

Folk Psychology Project Notes

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1. It Began with Heider

In 1958 Heider published a book on what he called ‘naive psychology’ and, interchangeably, ‘commonsense psychology’; now more commonly referred to as folk psychology. Although widely ignored,¹ no comparably detailed work on folk psychology has yet appeared.

Heider’s overall aim is to advance ‘[t]he scientific study of interpersonal relations’ or, as we say, social interactions (Heider 1958, p. 3). He views naive psychology as having a central role in achieving this aim.

Heider offers two ways of characterising naive psychology. On the first,

‘the unformulated or half-formulated knowledge of interpersonal relations as it is expressed in our everyday language and experience [...] will be referred to as common-sense or naive psychology’ (Heider 1958, p. 4)

Like subsequent authors (including Clark (1987, p. 140) and Dennett (2014, pp. 73–74)), Heider makes an analogy with naive physics:

‘In the same way one talks about a naive physics which consists of the unformulated ways we take account of simple mechanical laws in our adapted actions, one can talk about a “naive psychology” which gives us the principles we use to build up our picture of the social environment and which guides our reactions to it.’ (Heider 1958, p. 5)

What is the role of naive psychology in advancing the scientific study of interpersonal relations? Heider thinks of naive psychology as ‘unsurpassed for the description of even the most subtle relationships’. But science requires systematicity, which naive psychology lacks. Heider’s project is therefore to provide:

‘suggestions [drawing on both naive and scientific psychology] for the construction of a language that will allow us to represent, if not all, at least a great number of interpersonal relations, discriminated by conventional language in such a way that their place in a general system will become clearer.’ (p. 9)

Heider characterises the same work as offering:

‘a preliminary approach to an analysis of basic components of our naive ideas about other people and social situations.’ (p. 18)

¹ To illustrate, the work is not cited in a recent collection of some of the best work on folk psychology (Hutto & Ratcliffe 2007); nor does Dennett, who claims to have introduced the term ‘folk psychology’ (Dennett 2014, pp. 73–74), mention Heider’s book.

Heider is explicit that systematising naive psychology is one way of understanding interpersonal behaviour:

‘our main purpose is to make explicit the system of concepts that underlies interpersonal behavior’ (Heider 1958, pp. 12)

In what sense might a system of concepts ‘underlie’ interpersonal behaviour? As Heider specifies a ‘program for describing interpersonal relations’ (p.~14), we might be tempted to construe being *underlying* as merely a matter of *being sufficient to provide a systematic description of*. Heider does, however, endorse a stronger thesis:

‘The general features of the causal network are thus in some way internalized and mastered. They form the content of the cognitive matrix that underlies our interpretations of other people’s behavior and our attempts to influence it.’ (Heider 1958, pp. 297–8)

We can therefore regard Heider as responsible for introducing and defending three theses:

1. ‘there is a system hidden in our [ordinary, everyday] thinking about interpersonal relations, and [...] this system can be uncovered’ (p.~14)
2. Uncovering this system enables us to describe interpersonal relations in a systematic, scientific way.
3. Humans’ capacities to interact with others depend, in part², on them having ‘internalized and mastered’ this system.

How should ‘hidden’ and ‘uncovered’ be understood? Maybe the thinking contains only the slightest glimmers which provide inspiration and uncovering is mainly construction, so that ethnography would be irrelevant to uncovering the system. In this case, there may be a large gap between naive psychology and the psychological bases of capacities for social interaction. Or maybe the uncovering should be understood as merely tidying up to reveal things that are already present but not easy to see. In this case, we could interpret Heider as committed to the claim that implicit knowledge of naive psychology just is a psychological basis of capacities for social interaction. We are pushed towards the second possibility by Heider’s stress throughout on ‘analyzing the data through which our beliefs are revealed’ (p.~60). To illustrate:

² Heider (1958, p. 298) concludes with the qualification that ‘one has to be aware that the picture that evolves in this way shows only a part of what is going on between people, that part which, let us say, inclines toward the side of “intellectualism.” To complete the picture one would have to add other facets, for instance, one would have to give an account of the genetic sources of interpersonal behavior.’

‘to study the cognitions and actions directed toward the perceptions of another person, we have to explore our beliefs regarding the conditions and effects of perception. [...] The commonsense assumptions about the conditions that make it possible for one person to recognize what another is perceiving are for the most part implicit. If people were asked about these conditions they probably would not be able to make a complete list of them. Nevertheless, these assumptions are a necessary part of interpersonal relations; if we probe the events of everyday behavior, they can be brought to the surface and formulated in more precise terms.’ (Heider 1958, p. 60)

Heider appears to view social interaction as made possible by the internalization and mastery of a system which can be characterised by re-formulating naive psychology. This is confirmed by a second characterisation of naive psychology:

‘naive psychology, the pretheoretical and implicit system which underlies interpersonal relations.’ (Heider 1958, p. 58)³

Treating as equivalent the two ways of characterising naive psychology presupposes what we will call *Heider’s Thesis*:

Heider’s Thesis [broad version] All capacities for social interaction depend on representing commonsense psychological principles and making inferences from them.

In case this thesis seems too obvious to be even worth formulating, consider some views which contradict it or at least justify considering whether it is true:

1. There are no commonsense psychological principles (we take this view to be refuted by Heider’s work).
2. More than one incommensurable system of principles can be uncovered in commonsense thinking about social interactions (compare Stich & Ravenscroft 1994).
3. Commonsense psychological principles provide limited insight into social interactions (perhaps because their role is not only explanatory but also regulatory (McGeer 2007; Zawidzki 2013) or normative).
4. Commonsense psychological principles vary more between cultures than do capacities for social interaction (compare Lillard 1998).

³ In terms of the distinction introduced by Stich & Ravenscroft (1994), Heider’s first characterisation is folk psychology in the ‘external’ sense whereas Heider’s second characterisation is folk psychology in the ‘internal’ sense.

5. Human share capacities for social interaction with other animals that do not represent commonsense psychological principles.
6. Adults share capacities for social interaction with infants but infants do not represent commonsense psychological principles.

One response to the last two views would be to retreat to a narrower version of Heider's Thesis:

Heider's Thesis [narrow version] Capacities for social interaction involving communication about psychological things depend on representing folk psychological principles and making inferences from them.

As Stich & Ravenscroft (1994) argue, even this weaker thesis is far from being obviously true.

1.1. x

The broad version of Heider's Thesis is presupposed by a body of comparative and developmental research. You can use Heider's Thesis to get from 'individuals of this kind exhibit a certain capacity social interaction' to 'individuals of this kind represent the corresponding folk psychological principles'.

Further, the thesis is confounded with the weaker view that certain social interactions depend on representing psychological principles though not necessarily *folk* principles. One aim of what follows is to separate these views.

1.2. Our questions (using Heider's terms)

Weaker to stronger challenges:

1. Does the unformulated or half-formulated knowledge of interpersonal relations as it is expressed in our everyday language involve a system of concepts that underlies **all** interpersonal behavior?
2. Does the unformulated or half-formulated knowledge of interpersonal relations as it is expressed in our everyday language involve a system of concepts that underlies that interagential behaviour which involves communication about psychological things? (Roughly, are folk psychological practices underpinned by knowledge of folk psychological principles?)
3. Does the unformulated or half-formulated knowledge of interpersonal relations as it is expressed in our everyday language involve a system of concepts that underlies **any** interpersonal behavior?

Problem with these formula is that it has borrowed an unspecified ‘underlies’ from Heider. Will need to refine by distinguishing different ways in which the knowledge of interpersonal relations may be involved.

1.3. x

Since Heider has not been influential, we need to establish that Heider’s thesis has been endorsed elsewhere.

1.4. Relation to other questions

By contrast philosophers have mostly considered these questions:

To what extent are the unformulated or half-formulated beliefs about interpersonal relations as they are expressed in our everyday language true? (Churchland etc)

Can the unformulated or half-formulated beliefs about interpersonal relations as they are expressed in our everyday language be understood as a theory?

2. Quotes on How Folk Psychology Is Characterised

2.1. encyclopedia articles, textbooks, introductions

‘I proposed folk psychology as a term for **the talent** we all have for interpreting the people around us—and the animals and the robots and even the lowly thermostats—as agents with information about the world they act in (beliefs) and the goals (desires) they strive to achieve, choosing the most reasonable course of action, given their beliefs and desires. [...] Folk physics then, in parallel fashion, is the talent we have for expecting liquids to flow, unsupported things to drop, hot substances to burn us, water to quench our thirst, and rolling stones to gather no moss. [...] Folk psychology is “**what everyone knows**” about their minds and the minds of others [...] It is **like an idealized model** in science—maximally abstract and stripped down to the essentials’ (Dennett 2014, pp. 73–74) (first part is quoted in (Mölder 2016, p. 3)). — Dennett claims to have introduced the term; tho’ perhaps not for a single thing.

‘The capacity for “mindreading” is understood in philosophy of mind and cognitive science as the capacity to represent, reason about, and respond to others’ mental states. Essentially the same capacity is also known as “folk psychology”, “Theory of Mind”, and “mentalizing”. An example of everyday

mindreading: you notice that Tom's fright embarrassed Mary and surprised Bill, who had believed that Tom wanted to try everything. Mindreading is of crucial importance for our social life: our ability to predict, explain, and/or coordinate with others' actions on countless occasions crucially relies on representing their mental states.' (Barlassina & Gordon 2017)

'Folk psychology is a name traditionally used to denote our everyday way of understanding, or rationalizing, intentional actions in mentalistic terms.' (Hutto & Ravenscroft 2021)

'What should we mean by this term 'folk psychology'? [...] Instead of beginning with folk psychology as what the folk know or believe about psychology, we do better to start with folk psychological practice—a practice in which we all engage on an everyday basis. We describe people as bearers of psychological states. We explain people's behaviour (or decisions, or judgements or other psychological states) by appeal to their psychological states. We predict people's behaviour (or decisions, or judgements or other psychological states) by relying on assumptions about their psychological states.' (Davies & Stone 1998, p. 54)

'“Folk psychology” refers to the way that ordinary people come to understand and navigate the social world around them. [...] Pluralistic folk psychology presents a new way of thinking about social cognition. Its central thesis is that folk psychology involves a variety of strategies and goals. On this view, terms like mindreading, mentalizing, and theory of mind refer to more strategies than just propositional attitude attribution, and are used for goals beyond behavior prediction and explanation.' (Andrews et al. 2020)

'our ordinary psychological thinking and theorizing (“folk psychology”)' (Kim 2019, p. 14)

'if there were a culture, past or present, for whose members the central principles of our folk psychology, such as the one that relates belief and desire to action, did not hold true, its institutions and practices would hardly be intelligible to us, and its language would be untranslatable into our own. [...] it seems clear that folk psychology enjoys a degree of stability and universality that eludes scientific psychology.' (Kim 2019, p. 110)

'In the weakest sense, one can say that folk psychology is just the practice of attributing mental states to other people. Somewhat more substantially, 'folk psychology' can be taken to mean the ability to understand others' behavior in terms of mental states. ... Third, 'folk psychology' might mean merely the commonsense conceptual framework that comprises the mentalistic terms used in the folk practice.' (Mölder 2016, p. 2)

'some philosophers and psychologists assume that our implicit grasp of folk

psychology is the very thing that makes social cognition possible.’ (Mölder 2016, p. 3)

‘I will understand ‘folk psychology’ primarily in the sense of a conceptual framework that includes certain familiar psychological terms as well as the links between them. Of course, this framework is put to practical use when we attribute mental states to others in order to make sense of their action, and this presumes a certain ability or set of abilities to apply the framework. The ‘ability’ and ‘practice’ senses of ‘folk psychology’ are thus related to the ‘framework’ sense’ (Mölder 2016, p. 5)

Churchland: ‘Folk psychology’ denotes the prescientific, common-sense conceptual framework that all normally socialized humans deploy in order to comprehend, predict, explain, and manipulate the behaviour of humans and the higher animals.’ (Churchland 1994, 308) quoted by (Mölder 2016, p. 4)

‘thorough perusal of the explanatory factors that typically appear in our commonsense explanations of our internal states and our overt behavior sustains the quick ‘reconstruction’ of a large number of universally quantified conditional statements, conditionals with the conjunction of the relevant explanatory factors as the antecedent and the relevant explanandum as the consequent. It is these universal statements that are supposed to constitute the ‘laws’ of folk psychology.’ (Churchland 1989, p. 227)

‘we have a common-sense theory of mind, or a ‘folk psychology’, which implicitly defines ordinary psychological concepts’ (Botterill & Carruthers 1999, p 10) — their key contrast is between folk and scientific psychology.

2.2. Gallese (potential ally)

‘humans are able to understand the behaviour of others in terms of their mental states—intentions, beliefs and desires—by exploiting what is commonly designated as ‘folk psychology’ [...] A growing sense of discomfort towards a blind faith in folk psychology to characterize social cognition is indeed surfacing within the field of philosophy of mind.’ (Gallese 2007, p. 659)

‘the automatic translation of the folkpsychology-inspired ‘flow charts’ into encapsulated brain modules, specifically adapted to mind-reading abilities, should be carefully scrutinized. Language can typically play ontological tricks by means of its ‘constitutiveness’; that is, its capacity to give an apparent ontological status to the concepts words embody (Bruner 1986, p. 64).’ (Gallese 2007, p. 667)

2.3. Bermudez (potential ally)

‘I shall use the expression ‘folk psychology’ in what I take to be the standard way—namely, as picking out certain practices of ascribing propositional attitudes (and other mental states) to other agents and explaining/predicting their behaviour on the basis of those attributions.’ (Bermúdez 2003, p. 25)

‘the centrality of folk psychology in explaining what makes social interactions possible has rarely been challenged’ (Bermúdez 2003, p. 26)

‘Granted that we sometimes do make reflective and explicit use of the concepts of folk psychology in making sense of the behaviour of others, should we conclude that our unreflective social understanding involves an implicit application of the concepts of folk psychology in the interests of explanation and prediction? Should we conclude that all our social understanding involves deploying the concepts and explanatory/predictive practices of folk psychology?’ (Bermúdez 2003, p. 27)

‘According to the narrow construal, the domain of folk psychology should not be presumed to extend further than those occasions on which we explicitly and consciously deploy the concepts of folk psychology in the services of explanation and/or prediction. At the other end of the spectrum lies the broad construal, which makes all social understanding a matter of the attribution of mental states and the deployment of those attributed states to explain and predict behaviour.’ (Bermúdez 2003, p. 27)

Thesis: ‘one can act effectively in complicated social interactions without bringing to bear the explanatory and predictive apparatus of folk psychology’ (Bermúdez 2003, p. 42)

Key consideration for narrow view: ‘Sensitivity to emotional states feeds directly into action without any attribution of emotional states.’ (Bermúdez 2003, p. 38)

2.4. precedent for diagnosis

‘folk psychology applies to “knowledge-rich” aspects of cognition, which have proved completely unamenable to cognitive science, whereas cognitive science has been limited to “knowledge-free” aspects of cognition, about which folk psychology is silent.’ (Pickering & Chater 1995, p. 311)

‘The intractability of formalizing folk psychology explains why there has been a singular lack of success in attempting to provide a cognitive science of knowledge-rich mental processes; and why cognitive science has succeeded only by focusing on knowledge-free aspects of cognition, with which folk psychology is not concerned.’ (Pickering & Chater 1995, p. 312)

2.5. books or articles on folk psychology

‘Folk psychology is supposed to be the means by which people in ordinary life understand the minds of other people.’ (Morton 2007, p. 211) (Interesting because he is arguing for ‘the non-existence of folk psychology, as a single unitary capacity’.)

‘People don’t merely go through the world acting or behaving or responding. They also cognize about those actions, behaviors, and responses. In particular, they attempt to understand, explain, and predict their own and others’ psychological states and overt behavior by making use of an array of ordinary psychological notions. I shall refer to these cognitive efforts as our folk psychological practices and to the concepts we employ in engaging in these folk psychology practices as our folk psychological concepts.’ (Von Eckardt 1997, p. 24) — Note that Von Eckardt (1997, footnote 3, p. 29) goes on to identify folk psychology with *ordinary explanatory psychology*, ‘the psychology which ordinary people use to predict, explain, and understand their own and each other’s behavior’ (Von Eckardt 1997, p. 28).

‘our everyday practices of psychological description, explanation, and prediction – practices often referred to as folk psychology’ (Frankish 2007, p. 1) Qualification: ‘The term ‘folk psychology’ is often used to refer to the putative theory underpinning our everyday practices of psychological explanation and prediction, as well as to the practices themselves. To avoid confusion, I shall use the term only in its broader sense, to refer to the practices.’ (Frankish 2007, footnote 1p. 1)

‘In our everyday dealings with one another we invoke a variety of common-sense psychological terms including ‘believe’, ‘remember’, ‘feel’, ‘think’, ‘desire’, ‘prefer’, ‘imagine’, ‘fear’, and many others. The use of these terms is governed by a loose knit network of largely tacit principles, platitudes, and paradigms which constitute a sort of folk theory. Following recent practice, I will call this network folk psychology.’ (Stich 1983, p. 1)

‘folk psychology or “theory of mind,” the understanding of others as psychological beings having mental states such as beliefs, desires, emotions, and intentions’ (Meltzoff 1995, p. 838)

‘Folk psychology is a network of principles which constitutes a sort of common-sense theory about how to explain human behavior.’ (Horgan & Woodward 1985, p. 197)

‘Folk psychology, by contrast, is the unscientific understanding of the mind as possessed by, for want of better terms, laypeople or folk—people with no special training in the formal academic or scientific study of the mind. [...] the term ‘folk psychology’ mirrors the term ‘folk physics,’ which simi-

larly distinguishes the putatively commonsensical theory of physics ubiquitous among laypeople from the kind of physics taught in formal academic settings.’ (Hartner 2016, p. 23) — ‘the lay capacity designated by the term ‘folk psychology’ actually consists of two related activities: the primary act of mindreading, and the closely associated linguistic practice of description that may well reveal something about that primary behavior’ (Hartner 2016, p. 24)

‘I take folk psychology to be the basis—whatever it is—of our ability to describe, interpret, and predict each other by attributing beliefs, desires, hopes, feelings, and other familiar mental states.’ (Godfrey-Smith 2005, p. 1)

‘a folk psychology or “theory of mind” (ToM)— the conceptual framework of propositional attitudes with which we describe and explain each other’ (Rakoczy 2015, p. 2).

‘Numerous motives, ranging from self-preservation to simple curiosity, impel people the world over to try to make sense of themselves and other people, and doing that requires a folk psychology.’ (Flavell 2004, p. 13) [folk psychology as the thing that enables the understanding]

‘the cognitive capacities that underlie such social interactions. The capacity to understand and interact with other agents is called folk psychology’ (Spaulding 2018, p. 1)

‘In giving such an explanation we would be indulging in what has become known as folk-psychology. For we would be using a certain theory of the mental (viz. one which appeals to combinations of beliefs and desires to explain actions) to make sense of other people’s behaviour.’ (Clark 1987, p. 139) ... ‘Whilst accepting that folk-psychology constitutes a kind of primitive theory of the mental, I shall attempt to deny that that theory need be thought of as mere folk speculation. Instead, I suggest that we should accord our common-sense ideas of the mental something of the status we accord our common-sense conceptions of the physical. I thus propose that we talk not of folk-psychology but of naive psychology where this is conceived along the lines of Hayes’ (1979) notion of a naive physics. The general argument in favour of this conjecture will be that just as a roughly accurate grasp of some basic physical principles is vital to a mobile organism, so too will some roughly accurate grasp of basic psychological principles be vital to a social organism.’ (Clark 1987, p. 140)

‘We have evolved, biologically and culturally, to be able to attribute states of mind, to be able to have and use folk psychology. And we are this way because we are social creatures; we have a very particular kind of sociality, in fact, which makes most of our activities cooperative while forcing us to manage them by a mixture of reasoning, social shaping, and imagination,

without very many innate social routines.’ (Morton 1996, p. 119)

‘Folk psychology *stricto sensu* . . . the practice of making sense of a person’s actions using belief/desire propositional attitude psychology’ (Hutto 2008, 3, original emphasis). I shall argue that the *raison d’être* of this practice cannot be providing accurate representations of our fellows’ mental states that support accurate predictions of their behavior. Rather, its *raison d’être* is more likely shaping our fellows’ minds, in order to make coordination with them easier.’ (Zawidzki 2008, p. 194)

‘a widely shared commonsense psychological theory – “folk psychology” as it is often called. Folk psychology, the Premise maintains, underlies our everyday discourse about mental states and processes, and terms like “belief” and “desire” can be viewed as theoretical terms in this folk theory.’ (Stich 1996)

‘The term ‘folk psychology’ is employed in philosophy and cognitive science to mean our commonsense, everyday ability to understand each other and negotiate the social world.’ (Ratcliffe 2006, p. 31)

2.6. Helen Steward

‘According to folk psychology, weakness of will is, sadly, an all-too-common phenomenon’ (Steward 2012, p. 147)

‘The need for folk psychology, I shall insist, arises out of the fact that the settling of matters by animals genuinely is a very special form of causation indeed, so that it is not at all surprising that evolution has endowed us with specialized cognitive systems for its discernment.’ (Steward 2012, p. 106)

‘The mental states are simply not thought of by our folk psychology, I maintain, as independent causally efficacious entities. They are thought of rather as features of a substantive entity—an agent—which must act if any bodily movement is to result from its desires and beliefs and whose actions are thought of as explicable by appeal to, but not as deterministically caused by, those desires and beliefs.’ (Steward 2012, p. 77)

Steward (2012, p. 71–2) features of ‘a mature conception of agency’ = agents as centers of subjectivity etc ...

‘it seems so utterly obvious to me that folk psychology involves a commitment to the existence of agents whose exertions are required if anything is ever to be done, and which exertions are conceptualized by us as bearing only indeterministic relationships to their causal antecedents, so that they are spontaneous inputs into the course of nature, that I find it hard to know how to argue for it ... Is there any way of establishing empirically, for in-

stance, that folk psychology really does conceive of agents in the way I have suggested it does?’ (Steward 2012, p. 97) (Potential counter?: ‘In Japanese, the person is lexicalized as “a location in which the act takes place” (Ikegami 1991, p. 314). In contrast, in English, the person is a clearly identified agent, the source of action.’ (Lillard 1998); ‘In contrast to the English tendency to emphasize the notion of agentivity, Japanese has a way of weakening or even effacing the notion. One linguistic means serving this purpose is the ‘locationalization’ of the agent, that is, the agent is not represented as a person who acts, but as a location in which the act takes place. [...] Sentence (67) literally means Tn the Emperor, (it) became (to) the planting of rice seedlings’ or somewhat more idiomatically, Tn the Emperor, the planting of rice seedlings came to pass.’ The Emperor is deprived of all his agentivity — ‘de-agentivized’ as it were — and the event is represented not in terms of someone DOing something, but in terms of something coming to pass — BE-COMing something.’ (Ikegami 1991, p. 147); could also consider (Yamamoto 2006))

‘Substantial portions of folk psychology, I shall suggest, are meant to be for animals, too.’ (Steward 2012, p. 85)

‘I think it must be seriously doubted whether anything still recognizable as folk psychology can tolerate the very different idea that all reasons may be quantitatively weighed against one another in such a way that a determinate outcome is necessitated by these in-principle antecedently attributable relative weightings.’ (Steward 2012, p. 147)

2.7. Thought on the quotes

I’m less convinced it is helpful to use the term ‘folk psychologies’ for the systems of practices. Some people have introduced the term that way (e.g. Bermúdez (2003, p. 25) below). But the most influential thinkers (Heider or Dennett) introduce it by comparison with ‘folk physics’; just as folk physics is a physics (roughly, the one that would have to be true for a system of practices concerning physical aspects of the world to be impossible to improve upon and immune to failure due to physical facts), so folk psychology probably ought to be a psychology.

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