

EXPLAINING SOCIAL ACTION REVISITED: A REPLY TO JOHN LEVI MARTIN

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – To clarify and address questions that have arisen concerning John Levi Martin’s Explanation of Social Action (2011). I reply to some of Martin’s comments to my original review of his book (2012). In particular, this paper examines the distinction between first-person and third-person accounts of human action and whether third-person explanations of action are ever justified.

Findings – This paper concedes several of Martin’s points, but contra Martin, maintains that third-person accounts are sometimes valuable forms of explanation. This paper also concludes that the distinction between first-person and third-person explanations is relative to the actor.

Methodology/approach – A careful and close analysis of his reply is employed along with careful explication and exemplification of central concepts related to the study of human action.

Mediations of Social Life in the 21st Century
Current Perspectives in Social Theory, Volume 32, 259–269
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ISSN: 0278-1204/doi:10.1108/S0278-120420140000032010

Social implications – *Martin has argued that third-person explanations of social action generate epistemological instability and hierarchical social relationships between researchers and those researched. This paper expresses doubts about the generalizability of these claims.*

Originality/value of paper – *To date, no extended discussion has been published pertaining to the social value of third-person explanations of social action.*

Keywords: Social action; social science; experience; instability; third-person accounts; explanations

INTRODUCTION

I appreciate the opportunity to engage in a dialogue with John Levi Martin about his book *The Explanation of Social Action* (ESA). I also thank Martin for his thorough and insightful response to my recent review of ESA and for providing me with an opportunity to reply. Martin's response strikes me as refreshingly earnest and reasonable. He cleared up several misunderstandings that I had of ESA and has motivated me to revisit my initial questions and to rethink my earlier arguments. I am also pleased to discover that my difficulties with the text were not mine alone, and I hope that our exchange will be helpful to others who have already read or plan to read the book.

To be clear, although my review focused predominantly on what I thought were a few of the book's shortcomings, I have always regarded ESA as an impressive work of scholarship that promises to positively reorient sociological inquiry. To save time and print, I will not recapitulate all of the many points with which I agree. Thus, an omission by me of any of Martin's specific points means that I either agree with them or regard any differences I have as relatively unimportant. Because I have been given the "last word," I do not want to raise additional questions that Martin won't have the opportunity to answer. I will focus my attention defending one argument: *third-person explanations are sometimes valid explanations of social action.*

THE PROBLEM OF INSTABILITY

The large number of articles and presentations that make unnecessary use of third-person explanations, especially in overtly “theoretical” works, is a problem for social science, in part stemming from the way we teach our undergraduate and graduate students. Martin is, therefore, right to remind us that we should not ignore first-person experiences when explaining actions, and also that actions are often, according to our own experiences, induced by the qualities of objects in a field. For example, as an instructor, I may read a student’s paper, judge it to be of poor quality, and give it a failing grade; the poor quality of the paper *causes* me to give that paper a low grade; and I perceive this quality relative to an explicit or implicit set of criteria relevant for that course and to a wider field of related courses.

Despite my affinity for Martin’s approach, however, he has not (yet) convinced me that social science should dispense with third-person explanations of *social action* altogether or that the “hermeneutics of suspicion” is without value.¹ Martin does not invalidate Freud’s basic insight, namely, that *ego-centered explanations (or experiences) of action are sometimes inadequate because people have unconscious motives.*² And although I entirely agree with Martin that, “we should confront explanations employing third-person terms with a great deal of suspicion” and that “the burden of proof is on those who would explain action with terms actors do not recognize,” I do not share his contention that we cannot “accept *any* such terms for explanations of action.” Explanations of the social behavior of children, for example, can refer to models of developmental stages that are unknown and possibly even unknowable to them. These are still good explanations, despite being third-person explanations.

Throughout ESA and in his response to my review, Martin makes two types of arguments against the use of third-person explanations, namely, an epistemological argument pertaining to the veridicality of experience, and a consequential argument pertaining to the problem of instability.³ I will address each of these in reverse order. Martin’s primary objection to the use of third-person explanations for social action is that using third-person explanations produces undesirable outcomes. Martin says that third-person explanations are rude, generate authoritarian relationships with actors, and most importantly, their use generates epistemological instability – a situation in which “completely opposite statements of truth” can be produced “given the same empirical inputs,” and which can only be

stabilized given “some *external* anchor of social authority” Martin illustrates the problem of instability with a story of mutual misperception: Freud, “understanding that Jung sees himself as possibly Freud’s student and successor, interprets this as Jung’s Oedipal wish to have Freud ... disposed of.” Martin provides a second example of instability in which liberals and conservatives accuse each other of willfully mis-*interpreting* their *theories* as covert attempts to achieve social dominance, precisely in order to achieve social dominance. In both cases, each party is responding to explanations, and these explanations are themselves the objects that they experience and to which they respond. This suggests, in contrast to what Martin writes elsewhere, that humans *can* have experiences of (i) propositions and/or (ii) third-person accounts. Freud is reacting both to what Jung says or communicates in linguistic (“propositional”) form, and also to his own interpretation of what Jung says, stated implicitly or explicitly in some linguistic form. Martin could argue that Freud is here not responding to propositions or explanations of experience, but rather, to his relationship with Jung. This explanation, however, would undermine the distinction between propositions *about* relationships and experiences *of* relationships, a distinction, which was introduced by Martin in order to defend the absolute veridicality of the latter.

I would evaluate the parable of Freud and Jung as follows: Freud attributes to Jung the (unconscious) intention to murder him and then faints. Freud reacts to his own interpretive explanation of Jung’s action, and this interpretation is faulty for all the reasons that Martin gives. Jung, however, correctly diagnoses Freud’s reaction as a response to his own “inverted Oedipal obsession.” Freud may or may not be right because he is attributing unconscious motives to Jung. Jung probably is right, however, because Freud is reacting to his own consciously perceived theory of Jung’s unconscious. In short, Jung’s account is right, Freud may or may not be right, and I can easily assume that *both* are right. So, although the story is supposed to exemplify an unstable equivalence between equally invalid and mutually exclusive perspectives, the story does not succeed in this purpose. We don’t have to choose between Jung and Freud because their theories are not mutually contradictory. As [Luhmann \(1998\)](#) repeatedly points out, all observing contains a blind spot: we cannot see what we cannot see. To be faithful to our own experience as observers of the actions of others (and as retrospective observers of our own actions) may entail attributing those actions to situational factors and social forces (or pseudo-forces) that are not acknowledged, recognized, or corroborated by the actors themselves during the act.

Does Martin's project of mapping first-person social experiences eliminate or ameliorate the problem of instability? To answer this question, we must specify *for whom* the problem will be eliminated. It is not at all clear to me how or whether adopting Martin's approach would resolve these disagreements *between the actors*. I would venture to suggest that the problem of instability likely arises proximately from a self-reinforcing mutual lack of trust, and ultimately from the way in which language (i.e., symbolic reference) becomes entangled with immediate sensory experiences, but this rather vague hypothesis does not contravene directly anything Martin has written. To my mind, Martin has not demonstrated how the mapping of first-person social experiences obviates the potential problems of instability, but neither have I proven that his approach would fail. Instead, I pose as an open question for future exploration the manner in which a field-theoretic commitment to the compilation of first-person social experiences might stabilize competing worldviews and the importance of this endeavor.

DISTINGUISHING FIRST-PERSON AND THIRD-PERSON EXPLANATIONS

Whether my argument that third-person explanations are sometimes valid is itself valid (or at least convincing) really depends on how we distinguish first-person and third-person explanations. According to Martin, first-person explanations will use terms that the actors will recognize as actually existing, even if, as Martin says, to an analyst these terms are "somewhat abstract" ("voters," "Republicans," "taxes," "faith") (p. 4). In contrast, third-person explanations will make use of terms that the actors will not recognize as having "real referents (perhaps, "false consciousness," "repressed fear," "anomie")" (p. 4). Martin recognizes that first-person explanations can utilize "somewhat abstract" terms because people can relate to or have experiences of abstract social objects. Third-person explanations of social action are those that invoke "causal forces outside of the phenomenological experience of the actor in question" (p. 2). The intuitive plausibility of this distinction seems to arise from the predication we implicitly make of social actions as being concrete sorts of things, as opposed to thinking, which seems more abstract. The ambiguity of the distinction rests upon the ambiguity of terms such "real referent" and "phenomenological experience." An important question becomes what sorts of things can become objects of experience. And for Martin, the distinction between

experience and language (i.e., propositions about experience) becomes crucial for delimiting the kinds of explanations that can count as “first-person.”

Since it was not mentioned in my original review or in Martin’s reply, I want to point out that in ESA, first-person explanations of action can include both those explanations in which actors see themselves as active subjects initiating action as well as those accounts in which actors see themselves as passive objects re-acting to external, situational factors. To lesson our moral culpability for past actions, for example, we often stress the situational factors that caused us to act in certain ways (first-person accusative), while underplaying the significance of situational factors when explaining the actions of others or when imagining our own future actions (first-person nominative). So, for Martin, and in contrast to Weber, the difference between third person and first person is not the difference between passively determined re-action (the accusative case) and freely willed action (the nominative case). This means that Martin, in principle, espouses no objection to an explanation, which treats actors as being pushed around by outside forces so long as the actors experience these forces for themselves. Someone’s frequent outbursts of expletives can be explained by Tourette Syndrome, for example, and this would count as a first-person accusative explanation because the person suffering from Tourette Syndrome (potentially) explains her own actions this way.⁴

Martin is also careful to stipulate that first-person explanations are not necessarily explanations that actors themselves would immediately accept (or understand); they might be agreed upon (or understood) only after being *explained to the actors*. It is interesting, but certainly not “fatal,” to point out, however, that “with dialogue” (Martin, p. 336), many patients actually do assent to and regard as beneficial the Freudian-type explanations to which Martin objects. Are we then to classify Freudian explanations as first-person under these circumstances?⁵ Based on these considerations, I infer that it is not the particular content of any explanation of action that makes it third person, and that the distinction between first person and third person is always relative to a particular actor. The potential danger is that we end up using the term “third person” as an ex post epithet we attach to any and all explanations we happen not to like. Fuzziness, however, doesn’t necessarily lead to this problem. Even if we are unable to specify exactly ahead of time which theories will fit into each category, the distinction may have concrete empirical meaning. Moreover, the strong warning against the use of third-person explanations has prima facie plausibility and can reorient the way empirical inquiry is conducted.

ARE THIRD-PERSON EXPLANATIONS EVER VALID?

Martin acknowledges that experiments demonstrate that people are not always aware of all of the factors influencing their actions and judgments. In ESA, he discusses in depth the implications of “experimental studies that demonstrate that subjects may have a misplaced confidence in their ability to understand the causes of their thoughts;” that they “can be primed with information, images, or other characteristics of situations that predictably lead them to certain sentiments, moods, or attitudes and, more important, even to biased conclusions after reasoned judgment” (p. 174). In response to these experimental findings, Martin presents in ESA two sets of arguments: first, Martin challenges their ecological validity and points out that we cannot infer from these studies that persons *in general* are controlled dupes, confused as to the causes of their own actions, because the experimenters, who exercise a high degree of causal agency and control, are themselves persons; second, Martin reasons that these experimental findings do not show that people are mistaken about their experiences, but rather, that people’s *accounts* of experience are sometimes unreliable, either because of the cognitive limitations of retrospection or because the social context of questioning causes actors to give defensive and distorted answers. But none of what Martin has written demonstrates that people cannot have mistaken, incomplete or inadequate perceptions, and not just mistaken *accounts* of those perceptions.

Taken together, the findings reported by Gestalt and ecological psychologists indicate that actors are not omniscient. The fact that we have cognitive limitations, however, is not a valid reason to ignore first-person experiences, nor is it a justification for any and all third-person explanations. Researchers, however, have by and large interpreted these experimental results in precisely this manner. In response to what he perceives to be a total disregard of first-person experiences, an attitude which is without warrant and which has, moreover, contributed to the proliferation of third-person explanations of action in social science, Martin adopts the opposing position, defending the veridicality of experience as a kind of new foundationalism. The choice, however, between rejecting all of experience and accepting all of it as veridical is a forced choice – it is a false dichotomy. Although I admit that making stark contrasts in order to accentuate the differences between one’s position and one’s opposition is often an effective polemical strategy and pedagogical technique, as an issue of pragmatics, we need not be constrained by an “all or nothing” approach to cognition. Can we not also adopt a more banal position, for example, that our perceptual

and cognitive faculties have been evolutionarily adaptive for our species, that humans have a remarkable capacity for observing (“qualities” in) our environments, but that our perceptual systems are not perfect, and that we are also prone to making systematic errors of judgment? Why insist that all such errors only “creep in” outside of the experience? Martin wants to attribute “errors” exclusively to memory lapses (i.e., because accounts are *retrospective*), to language (i.e., because accounts are *propositions* about experience and not experiences in themselves), or to social pressures. Social researchers can go astray (i.e., away from experience) if they rely only on data acquired from retrospective accounts expressed in linguistic propositions. This does not mean, however, that perceptions or “experiences” themselves might not also be mistaken or at least incomplete, at least some of the time. Martin’s position, in an attempt to defend experience at all costs, seems to deny what is to me itself a self-evident experience, namely, that experiences are fallible, and judgments are corrigible.

To cite **Dutton and Aron’s (1974)** study, is it not reasonable to infer that we are more likely to experience sexual attraction to an attractive person more acutely and intensely under conditions of “high anxiety,” or at the very least, that the qualities we perceive in “objects” depend in part on the background conditions within which those perceptions take place? My point is simply that variable background conditions have variable effects on human behavior; we cannot be aware of or consciously attend to all of those conditions; and that therefore our first-person experiences of what motivates our own actions are often incomplete. All of this seems to suggest that we can supplement first-person experiences of action with third-person accounts of action, but again, this depends on how we parse the difference between the two.

Martin extends the veridicality of experience to racist and other prejudiced perceptions by arguing that racist perceptions are not distorted perceptions but rather, accurate perceptions of distorted objects. He then adds that the perceived “objects” are really social relationships. To say that the objects that people experience are really “bundles of relations,” however, becomes a third-person explanation insofar as (from our point of view) the actors hypostasize these relations into natural or supernatural entities. For example, consider the (late) Pastor Fred Phelps and the Westboro Baptist Church of Topeka, Kansas. The Westboro Baptist Church is infamous for its anti-gay bigotry and runs the website, “godhatesfags.com.” We can imagine three reactions that a social scientist might have to such homophobia, expressed and justified in religious vernacular. The first would be to attribute the observation to the observer(s) and not to the object observed

(e.g., “Mr. Phelps and his congregation are bigots. They experience a hateful God because they are themselves hateful”). The second kind of response would be to attribute the observation to the object being observed, which in this case would mean siding with Mr. Phelps and adopting the (first-person) *point of view* of the other — although this is certainly not the kind of first-person *explanation* Martin, or anyone else, would endorse. Martin seems to advocate the third kind of response, which is a more nuanced version of the first. It would go something like this: “Mr. Phelps is not right about what he *says*, but his experience that motivates him to say it is real, and that experience is the experience of a real (hateful) relationship he has to people he calls ‘fags,’ to his God, to his followers, to the media, and to his many detractors and critics.”

Now, there is definitely merit to this last explanatory effort. My point is simply that because the members of this church do not themselves regard their God as a mirror of their church or as a projection of their own bigoted attitudes onto an external, supernatural authority figure, explaining their experiences (and hence their actions) as the experiences of distorted, reified social relationships potentially introduces explanatory terms that are not recognized by the actors as having real referents. It is thus useful precisely because it is a third-person explanation.⁶ To be clear, I do think we should try to explain actors’ actions by getting at their experiences of those actions, and we can accurately describe without introducing unnecessary moralism. I also agree that many social objects consist in “bundles of relations.” I am just pointing out that we can regard people’s experiences as “real to them” without presuming the infallibility of those perceptions and concomitant judgments.

Because this point seems self-evident and even trivial to me, I will presume that Martin would agree with most of what I have written here, but would argue that his theory is not an attempt to establish the absolute truth of experiences. He might also argue that the explanation I provided above is not really a third-person explanation. Martin states explicitly in several places that actors do not need to agree with the explanations in order for those explanations to qualify as first-person explanations. Perhaps, then, there is a way to explain the social actions of the Westboro Baptist congregation (e.g., protesting at funerals) by referring only to the feelings of obligation they have toward one another and to the church. We might also choose to refer to their experiences of God without reducing this to an ensemble of relations, since this would be tantamount to effacing the objects we are supposing to be preserving in our explanatory accounts. Following Latour (1993, 2005), we could regard the category of the social

as something to be explained, rather than a means to explain. We would instead, as Martin proposes, try to compile and organize people's experiences of social life. If I am correct in my anticipation of Martin's likely responses, then my comments can be regarded as elaborations of ESA rather than as criticisms.

NOTES

1. Martin avoids much of what I had taken to be a criticism – that he unnecessarily limits the scope of sociological inquiry – by acknowledging that third-person explanations are sometimes okay for explaining things other than social action, such as *outcomes*. Because I think it strengthens his argument, I infer that Martin would include aggregate patterns in this latter category as well (e.g., properties of networks or distributions such as the power law), and that he regards as valid the use of third-person terms to explain them.

2. To accept this position does not necessitate that one accept Freud's specific hypotheses or even the notion of a "Freudian" unconscious that represses anxiety-provoking memories. By the "unconscious" I mean more generally both the Freudian unconscious, the preconscious, as well as the "cognitive unconscious," namely, those mental processes that are inaccessible to consciousness but that still influence our judgments or behavior.

3. Martin uses the word 'veridical' quite often, by which he means that our experiences are 'consubstantial,' that is, something like objectively true. I am proposing that we regard first-person experiences as veridical in the sense of being subjectively sincere, at least when they are experienced as such. They are also probably veridical in the sense of objectively true, but I am not convinced that this is always the case. How the veridicality of experience could be inter-subjectively established, however, considering it is all we ever access to, is a conundrum I will not even attempt to (dis-)solve here.

4. A cross-tabulation of these two distinctions (first/third person and internal/external attribution) renders four possible types of explanations: first-person accusative; first-person nominative; third-person nominative; and third-person accusative. Third-person nominative accounts are used to make valuations of the actions of others, as when pointing to a villain's moral failures or to a hero's exceptional character. Martin restricts his admonition for third-person accusative explanations.

5. In addition to Freudian explanations, in ESA, Martin provides several other examples of explanations that fit into the "third-person" category, including: (1) Turner's (1984, p. 199) explanation of the "popularity of jogging by recourse" to the "requirements of capitalist society" (p. 108) and (2) presumably any explanation that makes use of the variable "intrinsic religiosity," because, as Martin says, "there is no such thing as intrinsic religiosity" (p. 110). This seems compelling. I concur that "intrinsic religiosity" does not have the same sort of concreteness that "wealth" does, and people do not refer to their "intrinsic religiosity" in order to explain anything they might do but certainly might refer to wealth as a motivating force.

6. Martin admits that the “chief critique” he would personally make of ESA is that it does not provide a precise account of fetishism: we don’t know exactly *how* social relationships become reified objects. I agree that this is troubling rather than fatal, and that nobody else has really explained this either.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I’d like to thank Larry Chappell and Rhydon Jackson for their invaluable assistance and suggestions.

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