

CAUSAL PREFERENCES AS A FACTOR IN THE CHOICE AND DIAGNOSIS OF SOCIAL CONTINGENCIES

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A variety of social contingencies have been described in terms of the patterning of self and/or social causality along a chain of responses between 2 persons. Nonreciprocal (pseudo and asymmetrical) contingencies focus the researcher on the comparative implications of self and socially caused behavior as a matter of causal preference and relationship style. Two laboratory studies were conducted with this point of view in mind. In the first study it was shown that participants indicating a preference for socially caused behavior were more likely to choose spontaneous interactions with strangers while those who preferred self causality tended to choose scripted or nonspontaneous interactions. In the second study it was found that participants preferring social causality were more accurate in assessing their own influence over in the behavior of others in a self disclosure task than were those who preferred self causality. Findings are discussed in terms of both the need for a causal preference assessment technique and further research into the phenomena of pseudo relationships.

Keywords: causal preferences, social contingencies, choice, diagnosis.

A promising, and yet largely unexplored, approach to conceptualizing various patterns of social interaction can be derived from the basic distinction of self caused and socially caused behavior. Jones and Gerard (1967) originally used this idea to describe four elementary social contingencies existing between two people: 1) a pseudo contingency where each person's chain of responses is based primarily on self caused behavior, 2) an asymmetrical contingency where one person's chain of responses is self caused while the other's is socially caused, 3) a reactive contingency where each person's chain of responses is socially caused, and 4) a mutual contingency where each person's chain of responses is both self and socially caused. This kind of analysis remained generally underutilized until Kelley et al. (1983), who proposed a causal chain approach to the understanding of close relationship behavior. But as yet other kinds of relationships (particularly those able to be characterized by Jones and Gerard's pseudo and asymmetrical contingencies) have not been investigated in these terms.

Consideration of such cases is an important undertaking because it directly involves addressing one of the central questions arising out of the causal chain approach. More specifically, when non-reciprocal contingencies are involved, one is positioned to consider the separate and independent impacts of self and socially caused behavior. An inquiry then can be made into the consequences of habitually responding only to one's own plans or agendas as opposed to the behavior of others. While this problem has been addressed in part in the impression management literature (Jones & Wortman, 1973), it has not been fully extended to matters of relationship style. This then is the aim in the present paper, to examine the implications of preferences for self and social

causality, not only in regard to common social interaction but also as roots of what might be termed "pseudo relationship" behavior. Such an objective suggests a variety of intriguing populations for research (Caughey, 1984), but the central focus of this effort is restricted to data from college students who were asked to report their causal preferences in social interaction. The specific question addressed concerns the relationship of these preferences to one's acuity in detecting ongoing social contingencies: are those who habitually seek out social causality or situationally controlled behavior more or less able to recognize influence over others than are those who habitually seek the control of self causality in their social environment? Conventional wisdom from existing literature, including Rotter's (1966) work on locus of control may seem to point toward self causality in making a prediction here, but it should be kept in mind that the above question deals with habitual preferences in style rather than beliefs about control. Particularly since actual judgment of social contingency is involved in this formation, it is in some sense closer to Alloy and Abramson's (1979) work on depressive realism. However, in the present context, causal preferences really translate into a matter of whether one is inclined to be responsive to oneself only or responsive to others.

Preferences for self causality, one might reason, may involve people who seek out the controlling role in asymmetrical contingencies and thus fall into predictable rituals or routines, which may blunt their acuity for detecting real causality. Preferences for social causality, on the other hand, may reflect a history of interacting with others who are more powerful and, as Murstein (1976) and others have observed in the relationships between men and women, the least powerful person in a relationship often develops the greater acuity for understanding it. Thus the basic prediction in this work is that those who show preferences for social causality should have greater acuity than those who show preferences for self causality.

The research into this hypothesis was conducted in two steps. In the first of two studies reported it was necessary to determine what verbal statements by experimental participants best predicted the actual choices for conducting an encounter with a stranger. Herein it was expected that preferences for social causality would be associated with the choice of a spontaneous interaction and that preferences for self causality would be associated with the choice of a scripted or non-spontaneous interaction. The second study then used participants' reports of causal preference to test the basic prediction as to acuity in detecting actual social contingency.

METHOD

Thirty participants were recruited for each of the two studies, half in each case being male and the other half female. All were college students at the University of California at Hayward who were meeting requirements for introductory psychology courses. They had no specific expectations about the studies prior to entering the laboratory except that the task for each had something to do with "new relationships". Thus presumably many of the participants may have correctly anticipated that their experience would have something to do with meeting and interacting with strangers.

At the outset for both studies the participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire concerning their social and leisure activities. The specific questions dealt with their feelings about both real group activities (e.g., parties, crowds) and pseudosocial activities of a solitary nature such as watching television. Also included in the questionnaire were the central items of importance for both studies, which had to do with preferences for self and/or social causality. Two variations of each were employed, to which the participant was asked to respond either yes or no: "Do you like to be the primary cause of what happens between yourself and others?" (self causality); "Do you enjoy taking control of the social situations you are in?" (self causality); "Do you like having other people be the primary cause of what happens between yourself and others?" (social causality); "Do you enjoy having the social situation you are in take control of your behavior?" (social causality).

The subsequent procedures for both studies involved establishing a context for the participants for reciprocal self disclosure.² The purpose of the first study in this regard was to provide empirical support for the association between the causal preference measures and the participants' actual choice of circumstances for participating in the disclosure task. Thus the participants were told that the purpose of the study was in fact to learn what social conditions would allow them to exchange personal information as comfortably as possible. Specifically, they were shown a sample list of personal information taken from Taylor and Altman's (1966) intimacy scale and asked to decide which (if any) of this information about themselves they could share with a stranger. If they were so willing, they were then asked to participate in an exchange of personal history with another participant who would enter the room and take a seat behind a partition in front of them (i.e., they would not interact face to face). The essential choice for them to make first was the following: would they like this interaction to be completely spontaneous or would they like to write down their own comments first so that they could in effect use a script? As soon as this choice was made the session was discontinued, and the participant was debriefed as to why the actual interaction was not necessary. In the second study an actual exchange of the type described above did take place. This procedure began in the same fashion as the first except that the participants were not given the choice of scripted behavior. Instead they were simply shown the Taylor and Altman items and asked to decide which if any they could disclose to another subject who would be in the room. (The presentation of the items was arranged randomly rather than in a scaled or ascending order of relative intimacy so that the participants would not be cued as to any appropriate sequence of use.) After the participant checked off the items, he or she was asked to participate in an actual exchange of personal histories with a second participant. This, it was explained, amounted simply to taking turns with the other person disclosing information relating to the items he or she had just seen. If this was agreeable the other participant then entered the room and took a seat behind a partition in the room.

¹ Measures of preference for self and social causality were taken separately rather than dichotomously because they are theoretically independent elements in the social contingencies described earlier.

² We acknowledge the contributions of Alice Hanko, Marge Bedrin, and Carole Quayle in the development of these procedures.

The second participant was in fact an accomplice to the experimenter (matching the sex of the real participant) who had been trained to use the Taylor and Altman Intimacy scale. The procedure was thus set up to allow the accomplice's responses to match the level of intimacy of each of the real participant's responses. The real participant was asked to lead off with a disclosure to which the accomplice would respond, this pattern continuing until the session was over. In effect then, the encounter was set up so that the real participant controlled the intimacy of the exchange, for if he or she increased or decreased the depth of disclosure in a response, the accomplice immediately followed suit. When each session was over, the participants (real and accomplice) were given a final questionnaire. In it the participants were asked to assess who had controlled the amount of intimacy in the interaction: oneself, the other, or neither person. If the participants indicated that he or she (rather than the other or neither person) had indeed controlled the intimacy in the exchange, he or she was scored as having correctly diagnosed the contingency.

RESULTS

The participants' preferences for self and social causality were assessed by means of two sets of questions with distinctly different wording. Results from both studies indicated that only one of the two question sets, that which was worded in terms of the participants' enjoyment of "control of or by social situations", yielded significant differences. The other question set, worded in terms of the "primary cause of behavior", did not. While this fact will be discussed in the next section, all references to causal preferences in the findings to follow will refer to the first question set only. The first study related causal preference to the participant's choice of spontaneous or scripted circumstances. Table 1 shows the frequencies of participants who made either choice along with indicated preferences for social causality, self causality, both or neither in everyday social situations. Chi square analysis indicate a significant association between the two measures ($\chi^2 = 10.85, p < .01$) which as predicted suggests that those who preferred social causality had a greater tendency to choose spontaneous disclosure while those who preferred self causality had a greater tendency to choose scripted disclosure. The specific comparison in this regard for those who preferred only self or social causality (excluding the neither and both groups) was confirmed by Fisher's exact test ($p = .03$) social causality is also related to the ability to detect ongoing social contingencies. In Table 2 the association between this preference and correct diagnosis of self causality in the disclosure exchange is presented. As can be seen in this table, and consistent with predictions, those who preferred social causality were quite accurate while those who did not prefer it were not ($\Delta 2$ with yates correction = 5.36, $p < .05$).

TABLE 1: RELATIONSHIP OF SUBJECTS' CAUSAL PREFERENCE TO INTERACTION CHOICE

<i>Interaction Choice</i>	<i>Causal Preference</i>			
	<i>Social Causality</i>	<i>Self Causality</i>	<i>Both</i>	<i>Neither</i>
<i>Spontaneous</i>	5	2	8	2
<i>Scripted</i>	1	7	1	4

Findings from the second study support the hypothesis that preference for

TABLE 2: RELATIONSHIP OF PREFERENCE FOR SOCIAL CAUSALITY TO CORRECT DIAGNOSIS OF CONTINGENCY

<i>Correct Diagnosis</i>	<i>Social Causality</i>	
	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
<i>Yes</i>	10	2
<i>No</i>	4	14

No significant association was found between preferences for self causality and correct diagnosis of the contingency. However, a closer inspection of the data revealed that a large proportion in our sample indicated a preference for both self and social causality, meaning that many of those who correctly diagnosed the contingency did show a preference for self causality. Thus, though the sample was quite small it was important to compare (as in the first study) those who showed a preference for only self or social causality. These cases are shown in Table 3 and, consistent with the apparent and predicted pattern, a Fisher's exact test confirmed that those preferring only social causality were more accurate than those who preferred only self causality ($p = .02$).

In neither study were there any significant differences between male and female participants. Also, no significant relationships were found between the measures of causal preference and other measures of social lifestyle (e.g., going to parties or crowd situations, watching television soap operas, etc.).

TABLE 3: RELATIONSHIP OF CAUSAL PREFERENCES* TO CORRECT DIAGNOSIS OF CONTINGENCY

	Causal Preference	
	<i>Social Causality Only</i>	<i>Self Causality Only</i>
<i>Correct Diagnosis</i>		
<i>Yes</i>	4	0
<i>No</i>	2	6

*Excludes data from subjects who indicated both or neither preference.

DISCUSSION

The two studies presented here suggest that possibility that openness to social causality may have significant implications for the type and quality of social encounters that people have. Such inferences can only be made with some caution at this point since the evidence is correlational, but the findings of both studies taken together present a seemingly coherent picture. Participants preferring social causality were more likely to choose spontaneous interaction while those preferring self causality were more likely to choose scripted interactions. Furthermore, preferences for social causality, and not those of self causality, were shown to be significantly associated with accurate assessments of real personal influence in experimentally created social contingencies.

Clearly, many questions remain as to appropriate measures of causal preference. Questionnaire items with two different wordings as to causality were employed in this research. Those using the more abstract language of attribution theory ("Do you like having others in a social situation be the primary cause of your behavior?") led to no significant associations with other variables, but those put more concretely ("Do you like having a social situation control your behavior?") did. Aside from the relative concreteness in the wording, other possible explanations for these results should be explored. For example, it must now be learned whether choosing to give up control might have been suggested by the former question and not the latter. In effect, being in control of a situation or not must be looked at independently from taking responsibility for that control.

These kinds of problems certainly require the development of an assessment instrument in this area. In the process of such development, factor analytic inquiries may well indeed unearth dimensions to causal preference that have not been discussed in this paper. An obvious factor to consider in this regard, for example, would concern the roles that shyness, self consciousness and social anxiety (Buss, 1980) might play in this picture. Moreover, since causal preferences were not shown to be significantly associated with other questionnaire items as to social lifestyle, it is not yet clear where the differences observed in this study (regarding social causality in particular) might be most clearly manifested in social behavior outside the laboratory. In short, we need to learn a great deal more as to the real world meaning of this variable.

As indicated at the outset, however, the theoretical issues pursued here do suggest some new directions for future studies having to do with human relationships. The main thrust of the present research has been to focus on self and social causality preferences as independent elements of social contingencies. By thus addressing potential imbalances of these elements as matters of social lifestyle, we are faced with an almost totally neglected area of inquiry into interpersonal behavior – that of the pseudo relationship (depicted as causal chains of interaction without significant mutual or reciprocal influence). Such phenomena are not really that uncommon, however, if one simply scans the milieu of possible social events with an eye to pseudo and asymmetrical contingencies.

The real task here is to use naturalistic observation to begin to build a taxonomy of these patterns in terms of the degree of self and social causality enjoyed by each party of the interaction. For example, performers and members of their audiences conduct pseudo relationships in which each's role in the contingencies are at the extremes of imbalance as to self and social causality respectively. High pressure sales people (such as those involved in automobile sales) and their customers also frequently fit into this pattern. One party in each case enacts a rehearsed ritual designed to induce the other party to follow an anticipated sequence of responses, and the relationships are inevitably pseudo (e.g., lacking in mutual or reciprocal causality) in nature. These and so many other examples loom as both fruitful and necessary populations for study as the research in this area goes forward.

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