

Fallacy of The Single Cause

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November 19, 2022

RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2022). *Fallacy of The Single Cause*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES.
Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=39403>

The fallacy of the single cause, also known as causal oversimplification, is a fallacy of questionable cause that occurs when it is assumed that there is a single, simple cause of an outcome when in reality it may have been caused by a number of only jointly sufficient causes.

Often after a tragedy it is asked, What was the cause of this? Such language implies that there is one cause, when instead there were probably a large number of contributing factors. However, having produced a list of several contributing factors, it may be worthwhile to look for the strongest of the factors, or a single cause underlying several of them. A need for simplification may be perceived in order to make the explanation of the tragedy operational, so that responsible authorities can be seen to have taken action.

For instance, after a school shooting, editorialists debate whether it was caused by the shooter's parents, violence in media, stress on students, or the accessibility of guns. In fact, many different causes--including some of those--may all have necessarily contributed. Similarly, the music industry might claim that peer-to-peer file sharing is the cause of a loss in profit whereas factors such as a growing videogame market and economic depression are also likely to be major factors.

Causal oversimplification is a specific kind of false dilemma where conjoint possibilities are ignored. In other words, the possible causes are assumed to be "A or B or C" when "A and B and C" or "A and B and not C" (etc.) are not taken into consideration.

A notable scientific example of what can happen when this kind of fallacy is identified and resolved is the development in economics of the Coase theorem.