Advocacy and the Function of Folk Psychology

Henry Schiller

Summary

We often use terms like 'wants' to advocate for our interests and for the interests of others. I explain how such advocating speech works, and in which contexts such uses of 'wants' are the default (and in which they are not). I use these observations to argue that there is an *irreducible normative function* to folk psychology.

Abstract

Folk psychology is our ordinary framework for understanding human behavior in terms of mental states, like belief and desire. Folk psychology is often thought of in terms of a proto-scientific *theory of mind* (Gopnik & Wellman 1994); this endows us with a particular way of understanding the behavior of complex physical systems. Correspondingly, it is often claimed that we acquired a folk psychological capacity in order to have dominion over our environment (an environment populated with intentional systems). This motivates the following reductive position:

(1)   Folk-psychological reduction:
   a.   We acquired a folk psychological capacity in order to predict, explain, and control the behavior of other individuals,
   b.   All uses of folk psychology can be reduced to one of these basic functions.

Though the precise details of this claim have been disputed at the margins (cf: Knobe 2006), the view that we can explain all uses of folk psychology *in terms of its status as scientific theory* is widely endorsed.[1] When combined with another plausible claim about the *use* of psychological verbs—namely, that when we use

---

[1] This includes not only proponents of the so-called 'theory theory' of folk psychology, but also those who expound simulation (Goldman 1989) and hybrid (Stich & Nichols 1992) views as well.

terms like 'thinks' and 'wants' we are tokening concepts from folk psychology—we get the position that all use of psychological language reduces to one of the three basic functions.

What I argue in this paper is that folk psychological verbs are part of a *normative practice*, and that their use cannot be reduced to things like prediction and explanation. Specifically I argue for the following view of *desire ascriptions*:

(2)   'Wants' as a verb of advocacy:
         In cases of collective decision making or group deliberation, the default use of 'wants' is *to advocate* when the subject of the ascription is a member of the group (or is proxied by one).

I start with an observation about a typical use of verbs of desire—we often use such verbs to advocate our interests and the interests of others. Here is a characteristic example:

> *Sam and Mikhail are trying to decide where to get some food in New York. Their friend Jake will also join them. "I think I want pizza" says Sam; "I think Jake wants something that reminds him of the midwest" says Mikhail. "Let's compromise and go to Speedy Romeo's—they have St. Louis style pizza".*

To advocate for something is to draw attention to reasons in favor of endorsing or doing that thing. To advocate someone's interests is to put their interests on the table as potential sources of such reasons. Advocacy is connected to a notion of 'doing for'—to do something for someone is to take their interests into account as one of your reasons.

After establishing that these uses of 'wants' occur, as well as their intended effect, I go into more detail about their *discursive function*. What I argue is that such uses establish a commitment to taking someone's interest into account—the psychological effect of this is to draw attention to that thing as an object of (potential) value in our joint decision making. This is borne out by the observation that uses of desire ascriptions *in collaborative contexts* license the subsequent use of *deontic* modal verbs:

(3)   *Context: We're planning a camping trip with Dan;*
         a.   A: Dan wants to make omelettes.
         b.   B: So there should be eggs in the cooler.

Here, the natural reading of 'should' is performative and deontic (Kaufmann 2019). By contrast, however, when the subject of an ascription is not a collaborator, the same modal verbs tend to get an epistemic reading:

(4)   *Context: We're planning on sabotaging Dan's camping trip;*
    a.   A: Dan wants to make omelettes.
    b.   B: So there should be eggs in the cooler.

When it comes to 'in-groups' and collaborators, the function of folk psychology is a kind of collaborative value management (cf: Tomasello 2022). It is only when we consider 'out-groups'—opponents and neutral parties—that we apply a scientific stance to psychologizing.

The fact that advocating uses of 'wants' cannot be reduced to prediction / explanation is apparent from a number of observations. For instance, we often act to satisfy the desires of the deceased (e.g. 'it's what he would have wanted') where no prediction or explanation is possible. I also consider the relationship between desire satisfaction and gratitude in collaborative contexts.

References

Dennett, Daniel Clement. 1981. *The intentional stance*. MIT Press.

Fodor, Jerry A. 1987. *Psychosemantics: The problem of meaning in the philosophy of mind*. MIT press.

Goldman, Alvin. 1989. Interpretation psychologized. *Mind & Language* 4. 161–185.

Gopnik, Alison & Henry M. Wellman. 1994. The theory theory. In Lawrence A. Hirschfeld & Susan A. Gelman (eds.), *Mapping the Mind: Domain Specificity in Cognition and Culture*, 257–293. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kaufmann, Magdalena. 2019. Fine-tuning natural language imperatives. *Journal of Logic and Computation* 29(3). 321–348.

Knobe, Joshua. 2006. The concept of intentional action: A case study in the uses of folk psychology. *Philosophical studies* 130. 203–231.

Stich, Stephen & Shaun Nichols. 1992. Folk psychology: Simulation or tacit theory? *Mind & Language* 7(1-2). 35–71.

Tomasello, Michael. 2022. *The evolution of agency*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.