

Harré R & Secord P F. *The explanation of social behaviour.*

Oxford, England: Blackwell, 1972. 327 p.

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In this book we demonstrated that unacknowledged subscription to outmoded philosophical theories of causality and method had distorted the thinking and the empirical work of scientists. We replaced these old methods with new ones that explored the meaning of interpersonal behaviours. [The SSCC® indicates that this book has been cited in over 400 publications.]

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From about the mid-1960s a growing feeling of unease had begun to spread among social psychologists. The feeling was particularly strong in Europe¹ but also represented American opinion. At that time Paul Secord was professor in the very lively Department of Psychology at the University of Nevada at Reno. I decided to spend a sabbatical term there partly to continue my studies of the influence of philosophical ideas on psychology (in particular, on radical behaviourism) and partly to visit the Washoe project, then only just under way. Secord and I soon found that we had both felt the uneasiness then current in social psychology, and we began weekly discussions to try to focus our thoughts. We discovered that at the root of the problem were various unacknowledged philosophical assumptions and theories that powerfully affected the way that social psychology had developed, both theoretically and methodologically.

Shortly afterward, Secord spent a sabbatical year in Oxford, during which we gave a joint seminar with Michael Argyle and wrote the bulk of the text of the book. At the beginning of our collaboration we decided that this would not be yet-another purely critical book. The main thrust of our joint work was to devise a series of methods (and justify them in a methodology) by which the kind of studies we thought should be undertaken could actually be carried out. However, we began with a very thorough study of the way that unacknowledged subscription to outmoded philosophical theories of causality (the Humean theory²) and of method (the

naive experiment³) had distorted the thinking and the empirical work of scientists. We were able to show that the result of these influences had been a systematic neglect of the meaning of interpersonal behaviours, while at the same time the very subject of study was a network of relations created by the appreciation of just those very meanings.

Similar points had been made before, but until our work none had systematically attempted to replace the old methods with new ones specifically designed to deal with the new dimension that research seemed to require, namely, the exploration of meaning.

Two basic theoretical innovations prepared the way for our proposed empirical techniques. We were convinced that it was necessary to treat social behaviour as a three-level system with physically defined behaviours treated as intentional actions and by reference to their social meanings and the acts they are used to perform. But this was a purely analytical innovation. We proposed that actors knew (not always consciously) what they should do in given situations by reference to systems of rules that specified the acts required and the proper actions (for various societies) needed to realize them. This step connected our theory with a strong and persistent tradition in philosophy, found in particular in the writings of L. Wittgenstein,⁴ namely, the idea that reference to rules was crucial in the explanation of human action.

The final step was the development of a methodology to explore social activity in search of patterns of act-action performances and to check on the hypothetical rule systems that such exploration yielded. We proposed the joint method of episode analysis (treating our social life as an anthropologist would treat the life of a strange tribe) with account analysis, the collection and study of the speech and writing produced by people who took part in typical episodes and who had the task of correcting or reproving the actions of themselves and others. Finally, we suggested a merging of the two approaches into an episode, by negotiation with the participants.

This has come to be called *ethogenic* methodology. It has been used in a wide range of studies including my work with P. Marsh and E. Rosser on adolescent violence⁵ and M. Kreckel's fine-grained investigations of family life.⁶ Currently, the ethogenic approach has been combined with the work of the German "action" psychologists, who developed a very similar approach.⁷ Further developments of ethogenic methods can be found in work by G.P. Ginsberg.⁸

1. Israel J & Tajfel H, eds. *The context of social psychology*. New York: Academic Press, 1972. 438 p. (Cited 105 times.)

2. Hume D. *An enquiry concerning the human understanding and concerning the principles of morals*.

Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1951. 371 p.

3. Harré R. Introduction. *Great scientific experiments: 20 experiments that changed our view of the world*.

Oxford, England: Phaidon Press, 1981. p. 9-28.

4. Wittgenstein L. *Philosophical investigations*. Oxford, England: Blackwell, 1953. 232 p. (Cited 885 times since 1966.)

5. Marsh P, Rosser E & Harré R. *The rules of disorder*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978. 140 p. (Cited 85 times.)

6. Kreckel M. *Communicative acts and shared knowledge in natural discourse*. London: Academic Press, 1981. 216 p.

7. von Cranach M & Harré R, eds. *The analysis of action: recent theoretical and empirical advances*.

Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1982. 404 p.

8. Ginsberg G P. *Emerging strategies in social psychological research*. Chichester, England: Wiley, 1979. 319 p.