

Causal Questions and Explanations - What do Theories of Causal Reasoning predict?

York Hagmayer

University of Gttingen, Gttingen, Germany

Neele Engelmann

University of Gttingen, Gttingen, Germany

Abstract

Which information do people seek out when trying to explain everyday events? Previous research (Ahn et al., 1995) indicates that this may not be the same information that people take into account when provided, and that theories of causal reasoning consider crucial. In an experiment, we asked participants to generate questions to explain type or token events, which were familiar or unfamiliar. Based on theories of singular causation, we expected participants to search for present causes and indicators of actual causation to explain token events, but for causes and their covariations with the effect when explaining types of events. We assumed participants to inquire about the presence of known causes when events are familiar, but about potential causes when events are not familiar. We categorised generated questions according to the information sought. Results partially supported our predictions. We discuss the relevance of the findings for different theories of causal reasoning.