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Explorations in Causality and Causal Attributions: Russians on the Murder of Galina Starovoitova

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Abstract. This article illustrates the complexities of attributing psychological import to causal attributions. The recent murder of a Russian psychologist/politician is employed as a socio-emotive backdrop.

Why are causal attributions--the proximal and distal explanations of each and every person for why human events occur--afforded psychological import by psychologists and others who formally study people via a socially constructed expert status? Besides being psychological in nature--i.e., as assumed phenomenological and observed behavioral characteristics--what else do causal attributions signify within the constraints of the scientific method?

Causal attributions are a vehicle for creating and maintaining meaning about the world and suggest an existential import: that people need or strive for meaning about the world. However, this quickly induces a circular argument that what people have they must need or have needed and what they need they must have or strive to have. And all constituents of the circular argument break down in many societies and cultures including ones permeated by mass marketing and consumerism.

A closely related suggestion of causal attributions' psychological import can be taken from evolutionary psychology. Some variants of this import are that causal attributions were of adaptive value sometime in the distant past, continue to be of adaptive value even as environments have changed and continue to change significantly, are more recent phenomena induced through combinations of indirect natural selection and direct or indirect self-change mechanisms, or that they are of no functional value at all.

Causal attributions' psychological import is sometimes ascribed to their possessing total or partial, direct or indirect, or proximal or distal causal properties. For example, internal, global, and pessimistic attributions are sometimes alleged to be causally related to clinical depression. Internal and external loci of control are sometimes alleged to be causally related to recovery from physical disease or psychological survival from extreme situations. Attributions about the ultimate source of causality--e.g., God, cosmic energy--are sometimes alleged to be causally related to probability of engaging in homicidal or suicidal behavior. However, support for these generalizations comes from research that purports to rule out other salient causal variables but cannot possibly do so. In fact, in all the above approaches to alleging causal attributions' psychological import, the statistical bases for this research are founded on non-statistical exemplars of rationalism, while the rational bases for psychological import are based on fuzzy statistical models embellished with rationalist trappings.

So what caused the murder of Galina Starovoitova, a Russian psychologist and legislator who sought to further the goals of Russian democracy as she constructed them both? Russians have been asked and make their causal attributions: Communist rule led to a moral collapse of the Russian people; a too easy acceptance of the loss of individual life and of the use of force as the only law worthy of respect; and a gratuitous or facile acceptance that the powers that be--they--are, have been, and always will be responsible.

Some Russians have no doubt posited that there were other more-or-less sinister causal factors at work. But are there not as many causal attributions as there are people--if not more? While many journalists have opined that illusions of any hope of progress towards democracy have been shattered with Ms. Starovoitova's murder, the notion of causal attributions being anything more than psychological in its most basic sense may have been shattered as well--if there's anything still left to shatter. (See Bohlen, C. (November 29, 1998). Illusions shattered in St. Petersburg. The New York Times, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Chandler, T.A., Sook Lee, M., & Pengilly, J.W. (1997). Self-esteem and causal attributions. *Genetic, Social, and General Psychology Monographs*, 123, 479-491; Edwards, J.A. (1998). Effects of causal uncertainty on the dispositional attribution process. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 34, 109-135; Hilton, D.J. (1998). Causal judgment and explanation. *Educational and child Psychology*, 15, 22-34; Young, M.E. (1995). On the origin of personal causal theories. *Psychonomic Bulletin and Review*, 2, 83-104.) (Keywords: Causal Attributions, Murder, Russia.)