

This article was downloaded by: [Baurisch, Amanda][University of Utah]

On: 13 June 2011

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 937362180]

Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Journal of Gerontological Social Work

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t792304007>

### Causality Conundrums and Advice to Authors

Amanda S. Barusch

Online publication date: 13 January 2011

**To cite this Article** Barusch, Amanda S.(2011) 'Causality Conundrums and Advice to Authors', Journal of Gerontological Social Work, 54: 2, 135 – 137

**To link to this Article:** DOI: 10.1080/01634372.2011.550512

**URL:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01634372.2011.550512>

## PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf>

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

## EDITORIAL

### Causality Conundrums and Advice to Authors

Truth has become elusive in this post-modern era, which calls into question each of our many ways of knowing. In the traditional research paradigm, we approach truth through the process of elimination. As null hypotheses are rejected time after time we begin to consider the possibility that an affirmative causal explanation might be in order. Unfortunately, many researchers leap without question or pause from rejecting a single null hypothesis to embracing the explanation of the moment. Qualitative researchers are not immune, given their tendency to imply that truths (sometimes called “themes”) magically “emerge” from data. In the dawn of a new decade, let’s resolve to adopt a more circumspect approach to causality. Let’s circle our explanations a few times before we decide to lie down with them.

This might be going against our natures. Human beings are meaning-making machines. We can find patterns and explanations even before we learn to talk about them (Gilovich, 1993). Consequently, we have become very good at predicting the weather (Ring, 2000). My favorite weather woman can tell me when a blizzard is going to reach my home. She’s right, nearly all the time. But, prediction is not explanation. She can describe the flow of air masses around the globe; but she can’t say whether this blizzard was caused by global warming or a butterfly’s wing. She can’t tell me that I’m going to have to shovel snow tomorrow morning, but she can’t tell me *why*.

This may be the essence of the causality conundrum. Our powers of observation and pattern recognition are exceptionally well-developed, and we insist on applying them, not to prediction, but to the vastly more elusive task of explanation.<sup>1</sup>

Explanation holds us to a higher standard. Before concluding that A causes B, we must meet three basic criteria: observed covariance, temporal precedence, and theoretical explanation (Babbie, 2008). An example may be in order. Suppose A is social support and B is depression. Then suppose that I have conducted a survey of older adults. I measure their social support and their depression and I find that they covary—and the likelihood that my result was obtained by chance is less than 5%. Voila! I have met the first criterion. I have observed covariance. I might leap to publish this exciting result, and I would not be alone in doing so. Too much of the work published

in the social sciences offers cheap explanations based solely on observed covariance. Unfortunately, given my design, I cannot meet the second criterion for establishing causality: temporal precedence. My cross-sectional observations will not allow me to say whether social support influenced depression or whether mood states affect social support. For that, I undertake a longitudinal study. I follow older adults for two decades, carefully documenting changes in social support and depression. I find that shortly after social support goes up, depression goes down. Bingo! That's two out of three.

The third criterion may be the hardest because a theoretical connection calls on me, not just to come up with some *post hoc* explanation of why social support affects depression but to *eliminate alternative explanations*. How on earth do I accomplish this? How can I say with any confidence that there is not an external causal mechanism operating to both raise social support and lower depression? The answer, I am afraid, is that I cannot. In a naturalistic study of this kind, I can't even *list* all the competing explanations, let alone *eliminate* them! So what is a truth-seeker to do?

If you'll forgive a brief analogy: we're all together here in Plato's cave, and if we can't look at the sun (truth) directly, we can describe its shadows in careful detail and we can compare notes on what we observe from diverse perspectives. Through this process we approximate truth.

**My advice to authors using cross-sectional data:** When you observe covariance, celebrate! But don't rush to publish. Don't settle for the first explanation that comes to mind. Consider temporal precedence, if only hypothetically. Ask yourself if it is reasonable to assume that your independent measure preceded your dependent measure. Address alternative explanations. Talk to your friends (or better, your critics). Present your findings in several venues. Then you will be ready to publish. The story you tell need not be a Truth epic. Instead, give us a modest tale of your observations and insights. When you discuss your findings, consider multiple explanations and, if you like, persuade us that yours is the most plausible.

Science may not be the only—or even the best—path to Truth, but it is the best tool we have for generating disciplined observations of our social world and engaging in dialogue about the underlying forces that might explain them. Reviewers and editors here at *JGSW* are proud skeptics when it comes to truth with a capital “T,” but we have a strong appetite for new observations and insights. We look forward to seeing yours!

## INTRODUCTION TO THE ISSUE

The articles in this issue are rich in observation and insights. First, Tracie Harrison and her colleagues in Texas explore the experience and performance of femininity among 25 older women who suffered from polio. Then

Karla T. Washington and her colleagues consider end-of-life care in adult family homes, emphasizing the need for hospice social workers to reach out to family members who may not be present at the time of their client visits. Sherry M. Cummings and Nancy P. Kropf review the challenges of aging with severe mental illness, along with a valuable summary of effective intervention approaches. Noell L. Rowan and colleagues consider graduate students' knowledge of community-based services, and argue that this area deserves special emphasis in the education of gerontological social workers. Robin P. Bonifas identifies factors associated with deficiencies in psychosocial care in skilled nursing facilities. In the final article, Philip A. Rozario and colleagues apply the Selection, Optimization, and Compensation model to explore how older adults cope with chronic illness. The issue closes with Felix O. Chima's review of *Counselling With Caregivers: A Guide for Professionals*.

Amanda S. Barusch  
Editor, JGSW

#### NOTE

1. Both prediction and explanation in the social sciences are complicated by the fact that we are typically dealing, not in certainties, but in the sticky realm of probabilities in which A doesn't cause—but increases the likelihood—of B.

#### REFERENCES

- Babbie, E. (2008). *The basics of social research*. Belmont, CA: Thomson-Wadsworth.
- Gilovich, T. (1993). *How we know what isn't so: The fallibility of human reason in everyday life*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Ring, K. (2000). *Predicting the weather by the moon*. Glastonbury, UK: Gothic Image Publications.