

(Enter our super-competition and win a mega-prize!)

Some time ago, a lady in France had the pleasure of seeing her lottery ticket win the jackpot (several million euros), only to have her dream blown to smithereens by an untoward incident. To establish that a claim is valid, the lottery is legally bound to bring together [a] the computer printout of the draw, the winning ticket and [c] the computer readout from the place where the ticket was purchased. Unfortunately, that establishment (a bureau de tabac for you connoisseurs of things French) had burned down to a pile of ashes, cash registers and computers included, the day after the poor woman bought the ticket. The claim was denied.

A blow indeed, as her life so far had not quite been a rose petal path. She was unemployed, her husband an invalid with no pension, her equally unemployed son and daughter had both turned into alcoholic vagrants. We can certainly imagine her crying, Why?, Why me?

[Note that I am not sure this story is altogether accurate - I recount from memory]

Why think about misfortune?

Why do people the world over think about misfortune, and construct elaborate theories to explain it? Here surely is one of your massive, elephant-in-the-room quasi-universals of culture, crying out for explanation, and (as usual) thoroughly neglected by standard social sciences. In all human groups, it seems, people notice and remember cases of misfortune, tally them, detect regularities - and most important, try to explain misfortune.

Why?

Also, in most human groups, explanations of misfortune center on agents, imagined (gods, spirits) or real (relatives, enemies), that brought about the untoward events.

Again, why? Why do people do that?

To us evolutionarily minded folks, these universally available accounts of misfortune are puzzling, mostly because they are false. Nor are they just slightly off target - they are downright misguided. Bad things in the world happen for a variety of reasons, but superhuman agents are not among them. There are no witches making you sick, no bad spirits that make you trip up. Why would our evolved design for a mind include the propensity to focus on and ponder at length totally useless explanations? In evolutionary terms, this is all the more puzzling as such thoughts are not just futile but also potentially harmful. The time and energy spent thinking about mystical causes are wasted for a more productive use of one's reason.

You may tell me that this is just as true of myriad other cultural phenomena, as people fill their heads with nonsense of no possible evolutionary value - and insert your favourite example here, religious beliefs, ethnic hatred, alternative medicine, etc. Well, you may be right - the culture-as-widespread-nonsense phenomenon is much larger than the present question. But saying that there are other problems of a similar nature does not solve this one - unless you assume there should be a unique solution for all domains of culture-as-nonsense, which I do not believe for a minute.

So let me proceed to the four questions we should address if we want to have a decent model of misfortune explanations.

Question 1. Why agents?

Why are agents so frequently recruited in the explanation of misfortune? There are several ways to

account for untoward occurrences. One type of explanation is your common covering-law kind of generic causal statement, whereby ordinary impersonal causal processes are involved in producing a specific outcome. The bureau de tabac burned down because it was full of flammable stuff, and a small flame (perhaps a cigarette butt) started a fire. Another type is a kind of karmic accounting, where bad things are the outcome of some kind of fault. The place burned down because the lady (or her ancestors) had committed some moral violations in the past. The third model is that an agent was involved. Somehow a spirit or god decided to burn down that place. This latter, agency-based account is by far the most frequent. Why is that the case?

Question 2. Why “why me?” ?

This is another universal feature of misfortune models - they explain, not a generic set of causal processes that would account for the type of event that occurred, but the particular token that is being considered. Or, if you prefer less jargon, consider the most familiar example from classical anthropology. Among the Zande, when the roof of a mud granary collapses, everyone considers this must be a case of witchcraft - bad people are involved. In case you feel superior and smugly inform those benighted Zande that roofs collapse when their pillars are thoroughly gnawed by termites - well, they know that perfectly well, only that is irrelevant - witchcraft is mentioned not to explain why roofs collapse, but why that particular one collapsed at that particular time. I know viruses cause diseases, but why did it have to happen to me? Why me? Why now?

Why do people ask such questions? I hear you say, of course people want to know why it happened to them, of course that is universal - what could be more natural? Who cares what makes other rooftops collapse? Who cares what triggers diseases in other people? What people want to find out, of course, is the why of this particular roof collapse or disease, the one that affects them.

Now, where does all this of course stuff come from? What is so natural here? All this may seem natural to us... simply because we are human too, but that is all the more reason to try and explain it.

Question 3. Why this asymmetry between good and bad fortune?

This may be simpler to solve (indeed the solution may well be obvious) - still, this is one of the questions a good cognition and culture account should address. Most people in the world construct elaborate explanations for bad things while in many cases they are happy that good things just happen.

Question 4. Why are only some occurrences explained in agentive ways?

In the bad good old days of classical anthropology, people with a magical, primitive or prelogical mentality did everything the prelogical or magical way. They were peasants, barbarians, savages - in other words the unclubbable. But as Evans-Pritchard and many others pointed out, all these people also have causal explanations of the more sober, covering-law kind. True, witches will destroy your granary, but granaries cave in also because of termites. Indeed, in most human groups there is an explicit distinction between “simple” or “straightforward” misfortune, which requires not much explanation beyond a recognition of the generic causal processes involved, and those “special” occurrences that seem to cry out for an agentive, karmic or other explanation. During my fieldwork, I learned that Fang people in Cameroon considered some illnesses and assorted misfortune as “simple misfortune”, to be explained for instance in terms of (local models of) physiology, while others were “special”, recruiting the whole panoply of spirits and ancestors.

Why do people maintain both kinds of models? And more important, are there any recurrent

differences in the kinds of events covered by these types of explanations?

My solution and our competition for a MEGA-PRIZE

I have found a marvellous solution to all these questions. Unfortunately, the space of this blog is too small to contain it. So I reserve its full publication for another occasion.

In the meantime, why not let a hundred flowers bloom and a thousand schools compete? This is why ICCI proudly opens a competition for the best evolution-compatible, human-cognition-driven, empirically testable explanatory model of these four features of human reflections on misfortune.

Competition regulations: 1. Only send contributions that would address and answer all four questions above. 2. The winner will receive a prize of US\$42, offered by Pascal Boyer, in the form of a voucher for use in their favourite online bookshop. (I offer this precise sum because that's the amount of a reviewer's fee that I got and absolutely did not deserve). 3. Pascal Boyer is sole judge of all entries. His judgment is thoroughly subjective and may be swayed by friendship, reputation, good looks, bribes and neural misfirings. The judgment is final and unmotivated.