

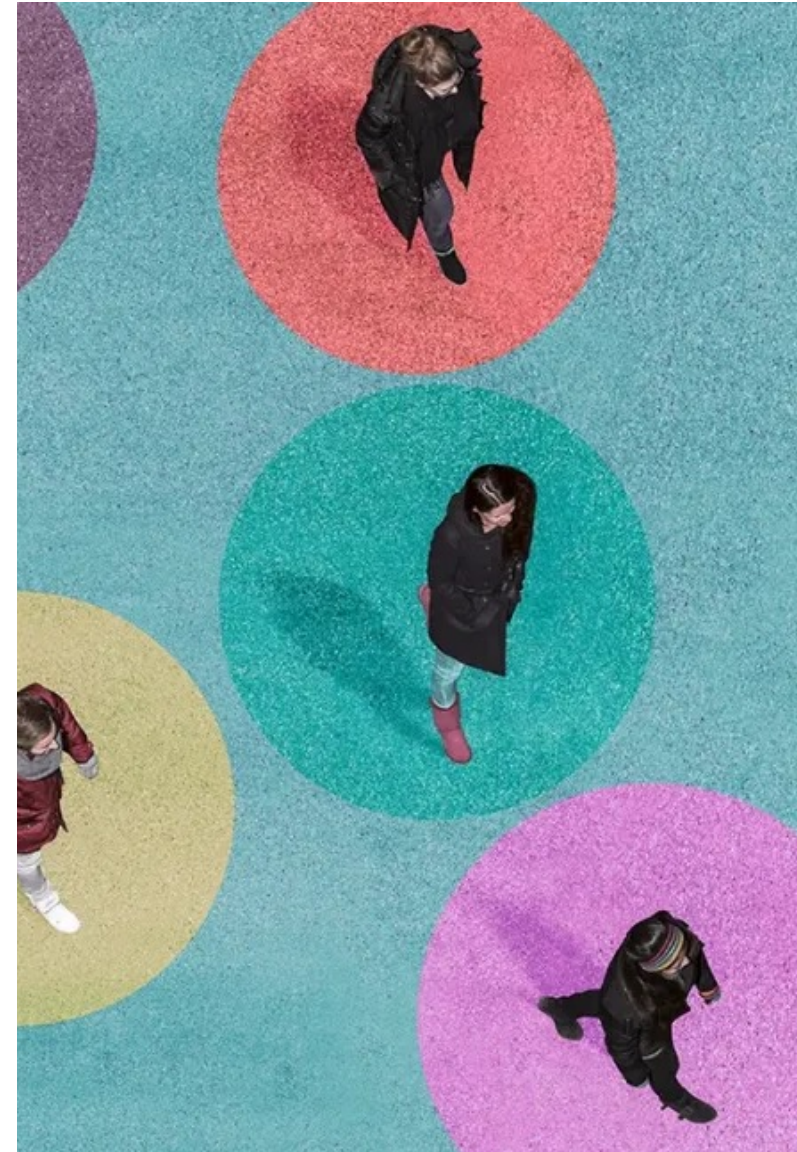
A stylized illustration of a person's head in profile, facing left. The head is rendered in shades of brown and tan. A red, oval-shaped area is highlighted on the forehead, with a blue line extending from it down towards the eye. A white circle is positioned above the forehead, with a grey line extending from it down towards the red area. The background is dark, with some faint, abstract shapes in blue and red. The overall style is graphic and modern.

# WHEN TO PSYCHOLOGIZE

Elise Woodard

# EXAMPLES

- “You really voted for Brexit because you’re xenophobic.”
- “You only think I’m being a bad girlfriend because you’re hungry.”
- “You’re really a socialist because you feel guilty about your own wealth & privilege.”
- “You only donate to charity because it makes you feel like a good person.”



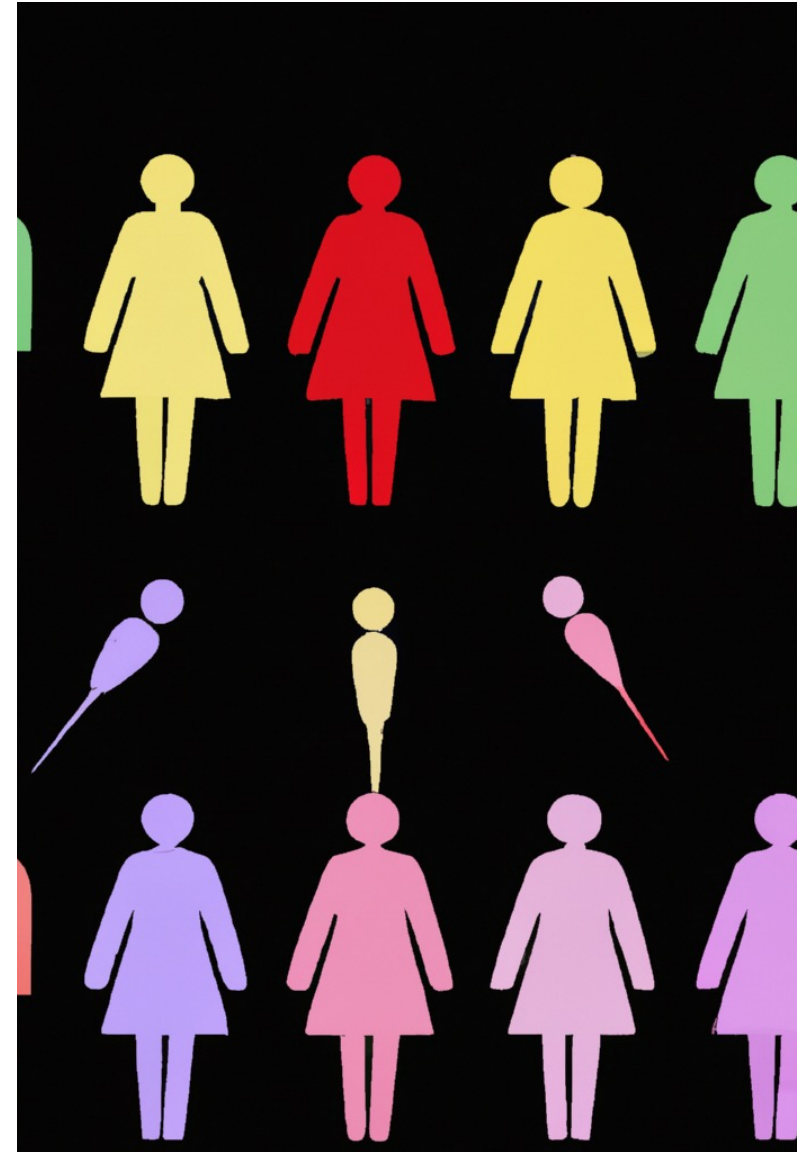
# XENOPHOBIA

## **Xenophobia**

Your friend is a staunch supporter of a politician you despise. Your friend lists the reasons she supports him.

But as the conversation continues, you start to wonder...

Does she actually support the politician because she is racist and xenophobic?



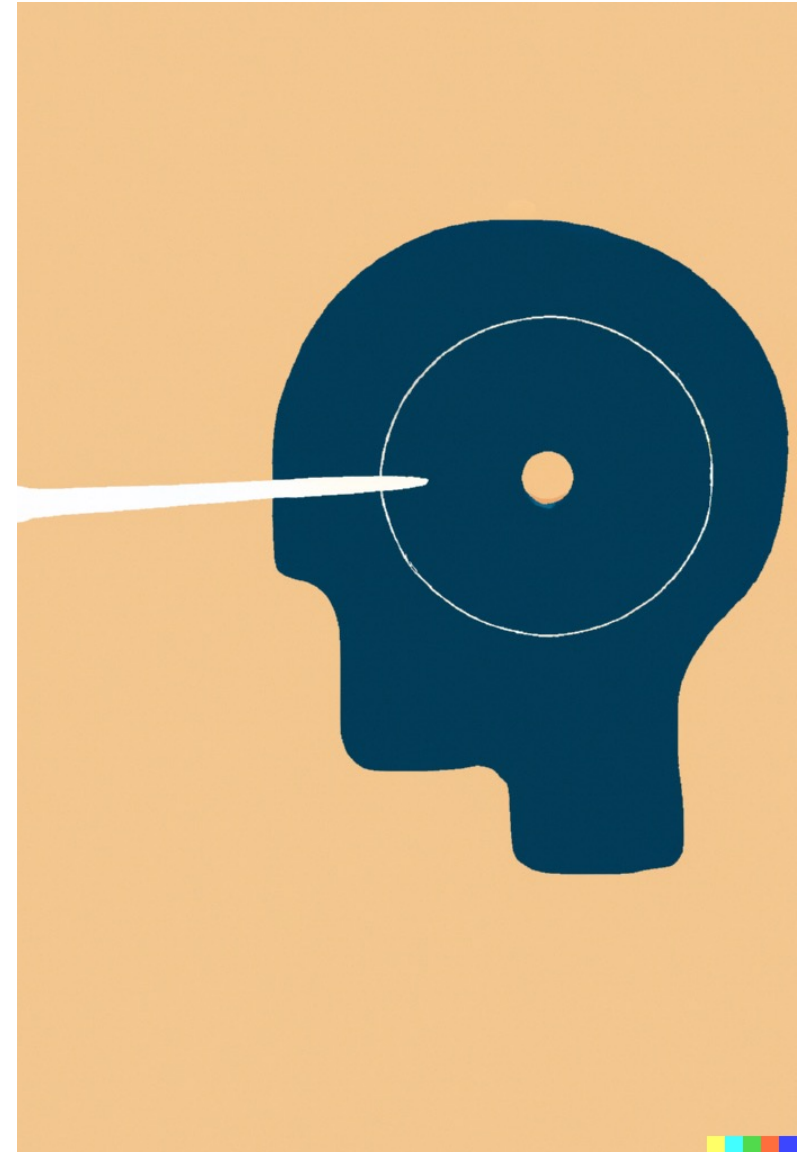
# PSYCHOLOGIZING

## Psychologizing Explanation

A psychological explanation for someone's beliefs, assertions, or behavior that denies or supplants their own stated reasons.

- “You really believe that because...”
- “You really did that because...”

Ex: ‘you’re racist’, ‘sexist’, ‘chauvinist’, ‘hungry’, ‘homophobic’, ‘hormonal’, ‘biased’, ‘self-deceived’, etc.





# FLOWERREE'S QUESTION

## Central Question:

When is it permissible to endorse a psychologizing explanation of a sincere interlocutor?

## Restrictions:

- Endorse vs. Hypothesize
- Sincere vs. Insincere
- Interlocutor vs. Self

**Q:** What motivates these restrictions?

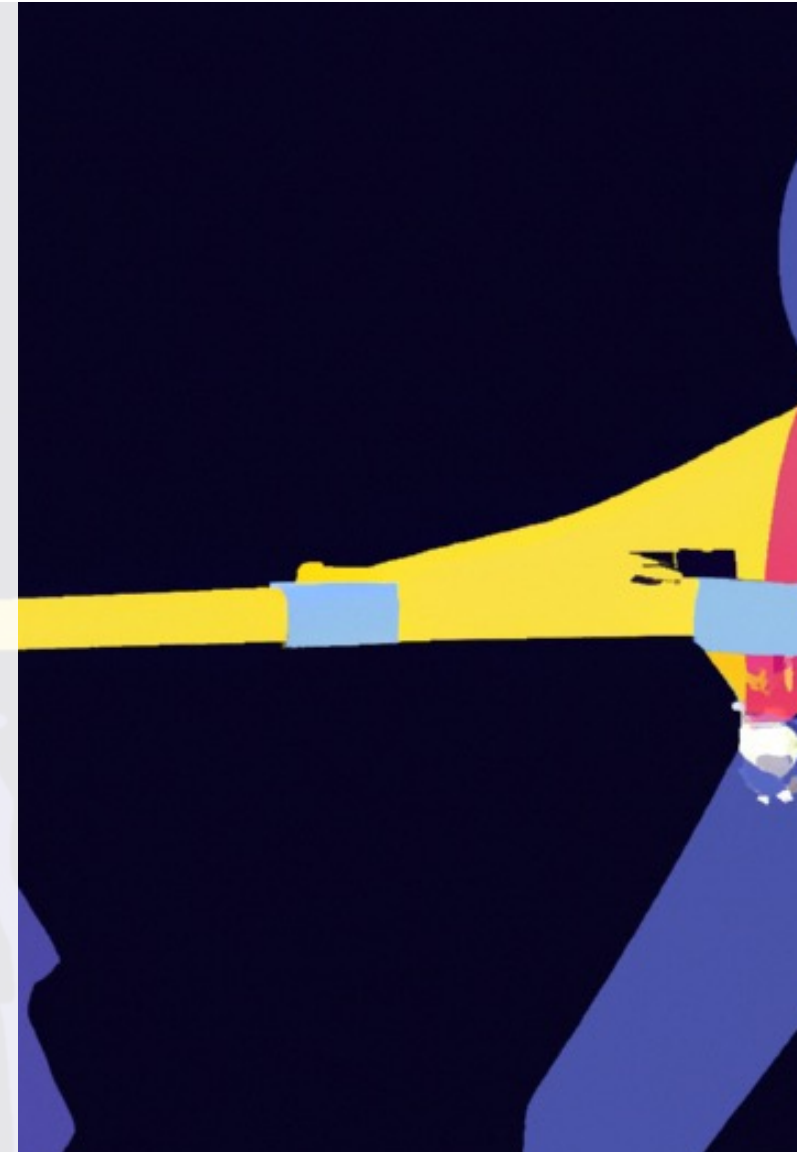


# THE TENSION

Respecting someone requires:

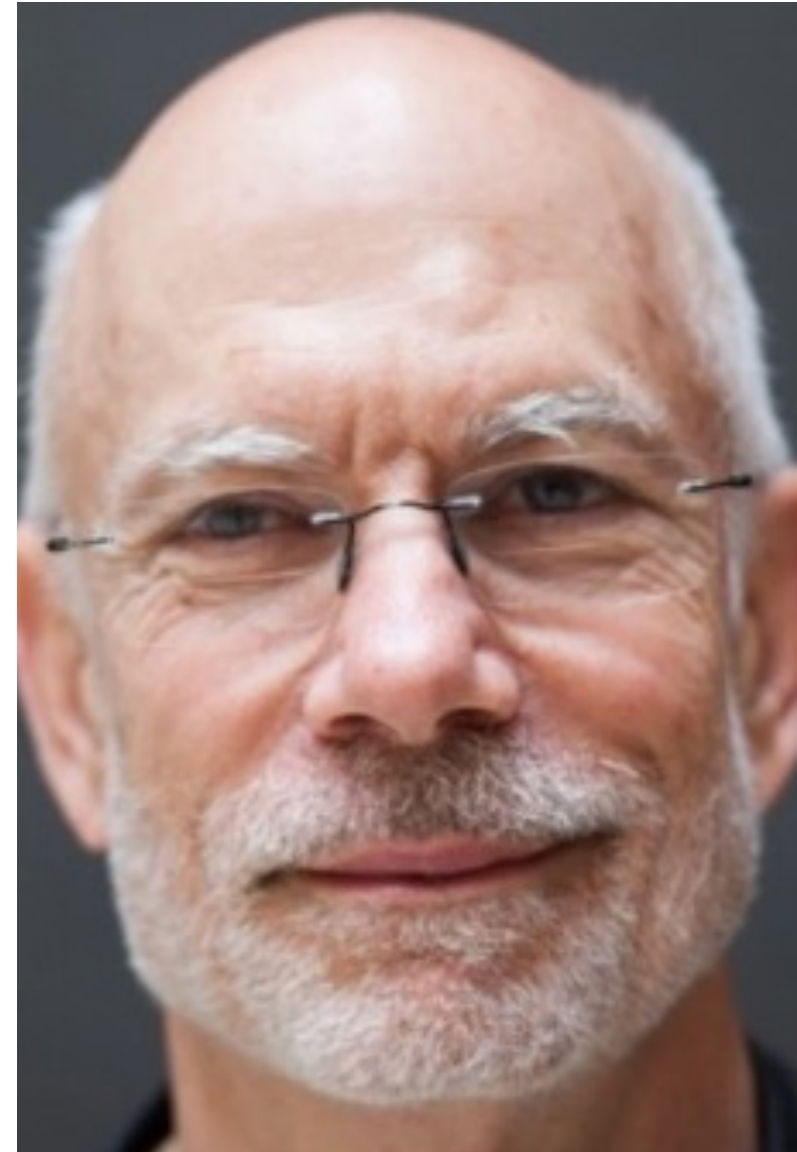
1. Taking seriously their own stated reasons
2. Taking seriously the realities of embodiment & cognitive limitations.

Sometimes the most charitable interpretation will be one on which the target is self-deceived, hangry, hormonal, etc.



# TWO KINDS OF RESPECT

- 1. Recognition Respect:** respect owed to all persons in virtue of their inherent worth & dignity
  - Universal: Deserved by all persons
- 2. Appraisal Respect:** esteem merited or earned by one's character or conduct
  - Selective: Deserved by people who excelled in some way



# FLOWERREE'S CLAIMS

We shouldn't dismissively psychologize by default.

Rather, we should accept the reasons offered by our sincere interlocutors.

This default can be overridden when we are **in a position to know** that our interlocutors are mistaken.





# TWO TYPES OF PSYCHOLOGIZING

## **Dismissive Psychologizing**

Involves dismissing someone's stated reasons as genuinely their reasons

## **Empathetic Imagination**

Involves thinking about what factors led the agent to adopt those reasons (e.g. his upbringing)



# DISMISSIVE PSYCHOLOGIZING

Only dismissive psychologizing involves attributions of *bad faith*.

## **Bad Faith**

An agent's stated reasons are not what's *actually* motivating her. The agent would disavow an accurate account of her motivations.



# VARIETIES OF BAD FAITH

- **Total vs. Partial:** Avowed reason plays *no vs. some* role in her motivation.
- **Sincere vs. Insincere:** Agent is unaware vs. aware of her actual motivations

Flowerree is focused on the wrongs of psychologizing sincere interlocutors.

- **Q:** Why would it be OK to psychologize the insincere?



# MORAL RISKS OF PSYCHOLOGIZING

## **Public Psychologizing**

1. Insulting, disrespectful, and damaging
2. Shuts them out of communal deliberation

## **Private Psychologizing**

1. Disrespectful, condescending, & wrongful—at least when mistaken.
2. It would be appropriate for the target to feel insulted if they found out.



# SMYTH: THE HARMS OF PSYCHOLOGIZING

- A form of **humiliation**: a loss of social standing.
- We feel shame and loss of self-esteem, which can be deeply painful.
- Also, we are given evidence that we are **morally unreliable**.
- We believe and act on motives that **don't track the moral truth**.



**A moral critique of psychological debunking**

Nicholas Smyth 

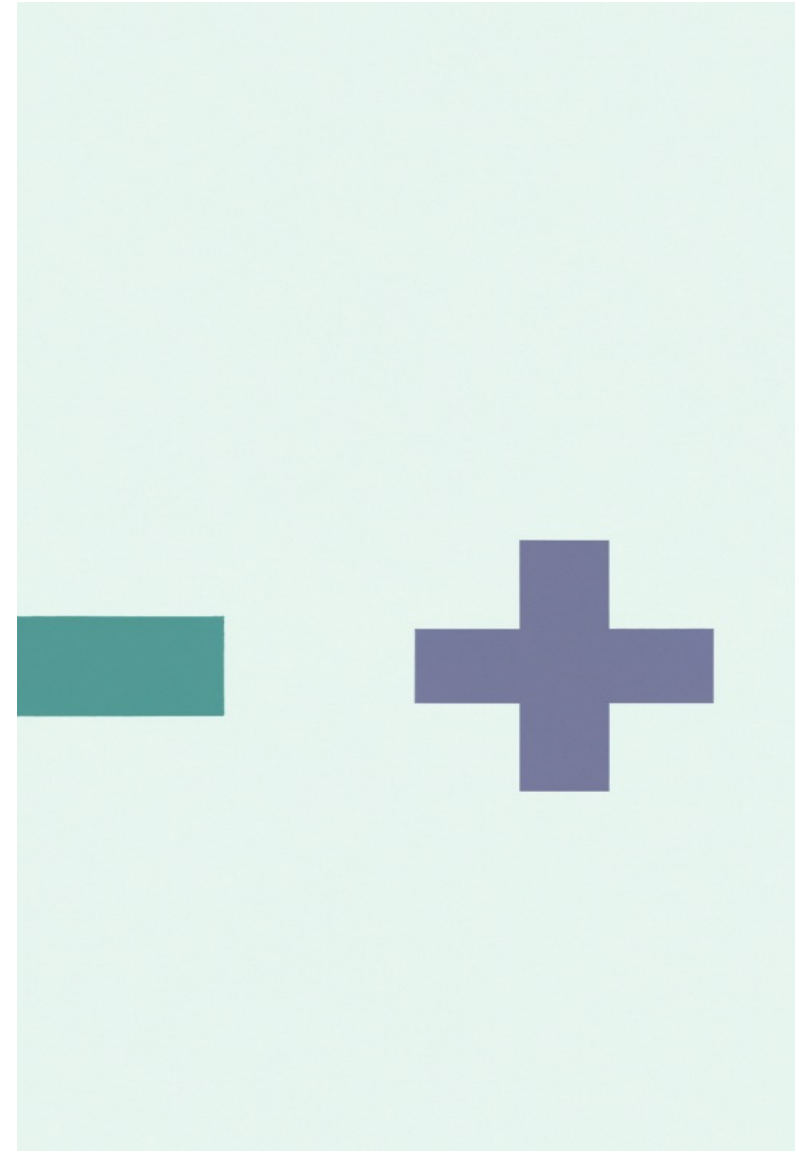


# BAD MOTIVES

It is especially problematic to psychologize someone by imputing to them negative traits, e.g. worse motives or irrationality.

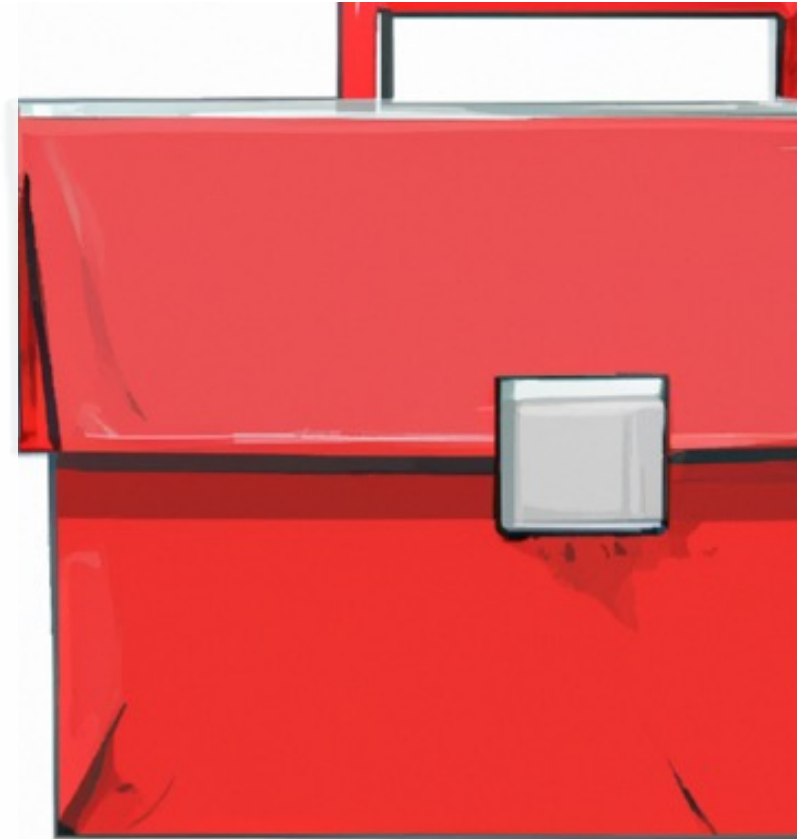
**Q:** What about *positive psychologizing*?

- **Ex:** “You say you’re just doing this because it benefits you, but you’re actually doing it out of kindness.”



# CASES, CASES, & MORE CASES

- Importantly, there are some cases where psychologizing is OK.
- What explains the differences?



# THERAPIST

**Therapist:** Eve is a trained therapist, who helps Lynn work through her feelings of low self-esteem triggered at work. Eve hypothesizes that Lynn's feelings of inadequacy are triggered by Lynn's childhood experience of being unable to please her controlling parents.

**Intuition:** Nothing wrong with psychologizing

**Features:** Consensual, exploratory, non-dismissive, helpful, positive(?)



# PROFILER

**Profiler:** Jamal is constructing a psychological profile of a crime suspect, Steve. Jamal claims that Steve commits certain crimes due to a problem with authority, not his commitment to justice.

**Intuition:** Whether psychologizing is problematic depends on the details.

**Features:** Part of Jamal's job; well-evidenced & might be right; Steve may *feel* disrespected... But is he?



# HORMONAL

**Hormonal:** Sarah tells her employee, Brad, that his work is subpar, and his performance must improve. Brad responds by saying that she doesn't really think his work is subpar, but is instead just lashing out at him because she is 'hormonal' and 'too emotional.'

**Intuition:** Psychologizing is problematic.

**Features:** Insulting, disrespectful, testimonial injustice, participates in unreliable social practice.





# HUNGRY

**Hungry:** Sylvia and Max are disagreeing over where to go to dinner. As the disagreement grows, Max realizes that Sylvia is probably suffering from dangerously low blood sugar, based on his long experience in a relationship with her. She is furious with Max for disregarding her preferences.

**Intuition:** Probably not wrong to psychologize.

**Features:** Close relationship; track record



# INTUITIONS

	Intuition	Relevant Considerations
<b>Xenophobia</b>	Suspect 😬	Dismissive & disrespectful, especially if mistaken
<b>Therapist</b>	Fine ✅	Consensual, non-dismissive, caring, etc.
<b>Profiler</b>	Probably fine ✅	Part of his job; well-evidenced
<b>Hormonal</b>	Problematic ❌	Insulting & disrespectful; background social injustice
<b>Hungry</b>	Probably fine ✅	Close relationship; reliable track record; caring

**Q:** How do we capture all the intuitive judgments? What details are relevant?

# WHEN TO PSYCHOLOGIZE

## **Psychologize:**

It is permissible to psychologize (i.e. endorse a psychologizing explanation) when you are in a position to know the other person is in bad faith.



# THE POSITION TO KNOW

- **Knowledge is demanding!**
  - You can only know that your friend is mistaken if she *actually is* mistaken.
- Similarly, you can only be **in a position** to know your friend is mistaken if she is.
- Sometimes violations of a norm are **excused**.
  - You can be excused for psychologizing if you had misleading evidence that someone was mistaken.



# CAPTURING THE CASES

	Intuition	Flowerree's Explanation
<b>Xenophobia</b>	😊	Must wait for more evidence
<b>Therapist</b>	✅	Hypothesizing, not endorsing
<b>Profiler</b>	✅	Position to know
<b>Hormonal</b>	❌	No position to know
<b>Hungry</b>	✅	Position to know

## Questions:

1. Do you agree with these intuitions?
2. Is her explanation right?



# QUESTIONS

1. What other features are relevant to the permissibility of psychologizing? (Ex: social role, motivations)
2. Is the “position to know” the right condition? Why not “reasonable suspicion” or “sufficient evidence”?
3. Is it always OK to suspect or raise psychologizing explanations, as long as you don’t endorse them?
4. Is it OK to psychologize yourself? If so, why?



# SELF VS. OTHERS

**Mirror**

Image: Getty

NEWS POLITICS FOOTBALL CELEBS TV ROYALS MONEY

## Men are using an app to track female colleagues' and partners' periods - and it's creepy

Some men have chosen to use the apps to try and predict when women are on their periods - and they're not sorry about it

ALISA VITTI

A 28-day plan working with your monthly cycle to do more and stress less

In the **FLO**

# MOTIVATED IGNORANCE

## Motivated Ignorance Objection

Members of dominant group display motivated ignorance, including about their own internalized racists and sexist attitudes. Hence, we shouldn't give their stated reasons much weight.

**Response:** You should still wait to psychologize.

- Just because most members of your friend's group are racist doesn't mean your friend is.

**Q's:** Is this response satisfying?



# IS PSYCHOLOGIZING ALWAYS BAD?

Smyth says,

- “a debunking speech act is **always** an *attempt* to humiliate.”

We have a presumptive duty to not humiliate.

- But sometimes, duties are overridden.



# THE MORAL & EPISTEMIC HAZARDS OF DEBUNKING

The psychologizer must make four assumptions:

1. **(Epistemic)** He is reasonably sure of the real underlying motivations.
2. **(Evaluative)** The end-state at which he is aiming (e.g., the exposure of hypocrisy) justifies his decision to undermine a person in this way.
3. **(Means-Ends)** Psychological debunking is an effective way to secure this end.
4. **(Unintended Consequences)** The end-state, even when efficiently achieved, is valuable enough to justify the potentially negative consequences of psychological debunking.

Smyth, "A Moral Critique of Psychological Debunking"





# WHEN TO PSYCHOLOGIZE?

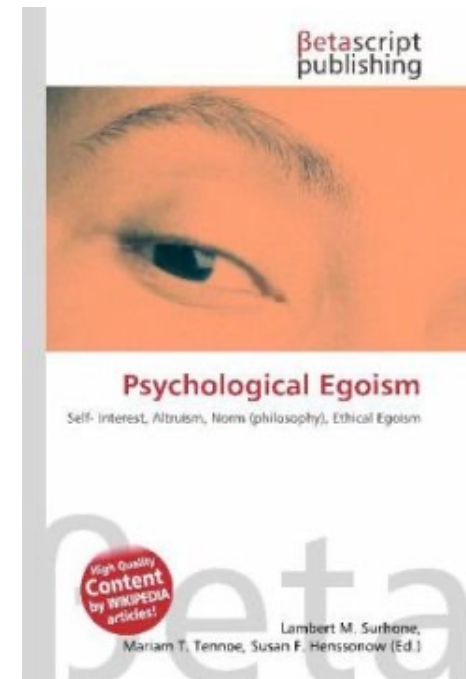
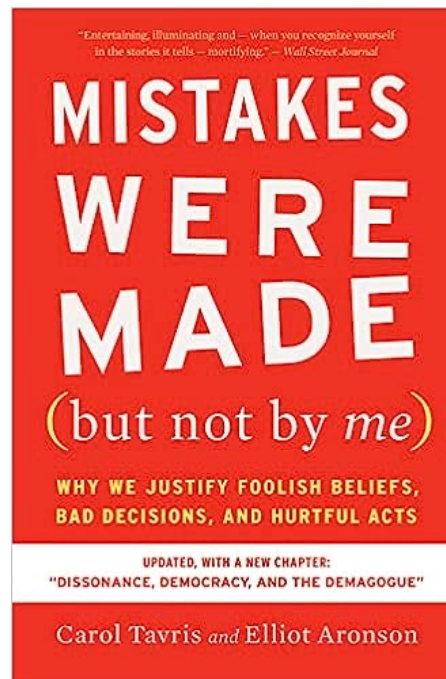
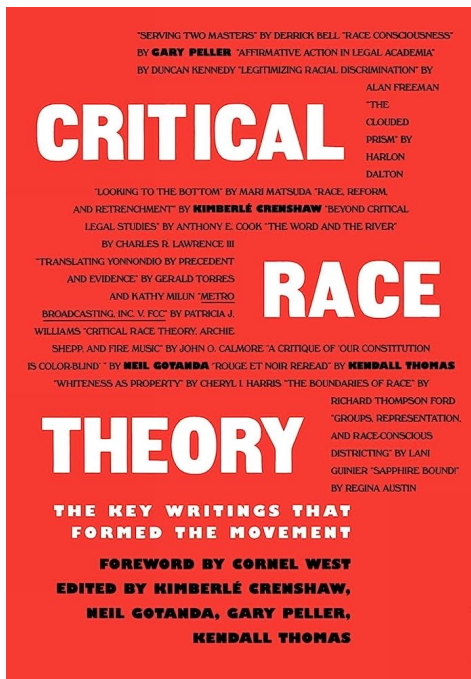
- **Flowerree:** When you're in a position to know that the target is in bad faith.
- **Smyth:** When (1) you're reasonably sure the target is in bad faith, (2) psychologizing is an effective & justified means for achieving your ends, & (3) the moral pros outweigh the cons.

**Q:** Who's right?

- What are the relevant epistemic & moral considerations?



# WHAT'S OFF THE TABLE?



# PSYCHOLOGIZING EGOISM

Does psychological egoism psychologize?

If so, is it not only false, but also morally or epistemically problematic?

