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## Causality as conundrum

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Martyn Hammersley  
CAUSALITY AS CONUNDRUM

My argument here is a tentative one, it comes out of work in progress. In summary, it is that social scientists cannot avoid assuming some notion of causality, but that this concept involves deep problems that are as yet unresolved, and which may have significant implications for how we do research. There has been substantial criticism of quantitative research for failing to deal with the issue of causality adequately, notably by realists who insist on the need to identify underlying causal mechanisms rather than simply documenting recurrent patterns in the data (for example, Sayer 1992; but see Kemp and Holmwood 2003). Here I will focus primarily on the case of qualitative research.

The core meaning of the term ‘causality’, it seems to me, is that one type of thing (X) tends to be followed by another (Y), and that this occurs as a result of some force exerted by the occurrence of an X, rather than by happenstance. Note that this core sense does not assume that an X is always followed by a Y, or that what precedes a Y is always an X. In other words, using this core sense of the term, in designating X the cause of Y there is no assumption that X must be a necessary or a sufficient condition for the occurrence of Y; even less that it should be both a necessary and a sufficient condition. The latter requirement defines a much stronger sense of ‘causality’, one whose applicability is uncertain; though some models of the process of explanation assume this strong sense, for example both analytic induction and Ragin’s comparative method (on analytic induction, see Hammersley 1989; Ragin 1987), and I wouldn’t want simply to rule them out.

Many qualitative researchers, I suggest, are in denial about their reliance on the notion of causality. A recent example occurs in a discussion of the similarities between ethnography and Foucauldian genealogy (Tamboukou and Ball 2003). Here, the authors declare that both these approaches deny that the social world can be understood ‘in terms of causal relationships or by the subsumption of social events under universal laws’; and they take this denial to be valid. Yet, in practice, almost all qualitative research reports use verb forms that imply causal relations in the core sense I outlined above - such as ‘influence’, ‘shape’, ‘leading to’, or ‘resulting in’. And even though qualitative researchers generally avoid terms that imply strong causality, such as ‘determine’, these too are occasionally employed. Thus, Tamboukou and Ball go on to state that ‘instead of asking in which kinds of discourse we are entitled to believe, genealogies pose the question of which kinds of practices, linked to which kinds of external conditions, determine the different knowledges in which we ourselves figure’ (Tamboukou and Ball 2003:4; my emphasis). I am suggesting, then, that - on the face of it at least - there is an inconsistency between what many qualitative researchers say about causality and what they actually do when it comes to making knowledge claims (even knowledge claims about what determines the knowledge we can have).

Qualitative researchers have a negative attitude towards the notion of causality because they tend to interpret it in the strong sense and see this as eliminating the role of human agency. There are at least two reasons why qualitative researchers believe that agency plays an important role in human social life. First of all, as actors in the world we have a clear sense of our own agency, that we can decide what to do, albeit within limits. So, any form of complete determinism is at odds with human experience. There are, of course, philosophers who argue that this simply shows us that our experience is misleading (as when we see the sun go round the earth), but it is worth emphasising that the notion of causality also has its origins in our experience of the world: that actions of particular kinds on our part bring about specific kinds of result.

The other reason why qualitative researchers often insist on the importance of agency is because they believe that to adopt a deterministic position dehumanises human beings, portraying them as - indeed perhaps inducing them to act as if they were - automatons. Thus, the concept of causality, in its deterministic form, is often taken to imply that there is no possibility of changing social arrangements for the better, or is seen as ruling out any personal or collective responsibility for actions. It is important to recognise that this

problem arises not only in the case of so-called reductionist explanations of human behaviour such as those in sociobiology or evolutionary psychology, but also in those forms of social theory which emphasise the social determination of thought or action. The debate about humanism and anti-humanism in the context of Structuralism and Post-Structuralism is relevant here (see Davies 1997:57-71).

In seeking to conceptualise social life in a way that takes account of human agency, some qualitative researchers turned away from the model of natural science, which they took to involve causal determinism (though, in fact, there were influential views within both early empiricism and twentieth-century logical positivism that rejected the very concept of causality). In doing so, they have drawn, explicitly or implicitly, on one or other of at least two alternative philosophical traditions.

One line of argument derives from the work of Hegel and those influenced by him, and interprets the relations among social phenomena as internal (logical or rational) ones rather than external, causal ones. Identifying these relations depends on systematic interpretation: 'locating' phenomena within the theoretical context of some social system or historical meta-narrative that explains them. Here, great emphasis tends to be placed on Theory as a way of conceptualising social relations and trends; often in a manner that goes beyond, and reveals the distortion inherent in, empirical appearances. The other influential philosophical tradition I will mention in this context is Husserl's phenomenology. He presented the task of phenomenology as description rather than explanation, and what it revealed were not causal relations but, once again, relations operating within subjectivity (but this time universal rather than historically developing, and individual rather than collective). Applied to social research, this has often led to an empirical concern with documenting modes of cognition and feeling on the part of particular actors, or groups of actors; these being taken to express themselves in local social relations.

Interestingly, similar problems arose within both these traditions as regards their support for non-causal interpretations of human social life: later developments had the effect of undermining, or at least challenging, any distinction between internal and external relations. In the case of Hegel, once Marx had put him back on his feet, the focus of inquiry became relations in a material world, rather than within a developing 'world spirit'; and it is hard not to see Marx's account of capitalism as anything but a causal one (see Ruben 1979:118-26). In the case of Husserl, once his followers became interested in being-in-the-world rather than in the transcendental core of individual subjectivity, the same problem arose. It came to the surface, for example, in the disagreement between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty as to whether human actions are simply a matter of free will, any denial of this being treated as bad faith, or are always necessarily historically located, and therefore caught up within some kind of causal nexus (see Gutting 2001:203-8). Sartre, of course, effectively conceded the point in his later work.

What this suggests is that neither of these routes offers a way out of the problem of causality, and that we are forced to recognise its role alongside that of agency. But there are still considerable problems associated with reconciling the two. What seems to happen at the moment, to a large extent, is an oscillation within social scientific accounts between an emphasis on causality and on agency, this being governed in large part by value commitments. For example, social scientists sometimes explain policies they regard as oppressive or exploitative by appeal to agency: as resulting from the interests of dominant groups. On other occasions, however, they deny that those implementing the policy are aware of what they are doing, and may even insist that these people are acting with good intent; at worst, they are simply dupes of some system. Here there is movement away from an emphasis on agency towards a stress on causality, determined (if I may use that term!) by an ethical or political judgment about whether, and where, to assign blame. Similarly, in looking at people on the receiving end of policies, to avoid blaming the victim we often stress the causal factors that lead people to engage in actions that worsen their disadvantage, marginalisation, exclusion, etc. However, this tendency is sometimes challenged because it is taken to render these people less than human: as passive, socio-cultural dopes. In dealing with both the powerful and the powerless, then, there is an

oscillation between determinist and voluntarist approaches. (My colleague Roger Gomm has provided a detailed analysis of the discursive contortions to which this can lead: Gomm 2001).

This tendency to oscillate between causality and agency reflects two philosophical problems, it seems to me. First, there is the old issue of free will versus determinism. Secondly, there is the question of whether we can separate explanation from evaluation of human actions and institutions. I don't know of simple or widely accepted solutions to either of these problems. But it seems to me that one way forward, in the hope of finding a way to cope with them as social scientists rather than to resolve them as philosophers, is to start from the question of what we mean by an explanation. We explain one another's behaviour routinely in everyday life, and while the substance of our explanations may often be wrong, I'm not sure what it would mean to say that the form of these explanations is false. And an important formal feature of these explanations is that they are always framed by particular concerns, rather than being all-purpose. This point was made many years ago by the historian and philosopher Collingwood. He writes: 'if my car fails to climb a steep hill, and I wonder why, I shall not consider my problem solved by a passer-by who tells me that the top of a hill is farther away from the earth's centre than its bottom, and that consequently more power is needed to take a car uphill than to take it along the level'. This explanation is quite true, he notes, but it is not relevant in this context. By contrast, if someone opens the bonnet and holds up a loose high tension lead, indicating that the car has been running on three cylinders, an explanation that is adequate to the situation has been provided. Collingwood concludes: 'If I had been a person who could flatten out hills by stamping on them, the [first] passer-by would have been right to call my attention to the hill as the cause of the stoppage[...]' (Collingwood 1940:302-3). What Collingwood is subverting here is any idea that there is a single, definitive, comprehensive explanation for a phenomenon. And by doing so, I suggest, he makes space for recognition both of sheer contingency and of the role of agency. (For further development of this idea, see Garfinkel 1981.)

Social explanations are framed by concerns about who might be taken to be responsible and/or about how a situation could be changed. Given this, it is important to make clear what the value relevancies are that guide our work. At the same time, this does not imply that to put forward an explanation is automatically to declare who is responsible or what ought to be done. There is a difference between using certain value assumptions in order to frame one's explanation and endorsing those assumptions as the only legitimate ones. Indeed, there is no reason why a social scientist need be personally committed to the value assumptions used to frame his or her explanations; such independence is also embodied in the notion of internal critique. Indeed, I think it is an obligation on the part of social scientists to emphasise that evaluative or prescriptive conclusions do not follow logically (or in any other way automatically) from their findings, that a variety of practical or political conclusions can be drawn from any empirical analysis.

To summarise what I have said: I don't believe that social scientists, even qualitative researchers, can escape reliance on a core notion of causality. At the moment, much confusion is sown in methodological discussions by a failure to distinguish this from determinism. And, in practice, social scientists often seem to oscillate between an emphasis on causality and on agency, under the influence of concerns about the implications of the explanation they are putting forward for who is responsible or what is to be done. I have suggested that we must recognise that our explanations are always framed by relevance assumptions about value issues. (This is Weber's notion of value relevance.) And this rules out any idea of some single comprehensive theory that could provide a complete explanation for any social phenomenon, and thereby reduces (though perhaps does not eliminate) the tension between causality and agency. However, at the same time, we need to be explicit about the relevancies that frame our explanations and to make clear that adopting particular relevancies for the purposes of social scientific work does not endorse them. Indeed, for social science to flourish we need research that is explicitly governed by a variety of value frameworks, since these will reveal different (though not logically incompatible) causal patterns in the phenomena being studied.

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