Explanation, Prediction, and Control

One of the philosophical virtues of realism is that it is theoretically neutral. Other philosophical “paradigms” do not share this virtue. The methodological prescriptions of the behaviorist deny the legitimacy of psychological explanations. The doctrines of scientific psychology deny the legitimacy of agency explanations, via the commitment to the Humean account of causality. The doctrines of hermeneutical psychology deny the legitimacy of explanations of human action in terms of ontologically sufficient conditions.

Realism makes no such explanatory commitments. For the realist, it is an entirely contingent matter whether any form of human action is best explained in terms of social relations or agent representations, or in terms of environmental stimuli or neurophysiological states. The realist can consistently hold that human actions are sometimes self-determined by agents for the sake of reasons, and sometimes determined and frequently influenced by situational, emotional, motivational, hormonal, neurophysiological, biological, physical, geographical, social, and political factors.

A realist science of meaningful human action does not prejudge any properly empirical questions. However, it does require some considerable modification of the traditional scientific psychological statement of the goal of social psychological science as the explanation, prediction, and control of human behavior.

Explanation

According to realism, a causal explanation of an action is not the description of a constant conjunction or regularity. Causal explanations make reference to the generative powers of human agents, and their enabling, stimulus, and interference conditions. Some of these explanations make reference to human powers of self-determination; others make reference to human liabilities determined by all kinds of ontologically sufficient conditions. Realism makes no prior commitment to the best theoretical explanation of these powers and liabilities.
In fact it can be anticipated that most theoretical explanations of human powers and liabilities will make reference to enabling conditions on a variety of ontological strata. Thus, the specific powers of a judge and the generic powers of language speakers require explanation by reference to biological, neurophysiological, psychological, and social enabling conditions, both local and developmental (Manicas & Secord, 1983).

These causally necessary and sufficient conditions must be carefully distinguished from the social relations and representations that are constitutive of human actions and social practices. Qua constitutive dimensions, these features are logically necessary and sufficient conditions for actions. These social relations and representations may sometimes also function as causally necessary and sufficient conditions, but this is an entirely separate empirical question. Like realism, the social constitutionist analysis of human actions and practices is theoretically neutral. It does not vouchsafe any explanations in terms of social relational or representational dimensions, or in terms of human agency.

Nevertheless, the social relational and representational dimensions of human action must be insisted upon against the scientific psychologist. The scientific psychologist does not in fact restrict the goal of social psychological science to the explanation, prediction, and control of behavior. Her causal explanations based upon experimental and other empirical studies are advanced as explanations of socially meaningful actions such as aggression, dishonesty, risk taking, and destructive obedience. Unless the social relational and representational dimensions of such actions are reproduced in experimental and other empirical studies, explanatory inferences drawn from them will not be empirically warranted. The successful reproduction of behavior is insufficient to establish that this is the case.

There is no reason in principle why the realist logic of experimental isolation and explanatory inference common to all causal sciences cannot be reproduced in social psychological science. The central methodological problems of social psychological science are problems of identification, which themselves derive from the scientific psychologist's neglect of the relational and representational dimensions of human action. The scientific psychologist's failure to establish that behaviors are instances of play, loneliness, dishonesty, aggression, obedience, attitude change, friendship, and risk taking in experimental studies and other forms of empirical enquiry is a consequence of his failure to discriminate the social relational and representational dimensions of human action in these forms of empirical enquiry. His failure to do so is a direct consequence of his methodological decision to restrict his empirical enquiries to the observation of behavior.

Nevertheless, there are two qualifications that ought to be made about explanatory inferences in social psychological science. It was noted earlier that if experimental studies demonstrate that some acts of aggression are caused by violent stimuli, then this explanation can be extended to cover everyday instances of aggression preceded by exposure to violent stimuli.