

Handbook of Motivation and Cognition: v. 1: Foundations of Social Behaviour

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The Multiple Inference Model of Social Perception: Two Conceptual Problems and Some Thoughts on How to Resolve Them

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Philosophers of science have noticed repeatedly that scientists have a preference for simple over complex theories (e.g., Harman, 1965). Unfortunately, simple theories sometimes turn out to be oversimplifying, which in turn limits their generality (Quine & Ullian, 1978). As Reeder points out in his target article, the history of attribution research experienced a similar fate, in that the emphasis on intentions and motives in early theories of social inference (e.g., Heider, 1958; Jones & Davis, 1965) disappeared in favor of simpler models that focused exclusively on inferred traits (e.g., Gilbert, Pelham, & Krull, 1988) or broadly defined causal factors that are internal or external to the agent (e.g., Kelley, 1973). Reeder's multiple inference model (MIM) comes as a refreshing alternative to these simpler models, providing a more comprehensive view on the type of inferences perceivers make about other people. As such, the MIM not only integrates many findings from more than 50 years of attribution research; it also implies several novel predictions, many of which have already gained empirical support (e.g., Reeder, Hesson-McInnis, Krohne, & Scialoja, 2001; Reeder, Kumar, Hesson-McInnis, & Trafimow, 2002; Reeder, Monroe, & Pryor, 2008; Reeder, Vonk, Ronk, Ham, & Lawrence, 2004).

Despite the superiority of a multiple inference approach over single inference models, the MIM outlined by Reeder in this issue has a few conceptual problems that should ideally be resolved to further strengthen the power of the model. Specifically, there are two parts where the assumptions of the model seem circular, which limits its capability of providing a fully convincing account of social inference. In the following sections, I first outline the two conceptual problems that I see with the MIM. In an attempt to provide constructive criticism, this discussion is followed by some theoretical thoughts on how these shortcomings could possibly be resolved by means of a simple yet significant revision of the model.

Intentionality and Motive Inferences

A central assumption of the MIM is that intentional behavior is explained in terms of mental states such as aims and motives, whereas unintentional behavior

is explained in terms of causal antecedents that may be internal or external to the person (see also Malle, 1999). The aims and motives inferred for intentional behaviors are further assumed to provide the basis for corresponding trait inferences. In other words, people do not directly infer traits from intentional behavior, but they first infer aims and motives, which then provide the basis for subsequent inferences about stable traits and dispositions.

A major question implied by the distinction between intentional and unintentional behavior is how people know that a given behavior is intentional or unintentional. The answer provided by the MIM is that a behavior will be judged as intentional if the agent (a) desired the outcome, (b) believed that the action would bring about the outcome, (c) planned the action, (d) had the skill to accomplish the action, and (e) was aware of accomplishing the outcome.

As may already be evident from the juxtaposition of the last two paragraphs, this conceptualization implies the risk of circularity, as inferences of intentionality provide a precondition for inferences about aims and motives, but at the same time inferences of intentionality depend on perceivers' inferences about aims and motives. Perceivers need to infer the agent's motives to identify whether the agent's behavior was intentional or unintentional, but they first need to know whether the observed behavior was intentional or unintentional to determine whether motives account for the agent's behavior. In other words, inferences of intentionality represent both an antecedent as well as a consequence of inferences about motives. This not only poses an inferential problem to the perceiver, it also represents a conceptual problem in the MIM, in that it implies the risk of circularity.

Soft Versus Hard Constraints

A second, rather similar conceptual problem concerns the distinction between soft versus hard constraints. According to the MIM, soft constraints favor motive inferences. In contrast, hard constraints favor inferences about causal antecedents, similar to the inferences proposed for unintentional behavior. Soft constraints are defined as situational factors that leave the

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motivation and cognition: Foundations of social behavior (Vol. everyday life: Advances in social cognition (Vol. 10, pp. 161). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

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