

Question: Outline the major elements of the mechanistic, psychoanalytic, and humanistic images of mankind. In your answer, please indicate the strengths and weaknesses of these perspectives.

Introduction

Psychologists are interested in the study of human actions and behaviour. Different psychologists have fundamentally different assumptions about what human is like. This is due to the different basis of perception which form the background of use of concepts, details of research and explanation. Three images of mankind shall be explored below, namely mechanistic, psychoanalytic and humanistic. Each of the following aspects will be studied : concept, assumption, and methodology. Their strengths and weaknesses will also be discussed.

Mechanistic Image of Mankind

The development of the image of man as a machine followed after the French philosopher and mathematician, **Descartes**, publication of his view. Descartes regarded body as a machine obeying laws of physics. The body, the skeleton and its muscles worked as levers and pulleys. The human mind however was not part of the mechanical system but was the switch that made all the levers work. When the machine went wrong, chemicals were injected into the machine transforming into energy. This was an allegation to a sick man taking medicine and recovered.

The assumptions for this image of man as a machine were that man was controlled by the events in the environment and by the structures of the organism itself. Man was only partially conscious of the reasons for what they are doing and saying. Man was therefore primarily reactive by nature. He responded to external forces and was passive.

Psychologists made observations and experiments on different parts of the body and the chain of actions : the workings of the sense organs, the interconnections of the nervous system, the response of the muscles. This view of man as a “tripartite machine gave rise to the concept of reflex arch”. (Swales, 1991, P.61). These however were inadequate for explanation of complex human behaviour. It was shown that behaviour would change when there were interruptions, or different additional environmental factors. An example of behaviour change was demonstrated by **Pavlov** using ‘conditioning’. Pavlov showed how human can be adapted to new stimulus in their environment, which becomes part of a reflex arch.

When ideas about machine changed from a rigid and fixed system to a flexible and dynamic one, image of man as a machine was perceived to be a dynamic system. “While the exact outcome of the stimuli on the system cannot be predicted, the overall result can be”. (Swales, 1991 P. 62).

Changes experienced by the mechanistic man are quantitative, measurable and continuous. Changes represent a difference in degree but not in kind. The whole can be understood by reducing into parts. Because changes are continuous, there are no stages of development. An example would be the

computer. The computer does not create its own output but rather responds to the input of data, external forces. The computer is passive. To examine the basis of a computer output, the initial program and the data input have to be studied to determine the effect on the whole. Like the computer, behaviour of man can be explained by previous events.

Strength of mechanistic view of mankind is that man's actions can be explained by rules. Change is viewed as continuous, and behaviour can be explained by happenings in the past. Man can therefore be understood by reducing behaviours to the most simple components and examine how these have changed quantitatively.

Weaknesses of the image of man as a machine are that the individuals can be understood only by understanding the parts which make up the whole. However, one cannot simply reduce what is known to prior forms for understanding. Individuals are principally passive-reactive entity. One's development is simply reactive to the environment. Hereditary influence, emotional and humanistic aspects are ignored. Changes in behaviour are viewed as differences in degree as opposed to differences in kind. An illustration is : Mr. Chan's dog died yesterday and he was sad. Mr. Chan was laid off today and become jobless. The mechanistic view could only reflect Mr. Chan was even more sad today without realising the incident happened today. Individuals are passive, there is no overall purpose to human activity. The behaviour of individuals striving for higher aims cannot be explained. Lastly, this approach is better suited to the infant and younger ones. For adolescence and adults, whose development has become more complex, this approach is inadequate.

Psychoanalytic Image of Mankind

Psychoanalytic theories, derived from the work of **Sigmund Freud**, address primarily the personality development of individuals. As people moved through stages of development, they confronted conflicts between biological drives and social expectations. How these conflicts were solved would determine the individual's ability to learn, get along with others and cope with anxiety.

Below are three renowned psychoanalytic theorists.

According to Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), there are three parts of the personality – id, ego, and superego; and five stages of psychosexual development. *Id* is inherited and is present at birth. It refers to the raw nature of biological processes, giving psychic energy and pleasure to the individual who wants immediate satisfaction. *Ego* is the conscious rational part of personality. It emerges in early infancy to ensure that the id's desires are satisfied in accord with reality. *Superego* originates from the child's understanding of the adult world, contains the values of society and is often in conflict with the id's desires. Once superego is formed, ego is faced with reconciling demands of the id, the external world and conscience.

The five stages of psychosexual development are *the oral stage* (birth to 1 year), *the anal stage* (1-3 years), *the phallic stage* (3-6 years), *the latency stage* (6-11 years) and *the genital stage* (adolescence). A child who may not obtain satisfaction through a particular stage may direct their psychic energy towards

achieving culturally acceptable activities. Freud called this sublimation. An example would be the unpleasant memories of a child, John, being humiliated by classmates because of a weak body, were suppressed into the unconscious. The unconscious force, being re-interpreted by the conscious, became a stimulant to the child's aim to become a doctor.

Personality was motivated by the psychic energy, libido, to achieve goals. Development of personality was influenced by the manner in which the child learned to expend libido, sex energy, in the series of early childhood stages, from birth to adolescence. Strong experiences encountered in early childhood were the keys to understand their behaviour in adult life, which might further influence their choice of work and career. Personality problems that went unresolved would be repressed and became unconscious, determining people's behaviour. Man could therefore be unconscious of his true motives. Under Freud's theory, man was irrational. An example would be John, instead of aiming to be a doctor, became an introvert.

Freud believed that all actions are determined, nothing is due to chance. In clinical tests, unpleasant memories hidden in the unconscious can be brought out and banished in the conscious by skilfully asking patients about their dreams, and unconscious behaviour can be reasoned / explained.

Strength of Freud's psychoanalytic theory was that it provided a new, fresh and stimulating point-of-view of psychoanalysis and inspired a wealth of research on many aspects of emotional and social development in the study of child development.

Weaknesses were psychoanalytic theorists were strongly committed to clinical approach that they failed to consider other methods. Freud's theory overemphasized the influence of sexual feelings in development. Some aspects of his theory were not applicable to cultures other than the 19th century Victorian society. There was the question of accuracy of the source of data as Freud did not directly observe, test or measure children during their years of growth. Validity of the retrospective interview as the source of evidence is questioned as there was no way to prove.

Henry A. Murray (1938) extended Freud's psychoanalytic theory explaining the many facets of the psychology of personality.

Murray put forward that a person's actions were the outcome of the interaction between needs and the environmental press. There were two types of needs, biological and psychological, both of which were innate. Biological needs arose from physical nature, giving mental satisfaction, and were under partial control of the mind. Psychological needs arose from psychological nature, giving mental or emotional satisfaction. Environmental press included environment, social groups and institutions. This represented outside forces which could be negative or positive.

Murray also included Freud's id, ego and superego; conscious and unconscious.

Methodologies adopted in testing and measuring personality included

laboratory techniques, observation, questionnaires, asking people to write autobiographies, describe their childhood experiences, doing handwriting tests, and doing the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT). Answers to TAT could reflect participant's own personal dreams, wishes and worries, and could thus uncover the basic 'themes' that recur in the unconscious.

When comparing Murray with Freud, they both agreed in some way that all behaviour is determined. Murray however did not agree with Freud on reducing psychic life to a few fundamental forces. Murray recognized more psychological needs whereas Freud reduced all phenomena to a function of the force of libido. Moreover, Murray saw needs as occur in groups. People's actions cannot be explained by single need in isolation. There was a more detailed analysis of biological factors by Murray, giving rise to a more explicit explanation on the nature and nurture issue; inborn and environmental forces. Methodologies employed by Murray include laboratory and clinical tests while Freud used mainly clinical experiences.

Strengths of Murray's model of study are that it covers a more comprehensive range of factors than Freud. Murray based his results on a variety of laboratory and clinical tests while Freud used mainly clinical methods, validity and accuracy of which were difficult to verify.

Weaknesses of Murray's model are that psychological needs differ widely according to different genetic endowment, and the environmental press varies geographically, for example, from north to south. The extent that the experiments can make sense of people's behaviour and actions is acknowledged with reservation.

George Kelly offered an alternative view in personality. His assumption was that each person had the same need to understand, to predict and to control the world. The approach emphasized that the ways which individuals construct the phenomenal world, the world around us and the people in it are attributable to personality. Behaviour was shaped by these constructs, also known as phenomenal fields, so individuals knew how to react to incoming information in an orderly way. But the constructs themselves were capable of change and adaptation. If expectations were wrong, individuals would restructure phenomenal fields to give sense and act differently accordingly.

The strength of Kelly's model over that of Freud, Marray and Skinner's is that the model is reflexive. This model explained behaviour of the author making it universally acceptable and valid.

Humanistic Image of Mankind

Humanistic psychology is a study of mental life. The study assume that human behaviour is motivated primarily by the individuals seeking to fulfil a series of needs.

Psychologists here treated individual as a whole person, who was unique and was motivated to achieve self-actualization. Individual was conscious of his own experience. He had a capacity for self-awareness, the free will to choose, to initiate thoughts and actions, and was guided by purpose and meaning. The subconscious guide in the person automatically evaluated

experience to tell whether he was actualizing. In adverse situations, the fully functioning person learned to adjust to maintain the human functions. Each person had the need for positive regard, to have the love, friendship, and affection of others. He would change his actions to conform to a condition of worth in order to get positive regard from others. When the ideal self was incongruent with the actual self, the real self would feel threatening and find ways to defend.

Humanistic psychology was created not as a child psychology. Its development was mainly to help adults achieve better personal and social adjustment, so as to achieve greater self-actualization.

Two distinctive figures in humanistic psychology is Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers.

Abraham Maslow developed a hierarchical theory of human motivation. The theory asserted that when certain basic needs were provided for, higher motives toward self-actualization could emerge. Maslow's pyramid of needs in ascending order from the lowest order is as below.

Physiological needs : for air, food, drink for survival.

Safety needs : for security and stability including need for structure, law and limits.

Belongingness and love needs : for family, friends, lover.

Esteem needs : for self-respect, self-esteem and esteem for others.

Self-actualization need : for realizing one's potential for development.

Maslow suggested heredity played a strong role in personality development. The essence of the kind of person was established in the genetic structure, and the environment determined which part to unfold or become actualized. The issue of nature versus nurture was considered in his theory.

Maslow adopted a growth-directions theory in that a person grew gradually from one kind of individual toward being a different kind.

Another prominent figure is **Carl Rogers**. Both Maslow and Rogers believed human nature was intrinsically good and embraced self-actualization as the empirical principle. Rogers introduced the person-centred therapy. Therapist offered personal congruence, unconditional positive regard and accurate empathic understanding in a therapeutic relationship.

Research methodologies employed by humanistic psychologists were mainly introspection investigative techniques. Individuals were analysed from the inside. Humanistic psychologists were of the view that the perfect example of an individual's personal experience was found in one's thoughts and feelings. They did not claim to be objective. Instead, they were intent on this subjective interchange of a relationship that uncovered the personal knowledge of another individual.

Strengths of humanistic psychology were that the theorists proposed a positive, optimistic picture of humans. This was in contrast to behaviorism which was accused of reducing individuals to a system of observable acts, thereby missing the human aspects, and was in contrast to Freud's psychoanalysis

which was accused of adopting a negative model of humanity, emphasizing on neurotic behaviour. The humanistic approach was notable for its concern for the individual's hopes and plans for the future, which was being neglected in many other theories. One other major strength of humanistic theory was its insistence on the importance of unique personal experiences.

The insistence on the importance of unique personal experiences mentioned above had also become one of humanistic theory's weaknesses in that the unique experience made it imprecise when communicating the essence of one person's experience to another. The theory is lack of falsifiability as introspection was the principal investigate technique. Humanistic psychologists were subjective in validating their theory. They trusted their own feelings and logic more than objective data. By concentrating on the self, other parts of an individual like bio-electrochemical nature, analytical abilities, memory systems were left untouched.

Conclusions

Psychologists while attempting to explain behaviour of individuals, adopted a varied basis of assumptions, and different images of mankind evolved. The concept that man acts like a machine and reacts to outside forces gives rise to the **mechanistic** view of mankind. Another concept that man's behaviour can be explained via bringing out their memories in the unconscious renders the **psychoanalytic** image of mankind. An alternative view that man seeks to aspire oneself by fulfilling the hierarchy of needs gives rise to the

humanistic image of mankind. Man can be viewed differently but there is not a theory that explains all. To have a more comprehensive understanding of man's behaviour, a combined study of all the different images of mankind would be helpful.

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