

THE NEW LAWS OF PSYCHOLOGY

Why Nature and Nurture Alone Can't Explain Human Behaviour

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Introduction

Why do we behave as we do? What makes life worthwhile? Are our actions, our thoughts and our emotions best explained by looking at the biological functioning of our brains? People behave differently and have different personalities. Are these differences best explained in terms of genetic variation? Is our fate in life dictated by our biology? And if that's true, where does this leave free will?

Alternatively, are we corks bobbing along on the tide of events, the unthinking products of social circumstances? We know that people's financial, material and social backgrounds are important. People from different social backgrounds behave differently, and major life events can have traumatic consequences – so are we simply a product of these? Even if we suggest that we are the result of an interaction between our genes and the environment, that doesn't leave much room for autonomy and free will. It doesn't leave much room for humanity.

Or are we intelligent, enquiring, inquisitive creatures who make active sense of the world? Can we appreciate the physical environment and the behaviour of other people and form complex, fluid, elegant accounts of the things we see? Are we able to construct mental models of the world?

Although psychology is a relatively young scientific discipline advances in psychological science over the past few years allow us to understand ourselves in unprecedented clarity.

Until recently, the explanations used by psychologists, psychiatrists and neuroscientists have suppressed and compartmentalised human behaviour. Biological accounts have suggested that we are best understood as being the slaves of our brain and, ultimately, our genes. Behavioural psychologists have acknowledged that we learn, and that we are in large part shaped by the events in our lives, but traditional behavioural accounts tend to see human beings as mechanistic robots, shaped by patterns of punishment and reward.

Now, a new approach to psychology – cognitive psychology – is emerging, which offers a much more optimistic vision of the human condition. This approach leads to new ways of thinking – new laws of psychology. It also leads to a fresh approach to mental health – a focus on promoting well-being rather than treating so-called mental illness.

Cognitive psychologists see people making sense of their world, forming mental models, developing complex frameworks of understanding ... and acting accordingly. People are more than the raw products of their biology and are not mere pawns of the vicissitudes of life. People are born as natural learning engines, with highly complex but very receptive brains, ready to understand and then engage with the world. We develop, as a consequence of the events and examples we experience in life, mental models of the world that we then use to guide our thoughts, emotions and behaviours.

These ways of thinking about what it means to be human shouldn't be surprising or strange. In a gentle fashion, this way of thinking could revolutionise our understanding of what it is to be human, of mental health and well-being, even morality and self-awareness. For me, as a clinical psychologist, if we understand thoughts, emotions and beliefs a little better, we'll understand our mental health in a different way. We would change the way we diagnose so-called 'mental illnesses' and we would offer realistic

help to people in distress. These new laws of psychology should change our whole approach to understanding and treating mental illness.

Biological determinism

Biological explanations of human behaviour suggest that our behaviour is the product of our brains, and that our brains are the product of our genes. These kinds of explanations were particularly popular in the early part of the 20th century, and are still commonplace in the media – on TV, the radio, in newspapers, they are seductive. Our brains are clearly responsible for a wide range of important biological functions, and biological explanations for complex human phenomena are common and powerful. The neurotransmitter dopamine (which has been linked to many street drugs and to psychosis) seems to have a role in making events seem more personally significant and salient, and has been linked to a range of mental- health problems, including psychotic experiences such as hallucinations and persecutory delusions. Serotonin (another neurotransmitter) has been linked to mechanisms of reward and social status, and therefore to depression and low self-esteem.

There is a lot of truth in these biological accounts of psychological phenomena. However, biological explanations are not, in themselves, very good at explaining complex behaviours, and they are particularly poor at explaining differences between people, which is usually what we're interested in. At one level, it's obviously true that our behaviour is the product of the functioning of our brains. Every action and every thought we ever have involves the brain. But since every thought necessarily involves the brain, this merely tells us that we think with our brains. This kind of explanation doesn't add much to our understanding. When confident people think about performing in public, their brains are involved in doing the thinking, but that is also true for anxious people – their brains are also involved in doing the thinking. Trying to explain complex human behaviours in neurological terms alone is the equivalent of explaining the origins of the First World War in terms of the mechanisms of high explosives. A simple biological model is difficult to refute but doesn't add much.

Social determinism

We are immersed in societies that form, support and mould us. In part, we behave as we do because of the social circumstances in which we find ourselves. Our behaviour is formed as a result of the contingencies of reinforcement to which we are exposed. As we go through life all of us are faced with a myriad of events and opportunities. These tend to shape us and shape our behaviours. Every time we are rewarded for our actions it changes our behaviour. This can be overt reward such as bribery or applause, or the much more subtle but equally effective reinforcement of seeing our parents smile as a result of something we've said, or seeing other people receive rewards for their actions. We are, at least in part, the product of the rewards and punishments that we have received through life. So there is a strong tradition in psychology of using behavioural explanations – accounting for our behaviours, and differences between people, in terms of rewards and punishments.

In the past, many psychologists have been particularly keen on this kind of

explanation. Many psychologists have assumed that human behaviour – and even that thinking itself – is merely the product of the pattern of reinforcements and punishments to which we have been exposed. However, these accounts are also inadequate. Although it's true that different experiences in life can lead to different emotional outcomes for people, it's also true that different people respond to similar life experiences in different ways. And that's because, in large part, people differ in terms of how they make sense of these events. Again, we have to understand the psychology of how people make sense of their world.

Thinking psychologically

People are more than mere biological machines and are more than unthinking clay, moulded by social and circumstantial pressures. We are more than the biological products of our genes and of the inevitable consequences of contingencies of reinforcement.

All this means that our beliefs, emotions and behaviours – including our mental health – are the product of the way we make sense of the world. Our mental models of the world are constructed using psychological processes that are themselves influenced by biological factors, life events and social factors.

This simple way of thinking about human behaviour has significant implications. All of us want to lead happier, healthier, more rewarding lives. If, in the words of the European Commission, we are to realise our intellectual and emotional potential and to find and fulfil our roles in social situations, school and working life, we need to understand how we make sense of the world. We may need to appraise and reconsider that framework of understanding. Fortunately, it's entirely possible to learn to look at the world differently. And if we change the way we think, we'll change the world.