanation for why we may neglect the more foundationally-focused attributions for perceived-offensive behaviour is the illusory-causation phenomenon (Lassiter, Geers, Munhall, Ploutz-Snyder, & Breitenbecher, 2002; Taylor & Fiske, 1975). This explanation focuses on the fast-pace real-world environment in which many attributions are actually formed. The illusory-causation phenomenon would suggest that the more foundational source explanations, for the negative behaviour of others, are sometimes neglected because they often require more time or knowledge in order to mentally visualise those foundational influences. Indeed, it may be the case that due to a lack of experience, younger adults tend to neglect external situational attributions more so than middle-age adults (Follett & Hess, 2002). The tendency to neglect external-situational explanations for the negative behaviour of others is known as the fundamental attribution error (Ross, 1977; Ross, Amabile, & Steinmetz, 1977). Whether explained by the EMT, HADD, a heuristic, or the illusory-causation phenomenon, the next section of this paper will argue that the societal negative consequences that often result from neglecting the more foundational source causes of negative behaviour far outweigh any individual advantages suggested by these possible explanations.

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