© The Institute of Mind and Behavior, Inc.
The Journal of Mind and Behavior
Summer, 1984, Volume 5, Number 3
Pages 351-362
ISSN 0271-0137

Fatalism as an Animistic Attribution Process

Leigh S. Shaffer

West Chester University

Following the perspective of Heider, fatalistic thinking is analyzed as an example of "naive" or "implicit" social psychology. "Garden variety" forms of fatalistic explanations are shown to be attribution errors where the nature of the error is perceiving "natural" events through schemata appropriate to personal causality. It is argued that natural events which have the properties of "personalism" and "hedonic relevance" lead to a perception of events as possessing "equifinality," the distinguishing feature of personal causation in Heider's analysis. Fatalism is therefore an inherently animistic form of cognition, and all animistic cosmologies are therefore seen as supporting this "error" by lending plausibility to the attribution. Implications for further theoretical and empirical research are discussed.

In his seminal work *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations* (1958), Fritz Heider provided a paradigm for social-psychological investigation of knowledge. The attribution theories spawned by Heider are now in their third generation, and while the number of publications associated with attribution theories continues to be impressive, the problems studied have been largely continued to a narrow range of topics in social cognition and social perception that were first raised by Heider. Recently Wegner and Vallacher (1977) published a textbook synthesizing research around Heider's concept of "naive" or "implicit" theories of psychology. Their book argued that the wellspring of reasoned social behavior is the person's naive social psychology, and they set out to explore different themes in this naive scheme: they treat Heider's balance theory as an examination of "implicit social relations theory," Kelly's psychology of personal constructs (1955) as a model of "implicit personality theory," and so on. As should be expected at an early stage in such synthesis, their book has the character of a promisory note; the reader is left with reason to expect social psychological investigation of naive theories to add both breadth and depth in the next few years. This article is intended as a contribution to the dimension of breadth. I wish to apply Heider's paradigm to the quasi-metaphysical concept of fatalism.

As a social psychologist following in Heider's footsteps, I wish to consider fatalism as an *implicit cosmology*. Several years ago, Nicholas Hobbs (1962) described the epistemological needs of the individual as follows:

Requests for reprints should be sent to Leigh S. Shaffer, Ph.D., Department of Psychology, West Chester University, West Chester, Pennsylvania 19383.

> Man constantly engages in building and repairing and extending and modifying cognitive structures that help him make personal sense of the world. The individual has got to have a cognitive house to live in to protect himself from the incomprehensibilities of existence as well as to provide some architecture for daily experience. He has to build defenses against the absurd in the human condition . . . . He must adopt or invent a personal cosmology. (p. 46)

Fatalism is a cosmology because it is a belief about the workings of the world; it is implicit because it is unlikely to be consciously articulated or formally evaluated by the people who resort to its use. Fatalism is interesting both as an idea—an article of furniture in Hobbs' cognitive house—and as a tool in the adjustment process. It is most often seen, as I will argue, in the adjustment to important events such as death, and it does seem related to the existential theme of absurdity by providing some semblance of meaning to the circumstances of events like death. Also, fatatlism may either be adopted (in the sense of being borrowed from the person's culture) or *re*invented, and my analysis will attempt to show that fatalism is so often reasserted as an interpretation of life events because it is so easily reinvented by the attribution process that I will describe.

In describing fatalism as an implicit cosmology, however, I am being mindful of its dubious reputation among students of "explicit" cosmology—that is, among theologians and philosophers. In their writings, fatalism is more of a pejorative term than a doctrine. While there are many detailed metaphysical doctrines of fate, fortune, chance, and luck (Ciofarri, 1973), fatalism remains largely a "superstition." At best, it is a bastard son of metaphysical thought—there is no formal discussion or definition of fatalism in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* or the *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*—but it is a part of the "social stock of knowledge" (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Occasionally philosophers have identified fatalism with determinism (e.g., Taylor, 1963), but most would not because the nature of fatalistic beliefs is not sufficiently articulated for formal comparison. Fatalism is a partly explored, epigrammatic conception of the origin of significant events.

When studying the social stock of knowledge, it is important to recognize that common, naive metaphysical beliefs are as pluralistic as sytems of academic knowledge or formal religion. Thus, I will not (and cannot) discuss here all the beliefs that have ever been called "fatalism." Instead I will describe what I believe to be the most common form in which the belief is encountered—a kind of "garden variety fatalism."

Garden Variety Fatalism

Fatalism is an assertion about the *inevitability* of important life events. When articulated, it is usually pressed to assert that these events are *predetermined* and *immutable*. The most recognizable fatalistic expressions concern death, so I will illustrate these three features with familiar maxims:

> "If it is your day to die, you will die!"
> "Somewhere there is a bullet with your name on it."
> "There is no escape; you can run but you cannot hide."

In garden variety fatalism, the belief in the inevitability of life events is derived from some belief in predetermination ("your day" implies predetermination, probably by the same agent who wrote your name on that bullet!) and belief in immutability ("you *will* die," "you *cannot* hide"). In tracing this derivation it is clear that even garden variety fatalism begins to develop some metaphysical complexity as it is pressed, but the point is that such pressing of arguments is fundamentally different than metaphysical discourse, because fatalism is an implicit doctrine which functions to satisfy psychological needs rather than canons of logic.

The fullest expression of this naive fatalism comes with pressing the question of inevitability. In my experience, inevitability is salient in two different ways. First, I may feel responsible for some event with bad consequences (say, I caused an automobile accident) and my guilt and anxiety are exascerbated if I tell myself "This didn't *have* to happen—it could have been prevented." Second, I may believe that I am in possession of information that foretells a bad day (say, I have charted my biorhythm and today is a critical day!). In both cases, the issue of inevitability of the crucial event greatly affects both affect and behavior. In the first case, a fatalistic view of the event I caused may act as a defense mechanism: it could be a rationalization that minimizes my responsibility for the accident and, therefore, minimizes my guilt. However, the second case may raise anxiety by implying my powerlessness to change the outcome. This case is most familiar in considering death, and it is usually expressed as a scenario:

> "If it is your day to die, you *will* die. If you set out on a trip by car, you will be killed in an automobile accident. If you leave your car at home and ride the train, you would be killed by the train's derailment. If you choose to fly instead, you might get on a plane carrying a terrorist's bomb and be blown out of the sky. If it is your day to die, you *will* die."

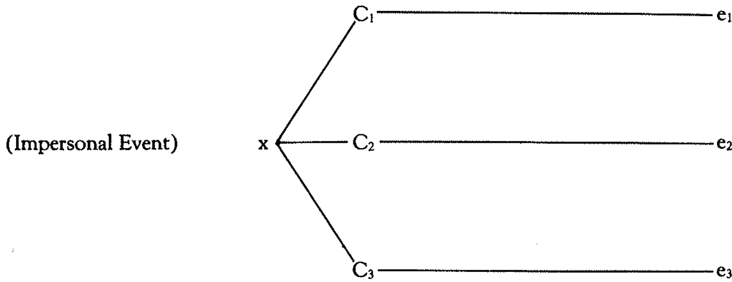
But whether the event is viewed retrospectively or prospectively or whether the fatalistic view raises or lowers anxiety, the core of the belief is in the inevitability of the event. While those who spin fatalistic scenarios may differ in their views of the nature of the agency that predetermines events and assures their immutability, they concur in seeing events as inevitable. This is the core of garden variety fatalism.

Fate as a Perception of Equifinality

Having identified the core of garden variety fatalism, I am now prepared to offer an analysis of the origins of this belief. The key to the analysis is the recognition of one of Heider's paradigms in the scenario of inevitable death

recounted above. The most fundamental distinction in Heider's scheme of attribution is the distinction between personal and impersonal causation. Figure 1 reproduces Heider's diagrams of these two attributional schemes.

MODEL OF IMPERSONAL CAUSALITY (MULTIFINALITY)



MODEL OF PERSONAL CAUSALITY (EQUIFINALITY)

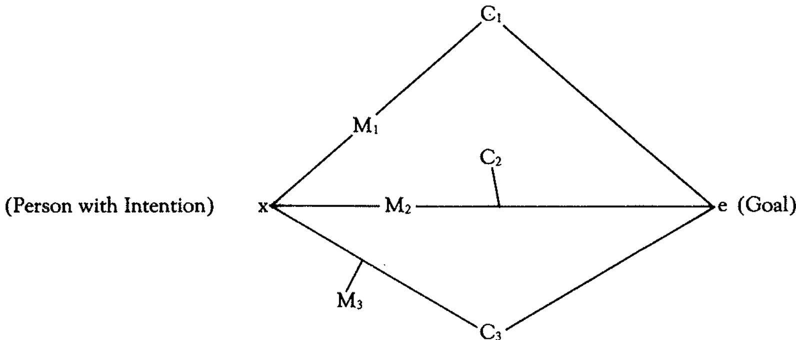


Figure 1: A comparison of Heider's models of personal and impersonal causation. (Based on *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations* by F. Heider, pp. 107-108.)

In all attribution, Heider argues that people will make attributions to explain events (e) by working backward from event to its source (x), taking situations or circumstances (c) into account. These are the only elements necessary in impersonal causation. Heider's paradigm of impersonal causation has one critical feature for this discussion—the property of *multifinality*. In the natural world, any force *x* may produce a variety of events *e* depending upon the circumstances. This means that there are many possible causal chains from one enviornmental source: one *x* can lead to different *e's* depending on the intervening c's. Therefore, *no event is* inevitable because all events are contingent, and Heider calls this condition multifinality. In Heider's words:

> In the case of impersonal causality, a wide range of environmental conditions will lead to a wide range of effects. Since no one condition bears the responsibility for a particular effect, any specific effect of a complex process requires the presence of a great many specific conditions. The more conditions required, the more unlikely it is that the same event will occur. (Heider, 1958, p. 102)

Applying this perspective directly to the issue of personal danger, Heider expressed the cognition of an individual invoking the paradigm of impersonal causation: "When I am threatened by a danger from a *nonpersonal* source, all I usually need to do is change the conditions in order to escape the danger" (1958, p. 101, emphasis added).

The origin of fatalism, I believe, can now be clearly seen. *Instead of applying the paradigm of impersonal causality to events like death, the fatalist applies the paradigm of personal causality.* In contrast to the paradigm of impersonal causation, the fatalistic scenario of death clearly belongs to the paradigm of personal causation *where all roads inevitably lead to only one event.*

The paradigm of personal causality starts with a source x which Heider identified as a person with conscious intention. In this paradigm, the observed event e has a different property than events of impersonal causation: it has the property of *equifinality* because the event is the *goal* of the person acting intentionally, and because the person can alter the *means* (m) used in different circumstances (c) to guarantee the production of the desired result. Again referring to Figure 1, the personal agent, sizing up the circumstances, will reject actions that miss the goal but choose precisely the means that will produce the intended event. Heider put it this way:

> In short, personal causality is characterized by equifinality, that is, *the invariance of the end and the variability of the means.* Vicarious mediation with respect to an end point is an essential feature of the operational definition of purpose . . . . (Heider, 1958, p. 101, emphasis added)

Heider offered an example of how the personal paradigm of attribution is invoked by an event: "If I see leaves on the ground arranged in the form of a neat square, *I will conclude that a person created this effect and not that it was an act of nature*" (1958, p. 102, emphasis added). The geometric pattern will be "recognized" as a human product, an "end point" in Heider's terms, and the observer will conclude that some*one* must have arranged the leaves. A "carpet" of leaves appears "multifinal" insofar as natural conditions seem sufficient to account for what is seen, and many different patterns of fallen leaves would be perceived to be "the same." But a "neat square" appears "equifinal" to the observer, and Heider asserts that the observer will effortlessly invoke the paradigm of personal causality and infer the prior actions of a human agent.

The philosopher Solomon (1981) has captured the fatalist's perception of equifinality rather than multifinality in his argument that fatalism is not a form of determinism:

> The Greek tragedies depend upon *fatalism*, the view that whatever a person's actions and whatever the circumstances, the end is inevitable. But this is not determinism, for determinism requires certain actions and circumstances as antecedents of the determined outcome. According to fatalism, whatever happens, the end is inevitable. According to determinism, an event will necessarily happen if its antecedent conditions are fulfilled. . . . This "if. . . then" structure is essential to determinism. (There need be no such "ifs" or "thens" to fatalism.) (Solomon, 1981, p. 355, emphasis in the original)

To illustrate Solomon's argument, I have applied Heider's paradigm of personal causality to the previous fatalistic scenario about death in Figure 2. Solomon argued that determinism is a doctrine about events and their necessary antecedents which takes propositions of the "if. . . then" form. As he clearly points out, determinism squares with impersonal causation because each unique set of antecedents creates a different effect—in short, multifinality. But, in fatalism, Solomon points out that the end is inevitable "whatever the circumstances." This fits the paradigm of personal causation where the end has the property of equifinality. Thus, in Figure 2, the end event (death) occurs whatever choice of transportation the victim makes because a means of death is always available. Of course, the *source* of equifinal events in Heider's view is ordinarily a person who wilfully creates the event. In garden variety fatalism, this is solved simply by a personification of natural events: fate is the author of the design of one's death.

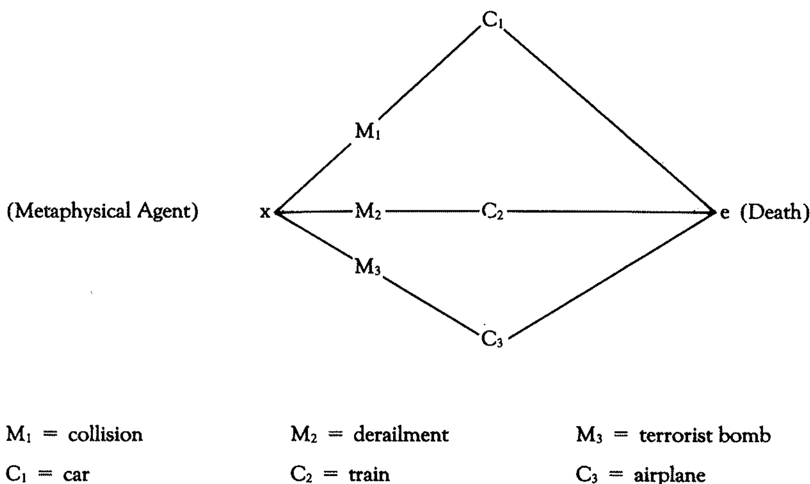


Figure 2: Example of Model of Personal Causality Applied to Fatalistic View of Death.

If this analysis is correct, *fatalism has its origin as an attributional error*. That is, the fatalist has chosen a familiar naive paradigm, but one that would ordinarily be considered an inappropriate choice. Explaining the origin of

fatalism becomes a question of how the fatalistic perceiver comes to choose the personal causality paradigm when others would choose the paradigm of impersonal causality. And further, since Heider noted that all attributions must be plausible to the perceiver, it is necessary to explain how the social stock of knowledge sustains a fatalistic account. This leads to consideration of an important implication of this attributional error: *fatalism is an animistic attribution.*

Fatalism as an Animistic Cosmology

One key to explaining the origins of fatalistic accounts of events must reside in the concept of equifinality. Beginning with a realization that many events do not initiate the attribution process, Heider argued that events are evaluated in terms of their causal and affective significance. In Jones and Davis's (1965) amplification of attribution theory, there are two event characteristics, personalism and hedonic relevance, which seem to elicit attributions from witnesses to the events. Put in naive phenomenological terms, an event that "happens to me" is personal if it seems to have "singled me out." An event has hedonic relevance to the degree that it affects the perceiver's goals in a facilitating or frustrating way. The kinds of events that provoke displays of garden variety fatalism such as sickness, accident, death, financial reversal—in short, "misfortunes"—all seem to satisfy the criteria of hedonic relevance. When the victim asks "why me?" it seems that the inquiry suggests that the victim feels "singled out," thus these events show personalism. But being *singled out suggests that the event has the property of equifinality.* If attribution as a process works backward from the perception of the nature of the event to a paradigmatic attribution that will serve as an explanation of the causes of that event, then the question "Why me?" is the critical question that must serve to invoke either of the two attributional paradigms.

In personal causality, the end result of action is an intended goal, but impersonal causation is characterized as being without intention or purpose. Fatalistic accounts of events, then, must be triggered by a perception that life events have the character of equifinality; they are not events that "just happen," are "coincidence," and so forth, but seem to have the quality of *design* about them. Invoking a fatalistic account, therefore, means that a life event is not really explained until *the purpose behind it* is revealed. The question "why me" is only satisfactorily answered with a *reason.* The significance of that is that schematic processing of a "natural" event using the paradigm of personal causality leads to attributions of the intentions of some metaphysical agent! Fatalistic attribution, therefore, is inherently animistic.

Animism is a notoriously slippery term, but as I will use the term here, animism is a cosmology that posits some form of sapient force that causes events to occur. While some authors dismiss animism as a primitive, obsolescent theory of causality (Chaplin and Krawiec, 1979) or as a specific form of

religious consciousness (Pepper, 1942; Tylor, 1873) several philosophers have used the term to refer to highly sophisticated metaphysical views. For Bertrand Russell, the rise of science is to be traced to the abandoning of animism as an explanatory principle in natural events:

> The first thing to note is the removal of all traces of animism from the laws of physics . . . . Moreover, purpose, which had since Aristotle formed an intimate part of the conception of science, was now thrust out of scientific procedure. Anyone might still believe that the heavens exist to declare the glory of God, but no one could let this belief intervene in an astronomical calculation. The world might have a purpose, but purposes could no longer enter into scientific explanations. (Russell, 1945, p. 538)

It would not be foreign to Russell to think of Aristotelian physics as an error in which categories appropriate to social analysis, such as purpose, were applied to "impersonal phenomena."

Ruth Benedict (1930) observed that "primitive" societies do not see a dichotomy between personal and impersonal causation and use the perspective of personal causation for both social and natural events. According to the philosopher Stephen Pepper (1942), animism is a "root metaphor" for the universe, and, although it is epistemologically inadequate, it nevertheless holds universal appeal:

> Animism, as a metaphysical hypothesis, is the theory that takes common-sense man, the human being, as its primitive root metaphor. This is the most appealing root metaphor that has ever been selected. Nothing is so interesting to man as man . . . . Every child is a natural animist, and so (if the secret be known) is every man, not only primitive man but civilized man as well. This view of the world is the only one in which man feels completely at home. (Pepper, 1942, p. 120)

The significance of the references to Russell, Benedict, and Pepper is that they all point to a fundamental divergence of possible perceptions of events. Probably every society has had some people who would see "natural events" and "coincidences" where others immediately "recognize" the "hand of God," the "works of the devil," and the like. (I have recently detailed one example of this divergence in the attribution of witchcraft during the inquisition; see Shaffer, 1984.) Where a society is relatively uniform in its cosmology, that is, when there is a distinctly "orthodox" view, conforming attributions are facilitated. But when attributions are unorthodox, they are more difficult to maintain (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). If we currently follow a secular point of view, then a fatalistic attribution seems to be an error, and we are led to wonder why people find such an attribution acceptable—that is, why they are not forced to give up this attributional error. Heider listed two factors that determine the acceptability of a potential attribution: one is that the attribution must fit the wishes of the person (wishing to deflect guilt over responsibility for an accident would be an example); the second is that the attribution must be "plausibly derived from the reason," (Heider, 1958, p.

172). To make the second point in different terms, there must be "'rationality' in every rationalization" (p. 172). Recognizing that fatalism is by nature an animistic attribution means that the social stock of knowledge available to most people will facilitate making and retaining such an attributional "error." Indeed, to the degree that a perceiver interacts with groups which hold *explicit* animistic belief systems (Pepper describes fundamentalistic religious groups as sustaining a "mature" form of animism), the perceiver may receive overt support in sustaining such attributions and may even be taught schemata to facilitate such attributions.

Conclusion and Directions for Research

To summarize briefly, I have presented an attributional analysis of what I have called garden variety fatalism. My thesis is that such fatalism can be explained as an attributional error: when events to be explained by a perceiver have the characteristics of personalism and hedonic relevance, the perceiver's experience may be organized around the perception of equifinality. The victim feels "singled out," asks "why me?", is forced by the hedonic consequences of the event to try to explain the event *and to be reconciled to the event*; this event "didn't just happen," and the victim searches for the "meaning" or "reason" for the event. Heider's analysis specifies that this form of experience corresponds to the paradigm of personal causality. If this account is correct, then the processing of information forces the perceiver to look for a metaphysical agency (however vaguely conceived) and to infer the intention of that agency which, in the paradigm of personal causation, *is* the explanation of the event. The attribution is pushed to a specifically fatalistic rather than just a generally animistic account because personal causation makes the end event *inevitable*: the metaphysical agent will be seen as adjusting the available means to the range of possible circumstances (which includes the victim's behaviors) in order to carry out its "will" or intention. Such attributional errors, I have argued, can only be maintained if they seem plausible, but recognizing that fatalistic attributions are inherently animistic suggests that the social stock of knowledge available to most perceivers will help sustain the plausibility of such attributions.

While I believe that the argument presented here is itself plausible, its empirical value remains to be fully established. There are conceptual issues as well as empirical investigations that remain to be accomplished, and I wish to sketch those in the remaining paragraphs.

The most critical issue is exploring more completely the factors that determine the perceptions of equifinality and multifinality in "natural" events. Take, for example, Heider's own example of equifinality in a natural setting: "If I see leaves on the ground arranged in the form of a neat square, I will conclude that a person created this effect and not that it was an act of nature" (1958, p. 102). Here we have an example very much like the ones that

philosophers debate when they examine the merits of arguments for the existence of God drawn from the concept of *design*. In Heider's analysis, the critical factor that leads to an attribution of personal causality in this example is the *improbability* of this event given the great complexity of factors that would "naturally" produce the effect (wind currents, animals, the shedding of desiduous trees, and so forth). The examination of the cognition of probability is a current area of interest and exploration and may be helpful here, but it is not clear to me whether the perception of equifinality exactly fits existing models. For example, with the perception of a square made of leaves, does the sense of design come from a qualitative recognition of a pattern associated with human activity (it's a square!) or a more quantitative analysis of likelihood (the probability that the arrangement of leaves was made by the wind is so low as to make it seem an untenable alternative to the likelihood that a person arranged the leaves). At this writing I have no cognitive mechanism that I wish to postulate as an explanation of the perception of equifinality, but a mechanism must be found to make my arguments more than attractive speculation.

Similar points must be made about the property of personalism. I have made an argument based primarily on my own social experience: misfortune often leads its victims to ask "why me?". For some individuals such a remark may only be expressive behavior—merely a verbalism to express compelling, but transient feelings. But I believe for many individuals it is a question that is serious and points to an ongoing attributional process. In Jones and Davis, personalism is used to explain the selection of events that will be subjected to the attribution process. Accepting that point, I am now asking for an analysis of the elements of an experience that conveys to victims that they have been targeted. I take it that many people who experience hedonically relevant events do *not* experience being targeted. Indeed, existential anxiety concerning the meaninglessness of life seems to be grounded in the perception of *untargeted* events. These issues are clearly related to Lerner's (Lerner, 1980) concept of belief in a just world, in that justice demands targeting individuals so that "natural events" can be matched up to individuals on the basis of their conduct. Again, the cognitive mechanisms underlying the perception of personalism must be delineated before my argument can be fully assessed.

As a last point, I want to argue as forcefully as I can that potential significance of this line of inquiry is not limited to fatalism. Garden variety fatalism as I have described it is not, even in my own mind, a terribly important phenomenon; it is one familiar theme in the social stock of knowledge, one of a cafeteria of possible rationalizations a distressed individual might employ as a transient coping device. But in calling for the recognition of fatalism as an example of animistic attribution, I believe that I have opened the door to a much broader range of phenomena, including many with greater intrinsic importance. First, the remarks I have made about fatalism are also applicable to *any* form of Hobbs' personal cosmology, as I

have recently done with belief in witchcraft (Shaffer, 1984). To state my thinking in the form of an hypothesis, *the origin of animistic thinking is an attribution error of a specific form: it is the processing of natural events using schemata appropriate to cases of personal causation.* Social scientists believe that attribution of personal causation is a facet of natural cognition (Wegner and Vallacher, 1977), and that some form of quasi-metaphysical belief exists in all cultures (Pepitone, 1976). Tylor had even suggested that it was a preliminary stage in the development of all religions (Tylor, 1873). The scientific study of culture will not be complete without an account of the origins, character, and functional significance of human belief systems (Pepitone, 1976). Put in those broad terms, the study of this hypothesized attributional error involves the study of phenomena of interest to virtually any social scientist. Given the historical record of significant social behavior performed in the name of a particular brand of metaphysical or quasi-metaphysical beliefs, the importance of understanding these beliefs cannot be gainsaid.

References

Benedict, R. (1930). Animism. In E.R.A. Seligmann (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of the social sciences* (Vol. 2). New York: Macmillan.

Berger, P.L., and Luckmann, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality.* Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor.

Chaplin, J.P., and Krawiec, T.S. (1979). *Systems and theories of psychology* (4th edit.). New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Cioffari, V. (1973). Fortune, fate, and chance. In P.P. Wiener (Ed.), *Dictionary of the history of ideas* (Vol. 2, pp. 225-236). New York: Scribners.

Heider, F. (1958). *The psychology of interpersonal relations.* New York: Wiley.

Hobbs, N. (1962). Sources of gain in psychotherapy. *American Psychologist, 17,* 741-747.

Jones, E.E., and Davis, K.E. (1965). From acts to dispositions: The attribution process in person perception. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 2, pp. 219-266). New York: Academic Press.

Kelly, G. (1955). *Psychology of personal constructs.* New York: Norton.

Lerner, M.J. (1980). *The belief in a just world: A fundamental delusion.* New York: Plenum Press.

Pepitone, A. (1976). Toward a normative and comparative biocultural social psychology. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 34,* 641-653.

Pepper, S. (1942). *World hypotheses.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Russell, B. (1945). *A history of western philosophy.* New York: Clarion.

Shaffer, L.S. (1984). Attributions of witchcraft in *The Witches' Hammer* (Malleus Maleficarum). Manuscript submitted for publication.

Solomon, R.C. (1981). *Introducing philosophy* (2nd edit.). New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich.

Taylor, R. (1963). *Metaphysics.* Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.

Tylor, E.B. (1873). *Primitive culture.* London: Murray.

Wegner, D.M., and Vallacher, R.R. (1977). *Implicit psychology: An introduction to social cognition.* New York: Oxford University Press.