

BOOK REVIEWS

EXPLAINING BEHAVIOR: ATTRIBUTIONS MEET FOLK THEORIES TO MAKE SOCIAL MEANING

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How the Mind Explains Behavior: Folk Explanations, Meaning, and Social Interaction, by Bertram F. Malle, 2004. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Making meaning is a bit like breathing; we rarely recognize the importance of this necessary, lifelong process that is so integral to our survival. It is what we do. We explain things in order to understand them and our experience of them—the processes and the products involved represent the scope of attribution theory, a central element in social psychology. Explanations have a certain power, however. They can reveal so-called “folk theories” of mind and behavior, the conceptual frameworks that direct our thinking about actions and the workings of the mind. Consider this example: In the opening of the third chapter of this scholarly work, Malle (p. 63, italics in original) reports reading the following message on the Internet:

A woman was asked, “*Why did you stay with your abusive husband?*” She asked in return: “Why does everyone ask that? Why don’t they ask, *Why did he do that?*”

Malle, who teaches at the University of Oregon, comments that:

This exchange harbors many insights. One is that the woman, in her retort, did not just want an explanation for why everyone asks the one question rather than the other; she also *criticized* the act of asking one question rather than the other. In general, explanations (i.e., answers to why questions) have multiple functions and multiple motives . . . (italics in original).

Attributions in daily life are inescapable, and so is attribution theory for most researchers who work in the discipline of social psychology. Malle's book marries traditional knowledge of attribution theory, the study of how people explain cause and effect in social contexts (e.g., Heider, 1958; Jones et al., 1972), with contemporary theory and empirical findings from social cognition, notably folk theories of mind. For Malle, the folk theory of mind is a conceptual framework for explaining intentional action by considering how an observer perceives some action performed by an agent. By classifying the action, an observer can then begin to search for other supporting information which will help disclose the actual intention of the agent. Malle distinguishes among four event categories for actions (observable and intentional), behaviors (observable and unintentional), thoughts (unobservable and intentional) and experiences (unobservable and unintentional).

The book's message begins simply: We create explanations when confronted with unusual or unexpected behaviors. A close friend snubs another friend at some social gathering. The "snubbed" party explains away the behavior by claiming the offense was due to fatigue and the noisy setting. Such explanations are both products of the mind and verbal "actions" that exist socially, out in the world, for regulating exchanges among people (see also, Malle & Hodges, 2005). For instance, explaining away being snubbed by a confidant is a way for a perceiver to save face ("She didn't mean to be rude to me—she was tired and, anyway, the party was *so* loud"). The perceiver's explanation manages the meaning of the social interaction for observers, those who hear about the social faux pas and, equally importantly, for the perceiver him or herself.

Although Malle harbors no illusions that traditional attribution theory will be unseated, his goal is not immodest. He argues that traditional accounts are fine for exploring unintended action and outcomes. Established theory falls short, however, when accounting for intentional behavior. In contrast, the folk theory of mind posits that living things (chiefly, of course, human beings) are capable of purposeful action, which result from their personal desires and beliefs. As noted earlier, folk theory also allows for behavior classification and the ability of the perceiver to make inferences concerning information that may be absent.

The nine chapters in this book are densely written. Chapter one reviews the history of attribution theory, highlighting the work of Heider (1958), Jones and Davis (1965), Kelley (1967), and the innovations of more recent theorists (see, for example, Gilbert, 1998). The folk theory of mind and behavior is the focus of the second chapter. Finding meaning,

managing social interaction, and Malle's outline of how and why we explain behavior constitute the third chapter. Chapters 4 and 5 describe a theory of behavioral explanation. Chapter 6 discusses behavioral explanations embedded in language and communication (a topic some social psychologists shy away from). Explanations of self and other (Chapter 7) and individuals and groups (Chapter 8) round out the text. The last chapter serves as summary and prospect for future work.

After finishing this book, one of us remembered a relevant experience from long ago. When walking out of a colloquium wherein the speaker addressed technical issues in attribution theory, an incredulous perceptual psychologist wondered aloud, "Social psychologists actually study that stuff?" Malle's carefully researched and reasoned book attests that the answer is an affirmative one; there is much more to understanding social understanding than lay people or some peer psychologists realize.

Thus, *How the Mind Explains Behavior* is not for the casual reader. Although Malle reviews the social and cognitive literatures thoroughly, familiarity with both is desirable, which means that this book is best suited to graduate and professional audiences already steeped in the issues. Philosophers who study cognitive science and related psychological phenomena are apt to learn a few things from Malle's work, as well.

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