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from G. R. Semin

Strictures upon strictures

Instead of being a critique of my earlier paper (Semin, 1980) Harvey’s (1981) rejoinder would seem to be part of the very dialogue that he argues my analysis failed to promote. He is right in claiming that my paper fails to ‘instruct attribution theorists’, as his comment clearly demonstrates, and it is in this invitational sense that it is welcome because it allows some hopefully instructive communication. However, before turning to substantive issues, let me briefly note and rectify a few casual inaccuracies. The term ‘current hegemony’ does not mean ‘monolithic theory’ but that which would be revealed by, for example, a simple frequency count of the words with the root ‘attribution’ appearing in current social psychology journal titles. Clearly, the imputations made by Harvey, i.e. that I present attribution theory either as ‘developed in a provincial way’ or as a ‘faddish establishment-type orientation’ (which he apparently regards as compatible constructs) are somewhat inappropriate. However, Harvey not only makes but also endorses this latter interpretation in the same paragraph, as well as later on when he maintains that the attribution domain is too ‘complex’, ‘extensive’ and ‘diverse’ to debate as a whole and open to revision only in detail. In his view, advancement can only be made within the theory and preferably through empirical studies!

The substantive points raised in Harvey’s comment concern my criticisms of attribution theory with respect to its statistical model of man, its ideological status, and its neglect of the social context. I take this to mean agreement on the further criticisms, for example, the lack of specifications for the conditions under which attributions are made.

In relation to criticism of attribution theory’s statistical model of man, Harvey drawing primarily on Heider (1958) notes the latter’s concern with non-informational parameters in social judgement. He is certainly right with respect to the origin of attribution theory, however, given Harvey’s dislike of ‘dated assessment’ it is surprising that he turns for evidence to the origins of attribution theory rather than to contemporary praxis. Both a modal concern of the research emphasis (e.g. McArthur, 1972, 1976; Orvis et al., 1975; Di Vitto & McArthur, 1978; Smith & Miller, 1979; Hansen, 1980; inter alia) and the theoretical tenets of a large part of attributional research have been highly influenced by Kelley’s (1967, 1973) statistical model of man. If there is a broadly shared tenet of attribution theory, then it is that people try to find causal explanations for one another’s behaviours, and this they do by looking for covariations between presumed causes and effects. This widely held standpoint is certainly no ‘straw man’. It should be obvious that for my general argument it is irrelevant whether man is a good or bad statistician, and therefore, to
suggest that there is an emphasis on 'bias, motivation, etc.' is a non sequitur — except in one context: namely, that attribution theory is normative; that it sets out an ideal or absolutistic model and examines explanations and understandings generated in the context of everyday life against this ideal model. However, Harvey claims that precisely this ideological element '... has not to my knowledge been exhibited in the attribution literature'. If not, then other social psychologists apart from myself seem to have misread the literature in the same way. For example, Eiser (1980, pp. 103–104) notes that 'Kelley's "analysis of variance" model of the attribution process does indeed seem to be a statement of the normative rules describing how statistical inferences should be derived from a given data set'.

Next, a note on Harvey's concern with the general critique about attributional approaches' neglect to regard the social context of everyday existence, namely the possession of common, known-to-all rule systems, social conventions and metaphors which enable the meaningful conduct of everyday life: It seems that Harvey is either misreading what is understood by culture or custom in this sense [as when he refers to Orvis et al. (1976) or Jones & Thibaut (1958), suggesting that these authors take into account the 'context'] or missing the point of my argument completely (as when he refers to sources linking Mead and Heider). The point I was making is that 'covariance' is but one mode and probably not the most frequent mode of answering the question 'why'. It is only when one leaves the narrow boundaries within which Harvey seems to define his movements (e.g. his use of the term 'social context') that it is possible to appreciate more fully what social explanation and understanding involve. Unfortunately, this is neither the place nor the occasion to document a number of developments which do precisely this and do so within an attribution theoretical frame of reference (e.g. Fincham & Jaspers, 1980).

Finally, although Harvey maintained quite the opposite some time ago (cf. Harvey & Smith, 1977, p. 12) he remarks in his present comment that 'attribution theorists have no specific claim to understanding reality, or even understanding people's understanding of reality'. His rejoinder certainly leads one to such a view — though probably not in quite the sense he intended.

References


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Editorial Acknowledgement

From January this year I spent 3 months' study leave at the University of Linz, and Derek Rutter assumed my editorial responsibilities for that period. I am very grateful to him for allowing me that brief respite in the middle of my six-year term of office, and for doing such an excellent job. It is not possible to point exactly to the consequences of his labour in terms of particular publications but this issue probably bears Derek's stamp more than any other.

At the same time, I am sad to report that my editorial assistant, Celine Noronha, has been a victim of secretarial reorganization following the recent governmental cuts in grants to universities, and that another department in the university now has the benefit of her services. Contributors and referees will know something of the extent to which her skills and courtesy have contributed to this journal's operation. I wish to record my warm appreciation of all she has done.

GEOFFREY STEPHENSON