

CAUSATION – ALPHONSE THE CAMEL

Purpose

In this first activity in the causation progression, you'll get familiar with different ways of understanding cause and consequence, and learn to use them as analytical tools for understanding change over time. Historical events rarely have a single, proximate cause – some happen immediately before an event, some long before an event, some play a central role, and some merely contribute. Some causes may also be considered consequences, and the significance of the event may change depending on your framing of that event. In this activity, you will quickly learn about different types of causes, and then will be introduced to different frames you will use for analyzing causation throughout the course.

Note that “Alphonse the Camel” is a story that was used in the Big History Project course, so you might be familiar with it. Although the story is being reused in this course, the *way* it's being used is different, so be sure to pay close attention to the differences!

Practices

Scale

Interpretations and accounts (readings and writings) of cause and consequence shift when we think about causes over longer periods of time and across a global scale. For example, something considered a long-term cause could become a short-term cause if you shift to look at a longer length of time. In terms of spatial scale or distance, if you shrink or expand the physical area within which you view a historical event, you might incorporate a different set of causes and consequences as you zoom in or out on that event.



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Process

Start by reading the following story:

Alphonse the Camel

Once upon a time, there was a camel (called Alphonse). For various reasons (relating to an unfortunate accident during his birth) the camel had severe back problems. This was not the end of his misfortune, however, because he also had an evil, exploitative owner (called Frank the Camel Killer). Frank had hated camels ever since he experienced a nasty incident in his childhood involving a camel's hoof and his rear end. He was very bitter and hadn't trusted camels since.

Frank regularly overloaded his camels prior to taking them on grueling and totally unnecessary round trips up and down mountains on his way to deliver goods to his customers. These customers, shockingly, were completely indifferent to these frequent and gross violations of the rights of camels and even found Frank and his antics vaguely endearing. On top of it all, Alphonse was sometimes his own worst enemy. Camels are very proud creatures, and he would act tough in front of his camel friends, and on his rare breaks he would show off how much he could carry.

Plenty of camels had died doing similar work to Alphonse and his friends. After a particularly nasty few weeks when camels were keeling over left, right, and center, the camels decided to form a union to defend their rights and protect them from evil owners. However, when it comes down to it, camels are selfish creatures who don't trust each other. They were more worried about looking after themselves than about working together, and the union soon fizzled out.

One Friday, Frank had just finished loading up Alphonse and his poor exploited fellow creatures for yet another grueling and totally unnecessary round trip up and down the mountains. He had piled and piled and piled up the goods onto Alphonse's back and was taking a break, chewing a straw while thinking smugly about his handiwork. On a whim, he decided to add the bedraggled straw he had been chewing to Alphonse's load. Alphonse groaned obligingly. He eyed his owner with disgust. He keeled over and died of radical and irreversible back collapse.

Now, list all the reasons you can think of for why Alphonse died. Once you and your class have come up with a final list, write all the reasons on sticky notes or cards.

Arrange your stickies or cards into three different categories: short-, intermediate-, and long-term causes. Once you've arranged your cards by timeframe, look at your short-term cards to identify the "triggering event" in the story. The triggering event is defined as the most immediate cause of an event. Be ready to share your categorizations with the class.

You might notice that you didn't categorize long-, intermediate-, and short-term causes the same way as some of your classmates. That's OK! Our perspective – in this case, timeframe – can shift how we categorize the causes. Therefore, the definitions of long term and short term vary and depend on the timeframe or periodization that you use to examine an event. In this course, we will generally think about timeframes like this:

- Short term – from one instant to a lifetime
- Intermediate term – from a few years to a few hundred years
- Long term – from a hundred years to all time

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Now it's time for the final rearrangement and categorization of cards. This time, you'll use the frames of WHP to sort your cards. As you are likely aware, the frames are used throughout this course for different types of analysis, including causal. The three frames are production and distribution, communities, and networks.

- **Production and Distribution**
 - o Includes: The production and distribution frame looks at how we make and move the things we use every day.
 - o Question: How has the way we make and distribute the things we use every day changed, and how has it stayed the same?
- **Communities**
 - o The communities frame looks at how humans gather and organize the people around them.
 - o Question: How has the way we organize our communities changed, and what hasn't?
- **Networks**
 - o The networks frame looks at how ideas and information are shared and move.
 - o Question: How has the way we share ideas and information changed, and how has it stayed the same?

Now, look at your sticky notes and think about how you would sort them using the frames as categories. Stick your notes to the board under the relevant frame. Be ready to discuss your reasoning for your placement with your class.

Now that you've rearranged your causal cards a few different ways, discuss with your class how the different methods of categorizing within frames changes what a person may interpret as a long- or short-term event, or the reason for a particular outcome. Be sure to keep this in mind throughout the course when reading and analyzing different accounts of history, and when making your own assertions about history. You will revisit the frames throughout this course as a way to make sense of and explain different historical events from a variety of perspectives.

Finally, take a look at the Causation Tool, which is meant to help you categorize causes and consequences. While you haven't been introduced to everything on the tool quite yet, you will become familiar with Role, Significance, and Type, soon enough! You can use this tool to help you create a causal map or other representation of causation. Eventually, you will probably get so used to the tool that you won't need it anymore. But for now, it will help as you get used to this type of historical analysis.

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Name:

Date:

Directions: List your causes. Then, divide them up by short term, intermediate term, and long term and place them in the appropriate boxes. After that, use the key to help you label Role, Significance, and Type. If your teacher asks you to create a causal map, use your answers here to help construct that causal representation.

Explain the causes of:

Short term - *From one instant to a lifetime*

Intermediate term - *From a few years to a few hundred years*

Long term - *From a hundred years to all time*

Legend

Role: (1) Primary/Contributing (2) Secondary/Underlying (*) Triggering Event	Significance: <div style="display: flex; align-items: center; gap: 20px;"> <div style="border: 1px solid blue; border-radius: 50%; padding: 2px 10px;">Necessary</div> <div style="text-decoration: underline; text-decoration-color: blue;">Important</div> </div>	Type: <div style="display: flex; flex-wrap: wrap; padding: 0;"> <div style="margin-right: 10px;">(\$) Economic</div> <div style="margin-right: 10px;">(Ψ) Psychological</div> <div style="margin-right: 10px;">(P) Political</div> <div style="margin-right: 10px;">(E) Environmental</div> <div style="margin-right: 10px;">(C) Cultural</div> <div style="margin-right: 10px;">(B) Biological</div> <div style="margin-right: 10px;">(T) Technological</div> <div>(I) Ideas/Beliefs</div> </div>
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