Wise as folk

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See also Causal mapping has been used for over 50 years in many disciplines

Causal mappers believe that humans are the best detectors of causation

Causal mappers believe that humans are good at thinking in terms of causal nuggets

Where "folk" comes from

Somewhere in the last century social science picked up a tic. It started putting the word *folk* in front of anything ordinary people do with their minds. Folk psychology. Folk biology. Folk physics. Folk taxonomy. Folk theories of disease, of weather, of justice.

The word travels from the German *Volk* through folklore and anthropology: folk tales, folk songs, folk medicine, folkways. William Graham Sumner published *Folkways* in 1906 to name the customs a people inherit without examining them. That is the freight the word still carries. *Folk* means handed down, untutored, quaint, and above all not yet corrected by science.

In most of these usages *folk* just labels the intuitive everyday theory ordinary people hold: folk psychology is the framework we all use to predict each other, folk biology our common-sense sorting of living kinds, folk physics our feel for how objects move. Even there the word is doing quiet work, marking the everyday version as the naive cousin of the proper science.

Philosophy of mind then took the *folk psychology* case and pushed it much further into a technical doctrine. Here folk psychology is not just our ordinary talk of beliefs and desires; it is recast as an implicit *theory*, and a bad one. The eliminativists, Paul and Patricia Churchland chief among them, treated that theory as a primitive proto-science, a stopgap that a mature neuroscience would one day throw out, the way chemistry threw out phlogiston. That is a special, contested usage rather than what the word usually means. But it shows the freight the marker always carried. Call something *folk* and you have already decided it is wrong, or at best a charming first draft awaiting the grown-ups.

Turning it on its head

Now apply that same marker to causal reasoning and listen to how absurd it sounds. *Folk causation*. The everyday, untutored, pre-scientific way that ordinary people work out what causes what, pending replacement by proper method.

Replacement by what, exactly?

Humans are the best causation detectors on the planet. Not approximately, not as a courtesy. We read cause and effect faster, across more domains, and from less data than any instrument, any animal, and until very recently any machine we have built. A toddler works out that pushing the cup tips the juice. You work out from a half-sentence and a tone of voice why a colleague went quiet in a meeting. We do this constantly, mostly accurately, and we could not survive a single morning without it. As Judea Pearl keeps insisting, if you want to thrive in this world you have to understand causality natively, and we do so from infancy.

To stamp *folk* on that achievement is to get the relationship backwards. The controlled experiment is the latecomer, the special case, the narrow tool that works beautifully when you have many near-identical causes followed by many near-identical effects, and not otherwise. Everyday causal reasoning is the foundation that experiment is built on top of, not a rough sketch that experiment improves. You cannot design a trial, read its result, or decide it matters without the very faculty the word *folk* sneers at.

So the condescension runs the wrong way round. The right comparison is not naive opinion against rigorous science. It is a general-purpose causal engine of staggering reach against a precision instrument with a tiny field of view. Both are valuable. Only one of them gets breakfast made and the kids to school.

What we actually claim

Our everyday causal understanding is as primary as our perception of colour. It does not come mainly from logging correlations between events; it is fundamentally prior to that, and it is of course just as fallible as our sense of colour or size. This is why we take the causal claims of people, expert and non-expert, seriously (Maxwell 2004; Maxwell 2004). That kind of evidence is the bread and butter of evaluation.

It is also why we resist the idea that we *infer* causation through some conscious cognitive step. Mostly we just see it, everywhere, all the time. We do not teach children to infer causes. We teach them the opposite discipline: to question what they already see, and to separate a real cause from a mere co-occurrence.

What humans bring to this is not folklore. It is evolved machinery sharpened by survival, intuitive causal models built from infancy, the ability to carry a cause learned in one domain into a completely different one, counterfactual imagination, the habit of intervening to test a hunch, and a culture that accumulates and passes on hard-won causal knowledge through language and stories. Errors happen. We sometimes see a cause where there is only a coincidence. But the system that occasionally or even often misfires is the same system that underwrites every experiment ever run.

Conclusion

Causal reasoning is not a quaint feature of human cognition awaiting correction. It is the backbone of it. The word *folk* was always a way of holding ordinary minds at arm's length, of marking them as pre-

scientific so that the real scientists could get on. Used for causation it is not just wrong, it is upside down, because the faculty being patronised is the one doing the patronising.

So we will keep the verb and drop the slur. Humans remain the best detectors of causation, individually and collectively. Don't call us folk.

See also: 400 realist causation

References

Maxwell (2004). *Using Qualitative Methods for Causal Explanation*. SAGE Publications Inc. https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X04266831.

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