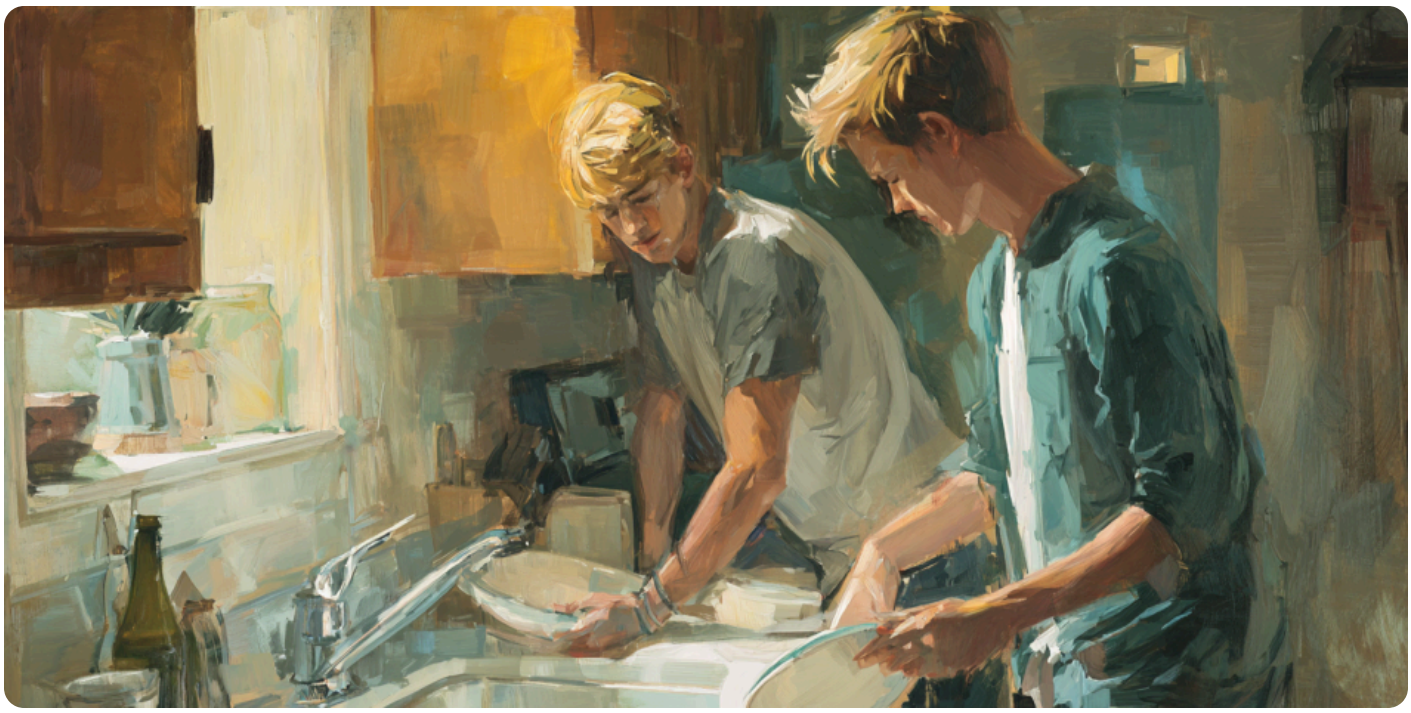

The Fiction of Self-Knowledge

Good sociology listens to personal narratives without mistaking them for complete explanations of behavior.

By C.D. Cunningham

COVERING THE COVERAGE

May 12, 2026

Imagine you live in an apartment with roommates. One is a bit of a slob, struggles with school, and eventually stops doing the dishes altogether.

A sociologist is curious about what's happening and comes to interview you and your roommate. The sociologist asks you why you think your roommate stopped doing the dishes. You tell the sociologist that your roommate is probably struggling in his broader life, doesn't have a very clean personality, and might even be a bit lazy.

The sociologist then asks your roommate why. The roommate answers that it was because the rent was too high, school got busy, and you weren't doing your fair share in

other areas.

The sociologist then announces that you didn't know why your roommate stopped doing the dishes.

Replicate this experiment across dozens of apartments, and suddenly the sociologist announces a trend: "roommates who do the dishes know the least about why people stop doing the dishes."

The headline is absurd. We all know this intuitively.

People can't truly be trusted to self-report their rationales. We barely understand our own rationales sometimes. This is even more true when we are feeling defensive about a choice we made.

This level of understanding is akin to telling a betrayed partner that the reason they don't get along with their ex is that they just don't understand the reason they cheated, and if they would just sit down and listen, then the relationship could be healed.

As absurd as this scenario sounds, it is a narrative that is often accepted when discussing religious disaffiliation.

We Can't Trust the Stories We Tell About Ourselves

There is a simple sociological reality we ought to admit more often: people don't fully and reliably understand their own motivations and report them correctly.

That sentence can sound harsher than it is. It is not an accusation that people are mostly liars. It is not a claim that ordinary self-explanation is worthless. And it certainly is not a license to treat our neighbors with cynicism.

But it is an acknowledgment of something that every parent, teacher, therapist, spouse, bishop, manager, and friend already knows: human beings are not transparent to themselves.

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We often do not know why we do what we do. And even when we have some understanding, we don't always describe our motives with perfect honesty, precision, or proportion. We give explanations that are flattering, available, socially acceptable, or useful. We turn impulses into principles. We turn fears into convictions. We turn resentments into moral stands and preferences into "discernment."

And it's not because people are bad or dishonest. It's because people are people.

This leaves it nearly impossible to know for certain why people do what they do. In that vacuum, those who seek to study these kinds of questions use self-reporting as a stand-in. It's the best data we have, even if it's not truly answering the underlying question.

The trouble is that when we extrapolate self-reported rationales for actual rationales we are left with a childish sociology. Listening to people's self-reported reasons is important. It's important in interpersonal relationships. It is important in developing empathy and charity. But it's not particularly good science.

And when something is the best available science, but also not particularly good science, we tend to give it way more credence than it deserves.

When we are trying to respond wisely to human behavior, people's own explanations for their behavior is often not a particularly useful starting point.

Why People Misunderstand Themselves

There are many reasons people misreport their own motives. Some are innocent. Some are self-serving. Most are mixed.

The first reason is simply that introspection is limited. We experience ourselves from the inside, but that does not mean we understand ourselves from the inside. Much of human action emerges from habit, desire, fear, loyalty, imitation, resentment, exhaustion, social pressure, or appetite, before it ever becomes a conscious thought.

Then, after we act, the conscious mind gets to work explaining. It does not always investigate, it usually narrates.

Take for instance a man who snaps at his wife, and says "I'm just stressed." Maybe he is. But maybe he is also embarrassed, defensive, entitled, tired of being challenged, or repeating a family pattern he has never examined. A teenager says he failed his test because "I don't care about school." Maybe so. But maybe he doesn't understand the material and caring and failing would hurt too much, so indifference is used as an armor. A politician says, "I'm just asking questions." Maybe. Or maybe the politician is laundering insinuation through the language of curiosity.

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The relationship between the reasons we give to others and the actual reasons is varied. Sometimes the actual reasons are buried so deep we don't understand them. Sometimes we know and choose to lie. Sometimes the reasons we give are part of the answer, but the full answer goes deeper.

The second reason is that people are motivated to preserve a good opinion of themselves. This pattern is so deeply ingrained that communication scholars call it "the fundamental attribution error." People don't experience themselves as the villain. Even cruelty tends to arrive internally dressed as justice. Cowardice feels like prudence. Laziness feels like self-care. Pride feels like principle. Envy feels like fairness.

That moral vocabulary may be sincere, but sincerity does not prove accuracy. In fact, sincerity can make error even more durable. A person who knows he is lying may eventually be confronted by it. But people who have successfully moralized their own impulses can become nearly impossible to reach.

A third reason is that social incentives shape self-reporting. People learn which explanations will be rewarded in their community. In one setting, the acceptable explanation is trauma. In another, it is loyalty. In another, it is authenticity. So people reach for explanations that fit within the circle in which they derive their social standing.

This doesn't mean that they are consciously manipulating others. More often, they are simply absorbing the language of their tribe, and casting their own decisions within that framework. They learn the kind of story that makes their behavior intelligible and defensible. Over time, that story becomes not merely the public explanation but the private one as well. This doesn't mean that the stated reasons are untrue, but it certainly means that they could be partial or shaped by the available scripts.

The fourth reason is that people confuse causes with justifications. The cause of behavior is what actually produced it. The justification is what makes it seem acceptable afterward. These are not the same. And human beings are remarkably good at finding true things that are not the truest things.

This is one of the great complications of moral life. People rarely offer explanations that are entirely fabricated. They offer explanations that are selective. They emphasize the part of the story that protects them from the parts that implicate them.

The fifth reason is that identity changes perception. Once people understand themselves as a certain kind of person, they begin interpreting their own behavior through that identity.

If I see myself as compassionate, my harshness must be "hard truth." If I see myself as courageous, my unkindness may be "speaking out." If I see myself as a enlightened, my contempt must be "clarity."

Identity does not merely describe behavior. It edits memory, filters evidence, and assigns meaning. This is why the question "Why did you do that?" often produces less insight than we expect.

Why Poor Self-Reporting Matters

The practical consequences of this can be enormous. If we accept everyone's stated motives at face value, we lose the ability to understand behavior.

If a child says she didn't do her homework, and she says the reason is that she forgot, and we get her a planner, that

> If we accept everyone's stated

only solves the problem if the real reason wasn't actually that she finds the work boring.

Again, this isn't cynicism. This doesn't assume that people are trying to trick or deceive you. It's wisdom. It recognizes that no one has perfect self-awareness, and it seeks to meet people where they are.

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A mature society needs that kind of wisdom. Without it, public life life becomes an endless competition of self-serving narratives. Whoever can produce the most emotionally compelling explanation wins the moral high ground.

But the truth about human behavior is not determined by the eloquence of the explanation.

Discerning Truth

Listening is a key skill. But just listening is not enough when we are trying to respond to behavior. So what should we do instead?

Watch patterns, look at effects, look for incentives, look at what is sacrificed, listen to third parties who bear the consequences, notice timing, distinguish pain from interpretation, and apply this to ourselves first.

Understanding some of these principles should help make us more circumspect about our own self-serving narratives before anything else. The goal is not suspicion, it's understanding. But understanding requires more than reflexively believing whatever narrative people tell about themselves.

So when we are trying to understand complex phenomena like abuse, conversion, or job choice, we should listen, but we shouldn't accuse other people of not knowing why people act the way they do, just because they see different reasons to explain that behavior.

About the author

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C.D. Cunningham is a founder and editor-at-large of Public Square magazine.