

Decision Processes Colloquium

Monday, February 21, 2011

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Category-Mistake Bumps on the Road to Prescriptive Models of Social Judgment

Or, Wittgenstein's Ghost in the Publication Machine

Analytical philosophers define "category mistakes" as errors that arise from "ontological confusion" and that treat things of one kind as though they belonged to another (Ryle, 1949). This talk explores the possibility that several widely discussed judgmental biases and errors are, *at least in part*, "functionalist category mistakes" in which researchers' assumptions about their subjects' goals do not correspond to what subjects (and often other observers) think subjects are doing. I focus on five candidates for category-mistake status—the fundamental attribution error, the severity bias, the dilution effect, unconscious prejudice, and overconfidence among political forecasters—and identify specific ways in which category-mistake critiques can be transformed from philosophical second-guessing into resolvable scientific disputes. For instance, disputes over whether the fundamental attribution error is indeed erroneous can be resolved, in part, by testing predictions about how the magnitude of the underlying "over-attribution" effect should change as a function of either experimental manipulations or individual-difference variables designed to activate one of two distinct functionalist mindsets: the intuitive prosecutor or the intuitive-scientist. Finally, I revisit Wittgenstein's (1953) oft-quoted argument (with which I begin the talk) that the "barrenness of psychology" is traceable to a disciplinary tendency to use operational definitions to finesse subtle conceptual questions that can be temporarily suppressed but that will eventually resurface. I close with a sociology-of-science argument on how the combination of publication inflation and attendant rush to publish, weak replication norms, and ideological homogeneity in psychological science have created perverse incentives that exacerbate the core problem that Wittgenstein pointed to 60 years ago.