

Problems - Causes

Introduction

People often try to identify the "true" causes of a problem through careful research. Once we identify the objective cause we can use policy to eliminate, modify, or neutralize it, thereby reducing the problem. But in the polis, we use causes to assign responsibility for a problem. This can result in punishment or compensation for harm. Causes tell a story of oppressors and victims.

"In the polis, causal stories are strategically crafted with symbols and numbers and then asserted by political actors who try to make their versions the basis of policy choices. Causal stories are essential political instruments for shaping alliances and for settling the distribution of costs and benefits." (p. 189)

Key Concepts

You can divide causes as stemming from actions that are unguided (or "natural") and actions that have purpose. You can also distinguish them by consequences that are intended or unintended. This generates four types of causal stories

Actions	Consequences	
	<i>Intended</i>	<i>Unintended</i>
<i>Unguided</i>	Mechanical	Accidental
<i>Purposeful</i>	Intentional	Inadvertent

Accidental causes - This includes natural disasters, car crashes, and winning lottery tickets. Anything that we can attribute to unpredictable occurrence.

Intentional causes - This gives someone the blame and brands them as having done willful harm to others or acted knowing the consequences. These are stories of oppressors and victims and conspiracy theories. An example would be that tobacco companies caused smoking deaths by concealing that nicotine is addictive.

Inadvertent causes - These are stories of unintended consequences. A minimum wage policy, for example, can cause businesses to layoff workers. Or illness is caused by a lack of awareness of healthy habits. Carelessness as a cause fits here as well. These stories often suggest that government shouldn't try to solve problems because there will be unintended consequences that will make things worse.

Mechanical causes - This is a cause attributed to people who have been socialized or manipulated to where they don't know what they are doing. For example, advertisers convincing people to eat unhealthy food.

Battle Over Causes - Many policy debates are battles over which box to put the cause of the problem into. Rachel Carson with her book *Silent Spring*, successfully moved the cause of bird deaths from the "accident" box to the "inadvertent" box. This meant policy makers could and should do something, like banning the chemical DDT.

Complex Systems - A different causal stories comes from the idea that a system is incredibly complex and so it's hard to predict or pinpoint a single cause. This system can be technological, institutional, or historical. But the model says that the cause comes from the interaction of different parts in the system. These stories have appeal in the world of social science, but they aren't that useful in politics because they don't allow the assignment of responsibility. In politics, people act like they are trying to find the true cause, but more often they are looking for the causal story that will justify what they want to do.

Calculated Risk - Statistics have allowed us to calculate the risk of harm caused by certain actions. If the risk is known and a person or company takes action, they are taking a calculated risk. This can open them up to liability and an argument that acted with intention. For example, one could argue financial executives on Wall Street took calculated risks that failed and caused the financial crisis. These same executives, however, could use the complexity argument that the system was so complex nobody understood what was happening.

Selling Your Story - Research shows that the media can influence what causal story people believe in. People who are able to win the debate over causal stories typically have access to media, are in prominent positions, and are telling a story that aligns with established cultural values and distributions of power and wealth. Causal stories that call for change have a hard time in the polis.

Law and Science - The law and science are powerful tools in getting certain causes accepted. Rachel Carson, for example, used science to overcome the entrenched interests that said that bird deaths were accidental.

Empower Fixers - Causal stories can empower particular groups, agencies, or individuals to come in and fix the problem. People who stand to benefit from a government contract, for example, have a strong incentive to argue for a story that will make them indispensable.

Forming Alliances - Causal stories can lump disparate groups together as victims and create alliances where before there was no relationship or conflict. Causal stories help to mobilize people around a particular goal.

Summary

"In the polis, causal stories need to be fought for, defended, and sustained. There is always someone to tell a competing story, and getting a causal story believed is not an easy task." (p. 202)

"Like other forms of symbolic representation, causal stories can be emotionally compelling; they are stories of innocence and guilt, victims and oppressors, suffering and evil. Good political analysis must attend to all the strategic functions of causal interpretation." (p. 209)