

Is Psychology a Science?

The debate surrounding free will and determinism is one that has occupied psychologists and philosophers for centuries. Those who believe in determinism believe that all behaviour is determined by external and internal forces acting on the person. An example of an external force would be parents rewarding certain type of behaviour, therefore further encouraging it, whilst an internal force would be that of hormones. Those who believe in free will believe matters are slightly more complex. They agree that external and internal factors do exist but that people have free will to choose their behaviour. The argument of freewill and determinism can be summed up by the questions "could a person's behaviour have been different in a certain situation if they willed it?" Those who believe in determinism would argue no whilst those who believe in free will would say yes.

Determinism is espoused by more theories in psychology than in free will. Behaviourists are strongly determinists. Determinists claim that the nature of the universe is such that it is governed by certain universal scientific laws, so that each action is caused by a specific prior cause, and human action is no exception. They believe that precise prediction of human behaviour is possible if an individual's current stimulus situation is known and if their conditioning history is also known. Skinner argued that all behaviour is determined by environmental events and that humans tend to repeat behaviours that are rewarded. Skinner stated that free will was simply an illusion.

Bandura, a neobehaviourist, believed in reciprocal determinism and pointed a flaw in Skinner's approach. If people's actions are solely determined by the external rewards and punishments then people would be like weather vanes constantly changing direction to conform to the whims of others. Bandura stated that people have long-term goals and strive to meet these rather than following others. Skinner focused exclusively on the notion that our behaviour is determined by the external environment however our behaviour also determines our environment. There are a number of different multi-determinants of behaviour and Skinner largely ignored these.

Freud also believed strongly in determinism. According to Freud, trivial phenomena such as calling someone by someone else's name are due to definite causes in the person's motivational system. Freudian slips are involuntary but motivated errors that reveal a person's true desires. The psychodynamic approach believes that internal systems such as defence mechanisms determine the way people behave as adults.

The biological approach believes that behaviour is determined by a person's genes and internal systems. In regards to mental disorders this approach states that it is not the patient's fault they are ill. Their biology pre-disposes them to certain conditions and therefore cannot be controlled unless their biological make up is manipulated. This has been proved, to an extent, with the knowledge that disorders such as schizophrenia are as a result of high levels of dopamine within the brain.

Psychology although deterministic might in fact be better described as probabilistic. The chaos theory and butterfly effect are an example of this.

In contrast the humanistic approach believes that individuals have free will. Maslow and Rogers argued that the notion that people's behaviour is at the mercy of external forces is inaccurate and that people have free will in that they can choose how they wish to behave. Rogers' client-centred therapy was based on the notion that individuals have free will. The psychologist was known as the facilitator and his or her role was to help the patient exercise free will and increase the benefits of life. Rogers believed our actions are free within a framework. The approach states that determinism is too mechanistic and being unfalsifiable it is impossible to assume behaviour is determined. With regards to mental illness, it is a result of the patient not being able to accept themselves or others around them. Therefore the humanistic approach believes illness is due to freewill and personal decisions. The psychodynamic approach, although mainly deterministic, believed that there is a potential for free will. Freud stated that psychoanalysis is based on the belief that people can change their behaviour. However there are two main problems with this approach; firstly what is meant by freewill? If according to determinism everything has a definite cause then is free will random? Very few people would argue in favour of such an extreme position. Also it may be that determinism does have an effect on the world but not on humans in which case there are many implications which have been left unanswered.

The ethical argument also supports free will. In order to expect moral responsibility, one must accept the concept of free will. If an individual's behaviour is determined by forces beyond an individual's

control then the individual cannot be held responsible for their actions. However our laws insist that adults do have individual responsibility for their actions and so implicitly society supports freewill.

Soft determinism is an approach that argues that people's behaviour is constrained by the environment, but only to a certain extent. Some behaviour is more constrained than other. There is an element of free will in all behaviour however it can also be controlled by outside forces. William James advocated this approach which is a medium between the two extreme views.

The issue of the extent to which we have free will is more of a philosophical question rather than scientific, as both beliefs are unfalsifiable. All psychologists agree on the fact that behaviour is made up, to an extent of biology, past experiences and present environment.