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Chapter four

Ordinary explanation

[pp. 72-89]

How is it possible to construct a critique of social-psychological theory without, at some stage, endorsing the very assumptions which lie at its core? The principal problem structuralism and post-structuralism drew attention to is that the language critics use to analyse and describe the internal contradictions they discover is one they share with the proponents of the theory under attack. An additional problem is that conceptions of human action which lie at the interface of psychology and sociology inform both the tradition *and* the opposition within the disciplines. Traditional social psychology has been able, so far, to contain and neutralize its critics. In addition, our culture sustains the way most people (including social psychologists) understand and explain the distinctions between truth and opinion, science and common sense, and between the person and the social world they inhabit. This means that if we want to attack a theory, we also have to unravel the cultural webs which make it possible.

In this chapter I will show that it is possible to strike a critical distance from a theory - in this case 'attribution theory' - and to illuminate the cultural preconceptions which support it. Attribution theory purports to take seriously 'ordinary explanations' of action, and we should take that theory seriously. This discussion will involve a deconstruction of attribution theory which, together with a historical account, exposes the shortcoming of the theory as an old paradigm approach. It will also throw into question the value of the alternative voices in the new paradigm.

Attribution theory has proved to be one of the more durable and popular areas of social psychology in the last ten to fifteen years. The simple problem which guides the theory – how we [73] discover the causal properties of social behaviour - has provoked a mass of research. Since the highpoint of its influence in the 1970s, it has extended into fields as diverse as legal studies, cross-cultural research and clinical psychology. It has also linked up with newer theoretical developments in social psychology (including the work on 'social representations' we will look at in the next chapter). On the one hand, new social psychologists have claimed that the original ideas advanced by Fritz Heider (1958) are part of their own approach (Harré 1981a). On the other hand, the old paradigm experimentalists have been able to use it to show an interest in aspects of common sense and claim that it can still be investigated quantitatively. An effect of this success has been that a common meeting-point between the 'paradigms' has been set up. The force of ethogenic criticisms of the old paradigm risks being undermined.

There have, of course, been many critiques of the theory, ethogenic ones among them. We will return to these later. Aside from some passing references to the bureaucratic rationality of contemporary life, however, new social psychology's objections have not seriously examined the historical basis of the theory, let alone the

historical nature of their own alternatives. Outside the new paradigm some cultural presuppositions of the theory, and possible links with economic changes culminating in the emergence of late capitalism, have been discussed by radical social psychologists (Billig 1982). These are useful links to make if we hold on to the distinction between the practical economic order and the expressive sphere (where the stuff of social psychology is reproduced). But we still need an account of how attribution theory as well as the ethogenic alternatives have been conditioned history.

Deconstruction will be my way of identifying and untying the conceptual structures of attribution theory. I will then be able to bring in the analysis of cultural history in the West described in Chapter three. The historical periodization offered by Foucault (1970) can throw attribution theory's assumptions about truth, and social behaviour into relief.

Both deconstruction, and post-structuralism generally, entail a thorough going scepticism about truth claims. Their own position flows from the emphasis on language and is an integral part of the third perspective I want to touch on in this chapter. [74] Post-structuralism may have emerged when it did because the modern age has broken up to give way to a *postmodern condition*. The rapid growth of information technology and the virtual collapse of the main political reform movements of the past century are part of a fashionable, studied incertitude as to the 'real' nature of things (Lyotard 1984). People are losing faith in human science, progress, and personal meaning as 'Modern' touchstones of truth. Whether or not this is desirable as a solution to attribution theory will have to remain an open question for the present.

Attribution theory

Attribution theory has, following Heider's (1958) work on phenomenal causality in the late 1950s, been concerned with the way individuals attempt to make social life predictable and controllable. The overriding motivation thought to possess the minds of lay perceivers is that they continually strive to determine the causes for behaviour. This assumption lies at the heart of all later developments of the theory: 'The theory describes processes that operate as if the individual were motivated to attain cognitive mastery of the causal structure of his [sic] environment' (Kelley 1967:193). The same kind of logic that is used by scientists to understand the physical world is employed by the 'naïve' actor to understand his or her social world: 'the person-perceiver's fundamental task is to interpret or infer the causal antecedents of action' (Jones and Davis 1965: 200). An observer, then, allocates causes to the external world or to other actors (and actors may attribute causes to the situation or their own selves).

These general propositions have given rise to a number of separate attribution theories. In part, the licence for this lies in the open nature of Heider's own original text. The similarity in Heider's 'naïve analysis of action' between everyday causal attribution and experimentation led Kelley (1967) to the notion of 'man [sic] the scientist'. This is a being who uses a logic analogous to that of an analysis of variance. The concern with intentionality was then developed into the idea of 'correspondent inferences' (Jones and Davis 1965). The discovery of the 'fundamental attribution error', in which actors over-attribute to situations whilst observers over-value stable personal dispositions, opened [75] up further disputes among advocates of the theory (Jones and Nisbett 1971).

The existence of so many refinements and versions of attribution theory raises methodological issues to do with the level of analysis that should be addressed by a critic. Just as different theories are produced by different writers, so variants of the theories are present in the many formulations offered at different times by a single writer. Changes of emphasis, shifts in interest, and lapses of memory all go to produce in social psychological texts (as in all texts) a multitude of possible 'theories'. The level of analysis then finally rests on the overall theoretical orientation and aims of the analysis. It is not possible to fish out any interpretation. It is possible to approach the text with certain questions in mind as to its historical basis.

In this chapter the discourse of attribution theory is the object of study. This discourse is the overall set of statements which refer to, and so create, the phenomena of 'attributions' which we then imagine to exist within the mental apparatus of 'subjects'. This discourse includes both written and spoken texts, and I have deliberately included a paper spoken to a British psychology conference (Totman 1982) among the ethogenic responses to attribution theory. (Deconstruction does not accept that any type of text should be privileged over others, and I guess I could have made my point even more strongly by including comments made by social psychologists in the coffee bar as part of the discourse I discuss.) The sense of this discourse arises, of course, from my own selective reading of texts, and this has been informed by a set of theoretical and political concerns. The purpose is not to expose the faults of any one attribution theorist, but to dismantle and then locate the discourse of attribution theory historically. You should bear this in mind as the assumptions within the theory are outlined in the following pages.

Assumptions

The following six aspects of the theory, the assumptions which hold it together and provide the space for internal squabbles and refinements, have been discussed before by other proponents and opponents of the theory. [76]

1: *Error*. Although people are ordinarily like scientists, they are bound to bias: 'Like all other perceptual and cognitive systems, attribution processes are subject to error' (Kelley 1967: 219). Apart from the 'fundamental attribution error', a whole field of research has developed from the attribution of causes of emotional states, into misattributions as to the meaning of arousal, and into beliefs about health. The importance of error is noted by all of those who attempt to specify exactly what type of rationality the person as 'scientist' operates with. Attribution will be worth the effort, so the story goes, 'if the perceiver's guess is correct only in a substantial fraction of cases' (Shaver 1975: 58). All of the variants of the theory specify forms of bias. The notion of error necessitates, of course, a correlative notion of hypothetically correct attributions, of truth.

2: *Relativism*. The theory takes an individual's perceptions and attributions as, for all intents and purposes, valid. This is a relativist view which flows from Heider's (1958) own stress on phenomenal causality. Some writers have argued that the development of attribution theory reflects a shift to a 'relativist logic' which is to be found in contemporary philosophy (Totman 1982). Because attribution theory does not study the 'truth' of the phenomena, but varying accounts, it accepts each person's interpretation in its own right. The actual 'cause' of the behaviour should not affect the status of the

accounts. Furthermore, the experimenter's account is just one more version. Those who do not believe that the 'fundamental attribution error' is an indispensable fact of human cognition, emphasize this relativist line. Thus, one writer who takes this position argues that 'attribution theorists have no special claim to understanding reality, or even to understanding people's understanding of reality' (Harvey 1981: 302).

3: *Rationality*. The person is seen as a rational evaluator of behaviour. If Kelley were to be believed, the person is a 'scientist' employing a 'naive' version of the 'method of differences': so Kelley claims that 'The logic of the analysis is obviously akin to that employed in analysis of variance' (Kelley 1967:195). This scientist is an inductivist. Others have suggested that the appropriate model of the person should rather be that of a lawyer who might profit from common sense or legal notions of responsibility. [77] Rationalism is still a crucial feature of these accounts, though. The model of science (or the law) is used to formalize the data on behalf of the naive 'scientist' or 'lawyer' who does not always, of course, do it properly.

4: *Common sense*. Attributions are ordinary explanations of social behaviour. An important link is thus forged with those who argued that social psychology should look to life outside the laboratory. From the earliest formulations of the theory, in which it was said that psychology had a good deal to learn from 'common-sense psychology' (Heider 1958), the focus has been on 'ordinary' judgements and decisions about causality. As Heider put it, 'Attribution is part of our cognition of the environment. Whenever you cognize your environment you will find attribution occurring' (Heider 1976:18).

5: *Situations*. Attribution theorists have a pervasive tendency to attribute the causes of actions to situational requirements. 'Naive scientists', of course, make the mistake of attributing intentionality where it is not, where the behaviour should probably be 'confined to its proper position as a local stimulus' (Heider 1958: 54). The 'fundamental attribution error' fixes on just such an issue. Some attribution theorists explicitly advocate situational explanations (Nisbett 1975), while for some the emphasis on the situation flows from a more deeply rooted adherence to behaviourist perspectives in which even the actor's activities are part of the situation (Bem 1972).

6: *Individualism*. The person is seen as responsible for evaluating and assigning causes. Heider's (1958) phenomenological sympathies and his emphasis on the role of intention in social interaction have been muted in later formulations on the theory by other writers. Positivist psychology prefers a more 'scientific' image of the person informed by natural sciences. However, the processes engaged in by the attributor are still conceived of as undertaken by an autonomous individual. So, 'The perceiver seeks to find sufficient reason why the person acted and why the act took on a particular form' (Jones and Davis 1965: 220). The various errors made by attribution theory's 'subjects' - their only potentially correctable misattributions - are, of course, individual [78] errors. In addition, the sharp distinction between the 'person' and the 'situation' screens out attributions that might be made by a person to such things as social relations or shared knowledge.

Three paradoxes

As you will already have noticed, the assumptions which underlie attribution theory conflict with one another at a number of points. Certain contradictions stand out and the

six aspects of the theory can be organized so as to form three pairs. Such a decomposition into binary oppositions is reminiscent of scientific structuralist analysis. According to some structuralists, cultural forms and theories reflect universal polarities which govern human thought (Levi-Strauss 1966). In this case we are simply using the device of pairing of assumptions into contradictory pairs as a convenient prerequisite for a post-structuralist analysis.

There is, first of all, an obvious conflict between the notions of truth and the appeal to relativism - between the supposition that misattributions can be corrected and the belief that attributions are not really right or wrong. Maybe attributions are relative, but for many researchers they are relatively *true*. They can only approximate an ideal, properly scientific, assignment of cause. In part, the status of real 'scientists' is at issue here. As Harré (1981a) points out, the experimenter chooses peculiar events so as to make the 'naive' scientist's behaviour look odd. The ostensible relativism of the approach can then appear to be pretty feeble in relation to the power of the 'true' view. Attribution theorists turn their subjects into inferior versions of themselves.

Second, despite the much-vaunted turn to 'ordinary explanations' of social behaviour, attribution theorists only accept explanations which conform to their own notion of what is 'ordinary'. There is a conflict between the claims of science and those of common sense. The explanations given by ordinary people are deemed to be 'scientific' only after they have been carefully screened by the researcher. Attribution theory still carries out much of its research in the formal setting of the laboratory and is preoccupied with documents instead of the ambiguities of everyday speech. In this way an image of rationality is promoted, and only certain varieties of common sense are tolerated. We can only agree with the comment that 'Vestiges of the tradition of liberal [79] rationalism, which sees science as fulfilling the role of demystifier still remain' (Billig 1982:177).

Third, a conflict is conceptually produced between the individual and the situation. The split between individual and situational factors is maintained in the image of the person as seeker of causes. The individual is often expected to derive attributions from a situation of which her behaviour is but a component. These semi-behaviourist assumptions lead to a manipulative view of people and of the delusions individuals are prey to as they seek to understand their own actions as well as those of others. So, we are told, 'it is possible to induce a person to feel he [sic] has total freedom to express himself when in fact he has none' (Kelley 1967: 226). In some texts, the ability to 'situationalize' is seen as an ability of 'brighter' individuals. Here the contradiction between the personal and situational emphasis in the theory collapses into a wilful and cynical 'mystification'.

Ambivalence and ideology

There is an analysis of attribution theory which is sensitive to the power of ideology in social psychology. Michael Billig argues that the modern model of the coherent individual has broken down, and that nowadays 'the contradictions of contemporary capitalism might be reproduced, rather than concealed, on a psychological level' (1982: 203). In his view, ideology now comes to be reflected in cognition, and the ambivalence of attribution theorists towards, for example, the relation between the person and the

situation, is one manifestation of the complexities of contemporary life.

Billig compares attribution theory with descriptions of the 'paradox of substance', where, in his words, 'Defining one phenomenon in terms of another involves the paradox of implying that it both resembles and ... differs from that other substance' (Billig 1982:175). For example, in order to understand the activities of an individual, we need to specify the *situations* in which different actions can take place. The object of attention thus flips back to focus on its opposite. We can see such a conceptual switching from one extreme of each polarity which comprises attribution theory to the other: conceptions of truth are bounded by so many conditions that we eventually arrive at a form of relativism, and relativism must to some extent be 'true' to function as a theoretical position; [80] an examination of science will reveal it to be rooted in 'common sense', and our notions of common sense are modelled on standards set by science; and the person needs 'situations' as much as situations need the person to be understood as such.

A principle which informs this understanding of social psychological theory is that of rhetoric and the importance of conversation in the everyday maintenance of social relations (Billig 1987). These are notions which also lie at the heart of new social psychology, and we will return to them in Chapter six. For the moment it is possible to consider the discourse of attribution theory by taking account of its rhetorical character and moving beyond the types of paradox identified in Billig's work. The paradoxes which make up attribution theory are not merely ambivalently structured. One term in each pair is dominant. Once you realize this, we are halfway to a deconstruction of the theory.

Deconstructing attribution theory

The deconstruction of texts carried out by Derrida, which was described in Chapter three, begins by dismantling the conceptual frameworks which govern arguments. I will apply this now to the collection of texts - the discourse - which surrounds attribution theory, and show that the assumptions which inform a deconstruction give a special cutting edge when applied to this type of social-psychological theory. In deconstruction there is a thorough-going scepticism about the value of 'theory' as an alternative to the positions being unravelled; there is an emphasis on the intimate connection between 'intention' and context; and there is a rather pessimistic assessment of the possibility of escaping the logic which glues together the discourses in any culture. I will now take attribution theory through the three steps of deconstruction.

Three steps

The first step is to identify oppositions that are set up in the text. In this case we have the written discourse of the theory as a massive sprawling series of texts. The three key oppositions have already been described, but a deconstruction attends to the way the concepts are hierarchically structured. Consider the importance of truth and error compared with the meagre value that is placed on [81] the accounts given by 'ordinary' people; the role accorded to the scientific status of research over the data sifted from naive common sense; or the emphasis on the force of situations over unwitting individual actors. In all three cases one of the aspects is privileged over the other. The notions of

relativism, common sense and personhood often appear as little more than rhetorical adjuncts (even though they are, at the same time, crucial to the internal structure of the theory).

The second step involves the displacement of the privileged term by its opposite number. A case can be made for the importance of the subordinate aspect of each pair. The terms can be turned around to reveal their opposites without too much effort, and it is evident that the subordinate aspects of the theory are *necessary* to those emphasized in the attribution theory texts. So, any notion of truth is contingent on some form of relativism because it is predicated on the particular nature of human beings (or of matter itself); science arose from, and is sustained by, intuitive commonsensical arguments; and a situation is defined as such by the presence of persons without whom it would not exist.

However, simply advocating one side against another does not escape the structure of the texts. We have to move on to the third step. This final step involves an attempt to transform the rhetoric from within by introducing a new term. I could elaborate a new meaning for an existing term and break the opposition down to prevent the dominant term from reasserting itself, and there are examples ready to hand from the discourse of new social psychology.

If we were to introduce Shotter's (1980) notion of 'joint action' into the first, truth/relativism, couplet, it might dissolve the separation of 'facts' from 'values' which is so crucial to positivist definitions of truth. Alternatively, the focus on 'self-presentation' advocated by Harré (1979) could highlight the power struggle involved in the final establishment of one view acknowledged to be 'true'. Again, turning to the second, science/common sense, pair, using the idea of 'joint action' would throw into question the dominant model of science which is predicated on the exclusion of common sense, and support instead a co-operative, interpretive style of human science. Stressing relativism, as Totman (1982) does, would also take away the force of the distinction between the ordinary and the scientific. Finally, in the case of the person/situation dichotomy an emphasis on relativism also draws [82] attention to the way every personal, supposedly autonomous, action is defined by a situation and can only be understood within it. The idea of 'self-presentation' could be used to draw attention to the way individual actions are social *acts* for others and so require their presence.

I want to defer the problem of pursuing the third step of deconstruction until Part three of this book. In this chapter I want to focus on the problems posed by the ethogenic responses to attribution theory, and I will do this by looking at the way the *second* step of the deconstruction has been appearing in their discussions of the theory. However, a necessary preliminary to that task is a brief outline of the historical context of the theoretical debates and transformations I have outlined so far.

Cultural history

A curious thing about the three deconstructive paradoxes is that they come apart so easily. The tension between the polarities is obvious, and the case for the subdued aspect of each pair is relatively simple to make. In part, this is due to the impact of the debates which have surrounded the paradigm crisis. However, it also has much to do with the historical cultural changes, and the political and conceptual crises, which accompanied the conflicts inside social psychology. A deconstruction is not usually such a

straightforward exercise, and a historical account would explain how the deconstruction of this particular theory was facilitated. The dismantling of texts always takes place in a context:

The *incision* of deconstruction, which is not a voluntary decision ... does not take place just anywhere ... it can *be* made only according to lines of force and forces of rupture that are localizable in the discourse to be deconstructed. The *topical* and *technical* determination of the most necessary sites and operators - beginnings, holds, levers, etc. - in a given situation depends upon an historical analysis. (Derrida 1981: 52)

At this point, then, we should return to the analysis of systems of knowledge undertaken by Foucault. Foucault's (1970) descriptions of the forms of knowledge which governed the Classical Age which endured from around 1650 until 1800, and the Modern Age which followed it, will help us understand the significance of the deconstructive paradoxes which make up attribution theory. [83]

The dominant form of knowledge in the Classical Age was a rationalist natural scientific method which led to human reality being seen as conditioned by natural causes. The notion of an autonomous 'self' or subject was not fully developed. The old paradigm in social psychology holds to just such a model of science and social interaction. Attribution theory, in like fashion, takes a rationalist view of behaviour. The concern with truth, science and the power of situations reflect the preoccupations of that historical period.

In the Modern Age, however, humanism rose in influence. An interest in alternative forms of human life developed. An anthropological conception of the variety of human experience arose, and with it a value was placed on personal 'truth'. The social world was generously assumed to be represented for each person as an individual reality, and the 'self' became seen as an experiential core of being, a subject which could be understood introspectively as the source of knowledge and action. We find such beliefs not only in new social psychology but also in attribution theory. Ordinary explanation and common sense are of value, truth is a matter for individuals, and individuals do the work of attributing causes.

A plausible conclusion would be that a deconstruction of attribution theory is possible because the inversion of conceptual priorities which it entails has already occurred in western culture, over a century and a half ago. In this case, social psychology lags badly behind mainstream culture. (This is yet another reminder of the isolation of the discipline from the real world.) A further consequence is that we should situate our own critical position in a historical context. This also applies to post-structuralism, to the development of deconstruction, and to the ability of a contemporary audience to appreciate the paradoxes of attribution theory. Here the argument that we are entering a postmodern cultural age is relevant. (I will discuss this claim in Part three.)

Attribution theory, then, carries with it the conceptual residues of two past historical periods. It is this which makes it so susceptible to a deconstruction of its main premises. What, though, of the ethogenic criticisms of the theory? I will now go on to address their arguments and show that the paradoxes which constitute attribution theory extend to its opponents. The deconstruction also needs to be taken into the new paradigm.

Deconstructing ethogenic responses

Some of the ideas developed in the various forms of new social psychology - 'joint action', 'self-presentation', 'relativism' - are useful antidotes to the presumptions of attribution theory. They could lead to the third step of a deconstruction. However, the specific responses by ethogenic writers to attribution theory have actually been limited to the second step of inversion, in which the subordinate concepts are championed. The problem is that the simple emphasis that the new social psychology gives to relativism, common sense, and individuality in its own texts leads it to repeat the three deconstructive paradoxes. Discussion of the inadequacies of ethogenic responses to attribution theory will also serve to demonstrate the importance of following through all three steps of a deconstruction. I will take, in turn, three of the responses to attribution theory from friends of new social psychology and relate each to one of the conceptual contradictions that have been identified so far.

Relativism substitutes for truth

This first response comes from a writer who is sympathetic to attribution theory and who attempts to reconcile social psychology's old and new paradigms. What happens if the relativity of accounts is taken seriously? Totman (1982) concentrated on this aspect of the theory, and argued that attribution theory reflects a shift to a 'relativist logic' in philosophy. Attribution theory does not, and should not, deal with 'truth' but with various accounts. This means that attempts to change an attribution might have the effect of 'disturbing cognitive structures which underpin perfectly adaptive lifestyles' (Totman 1982: 6). Totman goes on to make the claim that the problem of deception then disappears. Because all truths are relative, the notion of 'deception' no longer has any currency. The problem of deciding what is correct or incorrect dissolves, and with it questions as to who is right and who is wrong.

However, Totman does not allow this relativism to preclude any measure of the 'good'. There is an escape clause in his argument. The relativist logic of attribution theory for him is bounded by a powerful overarching truth. He proposes that the index by which the 'good' can be measured should be health, and this thesis underpins his earlier ethogenic study of health and illness in which [85] the central dictum was that 'people, in their dealings with others, follow social rules. When they stop following rules, for whatever reason, they are likely to become ill' (Totman 1979: 20).

The relativism which is championed here, then, is short-lived, and we end up being sold an uncritical endorsement of the 'truth' about health which governs the dominant culture. The consequence is that the person as patient is disqualified from identifying deception because the powerful reply is that 'everything is relative'. In addition, the person cannot deceive the researcher because the objects of inquiry are not really accounts at all, but 'rules' which lie hidden within them. This means that research can carry on without a proper reflection on the moral order governing the situation and the surrounding society. Not only does this relativism presuppose a true standpoint from which social actors are liable to err, but processes of power and ideology are able to

operate untouched. In this case, the relativism immediately invalidates the lay attributor's attempts to refuse to accept the definition of the situation laid down by the professional attribution researcher. This interpretation of attribution theory, then, deliberately sets up a power relation between people in which resistance is suppressed.

Common-sense substitutes for science

The next response comes from the mainstream ethogenic theory which has been most influenced by structuralism. What happens if the ordinary accounts are taken seriously? Harré (1981a) objects to the 'rhetoric of scientism' which, he claims, bedevils attribution theory. Attribution theorists such as Kelley (1967) are accused of projecting the model of rationality that scientists operate with on to the subjects they study. For Harré the human being is a spontaneous creator of meaning, and ethogenic social psychology prioritizes common sense over the scientific pretensions of traditional social psychologists: 'the conceptual systems of ordinary language must have priority over neologistic constructions and inventions' (Harré 1980: 211) A glaring problem with attribution theory, according to Harré, is that the researchers deal with written documents rather than with speech. Note here that the longstanding conceptual privilege given to speech over writing in western culture is reproduced in an ostensibly radical argument. [86] Harré links this bureaucratic theme in the research to centric bias and rationalist ideology of American culture.

However, Harré's favour for ordinary explanation in language has its limits. There lingers a clear conception of real rationality and science looks like, and he recognizes *speech*. Harré undertakes a contorted rhetorical manoeuvre to undermine the positivism of attribution theory which unfortunately (and predictably), in turn, draws ethogenics further into a rationalist model of human action: 'Our problem, as reformers, is to persuade Kelley that the people he has studied are rather himself' (Harré 1981a: 141).

In this way the rationality of 'ordinary' people, those Harré calls 'folk', is uncritically appealed to. It is a rationality which must in turn correspond to Harré's model of rationality to be recognised by him to be *pukka*. The 'folk' must now display common-sense 'rationality' in order to be considered as genuinely 'ordinary' (just as their cognitive abilities and malfunctions had to be displayed to the attribution researchers). The result is that this common sense presupposes reason. Common sense which does not come up to that standard, even in speech, will be disqualified. Despite (and because of) the obvious humanist intent which informs this new social-psychological attempt to combat a bad theory, power and ideology are once again pushed into the background. We end up, then, with an ideological re-interpretation of an already deeply ideological theory in which conflicts over meaning are deliberately glossed over and resistance to dominant meanings is suppressed.

Individuality substitutes for situations

The third response comes from the most extreme phenomenological position in new social psychology. Shotter (1981a) claims, in the course of his critique of attribution theory, that his hermeneutic standpoint is to the 'left' of Harré's. What happens if the

individual agent is taken seriously as an author of actions? Shotter attempts to defend the individuality of the subject in the production of meaning. The fluid nature of accountable action is marked by an 'intrinsic intentionality'. This is then violated by attribution theory's model of the 'person-perceiver' as a searcher for 'causes' of actions. We do not attribute 'causes', Shotter says, but we do want to know how a person transforms 'the definition of the [87] situation' in which they must act. An additional moral claim is that 'mental activity ... is *potentially* under one's control' (Shotter 1981b: 279). Attribution theory is understood as part of a historical process. He argues that it is part of a transition to a state of culture which suppresses real human intentionality 'with behaviour being explained by impersonal causes, and actions by reasons' (Shotter 1981b: 281).

However, although the person is 'autonomous', the 'author' of actions, she is governed by a drive 'to make their actions conform to something in their common sense' (Shotter 1981b: 279). This is a common sense which is shared. In addition, although action is carried out by agents, 'joint action' is accomplished by a person in coordination with others. Furthermore, it is only accountable with them. These assertions are advanced as part of an attack on empirical attribution studies, but they then fold ineluctably back into a situational position. People know what they are doing better than the attribution researcher, according to Shotter, but because of 'joint action' individuals 'are unaware of how its outcome is produced ... In such genuinely social activity, people may remain deeply ignorant as to what it is, really, they are doing (or why)' (Shotter 1981a: 177). The upshot is that the individual's agency is so limited that it is unlikely that they will, in practice, ever be able to exercise it completely.

It is worth recalling here the cynical attributionist argument that 'pragmatically' it would be better if individuals believed in situational attributions even if they were wrong. This position 'ends by countenancing mystification in order to produce better personalities' (Billig 1982: 182). Shotter seems to risk taking a correspondingly morally dubious stance when he argues that the fact of 'joint action' invalidates attribution research, but then supports the idea of human autonomy for moral/political reasons because without 'individually responsible and accountable elements, without in fact persons, a social order would fall apart' (Shotter 1981a: 174). Once again, although new social psychology attempts to oppose a dehumanizing theory, it finds itself caught up in the webs of power and ideology. In this case it fails to break from the assumptions which hold the theory together because it thinks it is more important to hold a social order in place than to support the resistance to it. [88]

Repetition and opposition

The three ethogenic responses to attribution theory, then, each conclude with a repetition of the paradox they sought to overcome. Totman (1982), Harré (1981a), and Shotter (1981a) fail to break with the historically grounded assumptions lying within the theory. We have a telling example here of how new paradigm responses are unable to escape from the assumptions governing the old paradigm. The problem does not simply lie in the way ethogenics focuses on 'relativism' rather than 'truth', on 'ordinary accounts' at the cost of 'science', or on the 'individual' instead of 'situations'. The problem is that the *discourses* it draws upon in this culture invite it to describe social life or theory in such a way that it can easily fall into the grip of the commanding conceptual constructs.

Furthermore, when social psychology, as an academic institution, brings in material from the 'ordinary' outside world it 're-frames' that material and so gives to it a different type of rationality. Social psychology cannot but give its own sense to the meanings it lets in. Since Heider's first formulations of attribution theory various attempts have been made to give a sense to it that traditional social psychology would understand. There have been two trends. The first is sympathetic to the phenomenological side of the individual/ social divide. This trend invokes the memory of Icheiser (1949) who investigated the contents of the consciousness reproduced in 'collective representations' of the individual. Icheiser (rather dualistically) saw the 'data' of experience as 'the object of collective or the object of individual perceptions' (Icheiser 1949: 12). His observations have been advertised as providing some conceptual continuity between processes of attribution and the organization of those processes in shared 'social representation'.

The second reformulation has been in the dominant positivist tradition of social psychology which has downgraded individual agency in the service of scientific truth. Here, the making of attributions is seen as an individual cognitive activity. Some cognitions, including attributions, are about the encoding, storage and retrieval of social information, and so the term 'social cognition' is used. The whole reductionist paraphernalia of cognitive psychology is then used to explain social action (Fiske and Taylor 1984). This cognitivist terminology can then be used to co-ordinate [89] the ostensibly more social 'attributional schemas' with others in the study of 'social representations'. That both a phenomenological and a positivist route could lead to a study of 'social representation' is not accidental, as I will explain in Chapter five. As I have said, attribution theory is a relatively easy target for deconstruction. Its concern to produce a true account, using a scientific method operating on behaviourist principles which downplay individual agency in situations, is very much of a piece with the American tradition of social psychology. The individualist ideas were ostensibly relegated to the domain of sociology, but they lay buried within it, repressed and 'absent presences'. Here were the relativist ideas where pragmatism thrived, the good practical common sense which pragmatism sentimentalized, and the individualism of a burgeoning capitalist economic order which pragmatism celebrated.

Notwithstanding attempts to bring together the experimental and ethogenic paradigms in social psychology, new social psychologists have been suspicious of attribution theory. As you have seen, though, it has been necessary to go beyond these suspicions and locate its contradictions in the matrix of the dominant culture. Because attribution theory was able to set the terms of the debate, new social psychologists were tied, from the start, to the guiding assumptions of the theory. Would the picture be different in the case of the theory of 'social representations' which emanates from which promises to draw upon sociological theory, and which new paradigm theorists have been *enthusiastic* about? This is the question that will be addressed when I turn to examine the theory of 'social representations' and the effects of the institutional divisions between the disciplines of psychology and sociology. [end of page 89]