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CHAPTER 2
Issues and debates

This chapter focuses on the important issues and debates that are a concern for all psychology theories and research. Some of these issues and debates also reflect the thoughts that people have about their behaviour. For example, people wonder whether they are who they are because of genes they have inherited or because of parental influences (the issue of nature or nurture). People also wonder about their capacity to be self-determining or, for example, being determined by the environment they grew up in (the issue of free will versus determinism). Maybe they can explain their behaviour simply in terms of the way their parents rewarded things that they did.

Determinism is the view that something other than your own conscious decisions has guided your behaviour, i.e. that your genes, your ‘homunculi’ or your past experiences ‘make’ you behave in particular ways. The alternative – free will – is the view that at any moment you can make a conscious decision to act according to your own principles or wishes. There is a middle ground, described as ‘soft determinism’. One version of soft determinism is that behaviour is always determined – it just sometimes appears to be less determined: behaviour that is highly constrained by a situation appears involuntary, whereas behaviour that is less constrained by a situation appears voluntary.

An investigation
This version of soft determinism was investigated in a study by Malcolm Westcott (1982), who asked students to say how free they felt in 28 different situations. Here are some of them:

- For each statement consider how free you feel in the situation using a 5-point scale: 5 = very much 4 = quite a lot 3 = somewhat 2 = very little 1 = not at all

- Write your rating in this column

1. As the end of term approaches I am up to-date with all my work. I plan to spend the rest of term in both study and relaxation. I am in the process of setting my own priorities and making a timetable to myself which will include both.

2. Sometimes I am not actively engaged in any particular activity, and I have nothing to do.

3. All day long I have had a supply headache, and I have just realised that it is given.

4. Getting all ‘A’ marks in my report is something I would really like to achieve. With some difficult courses this seems a very unlikely outcome. A ‘B’ average does seem reasonable and within my reach. By lowering my aims I go for the more certainly attainable goal.

5. It’s 12.00 and I’ve gone to the local cafeteria for lunch. I’m standing in line looking at the array of sandwiches, soups and salads. I am deciding what to buy for lunch.

6. An ad in the paper advertises a holiday to a place I’d like to visit. The offer is open for the next year. I have the time and money but haven’t taken any action to pursue it yet.

7. Working at the Hel-Repair organisation I have become very good at fixing broken furniture and repairing clothing. Now, when faced with the task of repair, I am able to manage well and efficiently.

8. Sometimes I restrict or reduce my desires to fit in with what I believe a situation allows and to what I believe my abilities to be.

Add up your rating for questions 1, 2, 3 and 7, and then add up ratings for 4, 5, 6 and 8. (You might like to combine answers from your whole class.) The first group of scores should be higher than the second group according to Westcott’s findings because he found that students reported feeling most free when they were in situations with little responsibility or when their behaviour would result in escape from an unpleasant situation, i.e. there would be little to stop them behaving in that (least constraint). They felt least free in situations when they recognised that there were limits on their behaviour, for example having to take their abilities into account when selecting course options, i.e. most constraint.

This suggests that behaviour is more to do with constraints on behaviour. People can exercise free will when there are less constraints.
Gender in psychology: Gender bias

In your studies of psychology you have learned about how there are gender differences in behaviour, for example, your studies have led you to conclude that men and women tend to have different personality traits. These differences raise important questions about the value of any explanation because it may not be universal (i.e. apply to everyone). But perhaps most importantly, these differences may lead to a gender bias – a distorted view of the world. In the case of gender bias it is a distorted view of what behaviours may be typical and atypical for men and women.

Because if you say men and women are the same and if male behaviour is the norm, and women are always expected to act like men, we will never be as good at being men as men.

Dee Dee Myers, Former White House Press Secretary

(source: izquotes.com)

In the current exam paper, gender bias is a common theme. The term ‘explain’ requires you to go a little bit further than a brief definition in order to show the examiner that you really understand the concept. You might do this by including an example, in this case an example of gender bias within psychology. There are no points on this page, for example Freud’s theory of psychoanalysis or androcentrism in stress research.

Fitting your answer to the question set
Many students appear to read all questions as ‘tell me something about…’ regardless of the actual wording (and therefore the specific requirements) of the question. Let’s look at some of the questions in the ‘Can you…?’ feature on this page.

1. Explain what is meant by gender bias in psychology. (2 marks)

The term ‘explain’ requires you to go a little bit further than a brief definition in order to show the examiner that you really understand the concept. You might do this by including an example, in this case an example of gender bias within psychology. There are no points on this page, for example Freud’s theory of psychoanalysis or androcentrism in stress research.

2. Explain how androcentrism has affected psychological research. (3 marks)

This question is surprisingly similar to the previous one (although a different topic) but it is worth one mark more. The answer you should have noticed those extra words ‘…how androcentrism has affected psychological research’ in the question. The point that androcentrism prevents us from fully understanding the stress response in females as research has concentrated on males alone. We’ll return to this theme of fitting your answer to the question in later exam features in this chapter.

Gender bias

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Dee Dee Myers, Former White House Press Secretary

(source: izquotes.com)

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EVALUATION

One way to counter androcentrism is to take a feminist perspective – as Carol Gilligan did (facing page). Feminist psychology argues that different ‘psychology’ arises from biological explanations for gender differences. One of the most influential and radical feminist approaches is a feminist psychology, which examines ways in which psychology has been gender-biased.

Feminist psychology

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Feminist psychology
Much of traditional psychology represents a Western view, which is hardly surprising because most of the world’s psychologists are trained in the West and most of the participants in psychological research are from Western cultures. This means that most psychological theories and research techniques have a basis in a Western worldview. When this knowledge base is applied to members of other cultures it reflects a cultural bias. However, as developing countries also increase their involvement in psychological theory and research, this bias is slowly being addressed.

Cultural bias

The tendency to judge all people in terms of your own cultural assumptions. This distorts or biases your judgement.

Cultural relativism

The view that behaviour cannot be judged unless it is viewed in the context of the culture in which it originates.

Culture

The rules, customs, manners and ways of interacting that bind together members of a society or some other collection of people.

Ethnocentrism

Seeing things from the point of view of ourselves and our social group.

Cultural bias can also lead to a beta bias, if psychologists believe their own cultural assumptions are a valid universal. For example, if a culture is described as collectivist because of a greater emphasis on the group over the individual, one cannot assume that the same criterion will be used in all other cultures.

Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism refers to the use of our own cultural or group bias as a basis for judgements about other groups. There is a tendency to view the beliefs, customs and behaviours of our own group as normal and even superior, whereas those of other groups are strange or deviant.

Beta bias

Beta bias is an example of alpha bias because our own cultural assumptions are considered more important than those that psychologists have of other cultures.

Cultural relativism

In a way the opposite of ethnocentrism in psychology is cultural relativism – the idea that all cultures are worthy of respect and that in studying another culture we need to try to understand the way that a particular culture sees the world.

Cultural bias

Cultural bias can also lead to an alpha bias where the assumption of real differences leads psychologists to overlook universal. For example, Margaret Mead researched traditionalulu in Papua New Guinea (see page 104) where she initially concluded that there were significant gender differences due to culture, but later recognised that these were universal (probably related to biology) – that men in all cultures have an uncheckable penis. In the case of the statistical infrequency definition of abnormality (part of your Year 1 studies), behaviours that are ‘statistically infrequent’ are one example which may be statistically more frequent in another. For example, one of the symptoms of schizophrenia is impairing to hear voices. However, this is an experience that is common in some cultures.

By assuming that the same rules apply universally (a beta bias), we may diagnose some people as mentally ill, but that diagnosis is relative to our culture.

Indigenous psychologies

One way to counter ethnocentrism in psychology is to encourage indigenous psychologies – the development of different groups of theories in different countries. For example, Afrocenstors is a movement whose central proposition is that all black people have their roots in Africa and that psychological theories concerning such people must, therefore, be African-centred and must express African values. Afrocentrism disputes the view that European values are the appropriate norm. As we discussed on the previous spread, Hare-Mustin and Marecek proposed that there are two different ways that theories may be biased – alpha and beta bias. We can apply this to culture as well as gender.

Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism refers to theories that assume and minimise cultural differences. They do this by assuming that people are the same and it is therefore reasonable to use the same theories/methods with all cultural groups.

Beta bias

Beta bias is an example of cultural bias as a tendency to judge all people as equal. For example, Western societies see intelligence as something within the individual. In contrast, a collectivist culture such as Ugandan society sees intelligence as a functionally relationship depending on shared knowledge between the individual and society (Waller, 1974). The result is that, when such Western IQ tests are used on non-Western cultures, non-cultures may appear less intelligent. Such tests are described as an imposed idea, where a research method or psychological test that is developed by one group is imposed on other groups of people (in this being the belief that perceptions, behaviours, etc. are shared by all cultural groups).

Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism refers to the use of our own cultural or group bias as a basis for judgements about other groups. There is a tendency to view the beliefs, customs and behaviours of our own group as normal and even superior, whereas those of other groups are strange or deviant.

Beta bias

Beta bias is an example of cultural bias because our own cultural assumptions are considered more important than those that psychologists have of other cultures.

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In a way the opposite of ethnocentrism in psychology is cultural relativism – the idea that all cultures are worthy of respect and that in studying another culture we need to try to understand the way that a particular culture sees the world.

Cultural bias

Cultural bias can also lead to a beta bias, if psychologists believe their own cultural assumptions are a valid universal. For example, if a culture is described as collectivist because of a greater emphasis on the group over the individual, one cannot assume that the same criterion will be used in all other cultures.

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Ethnocentrism refers to the use of our own cultural or group bias as a basis for judgements about other groups. There is a tendency to view the beliefs, customs and behaviours of our own group as normal and even superior, whereas those of other groups are strange or deviant.

Cultural relativism

Cultural relativism is often discussed in the context of defining mental disorder. In the case of the statistical infrequency definition of abnormality (part of your Year 1 studies), behaviours that are statistically infrequent in one culture may be statistically more frequent in another. For example, one of the symptoms of schizophrenia is impairing to hear voices. However, this is an experience that is common in some cultures.

By assuming that the same rules apply universally (a beta bias), we may diagnose some people as mentally ill, but that diagnosis is relative to our culture.
Free will and determinism

Determinism is the view that an individual's behaviour is controlled by either internal or external forces. This means that behaviour should be predictable.

Free will is used to refer to the alternative end of the spectrum where an individual is seen as capable of self-determination. According to this view, individuals have an active role in controlling their behaviour, i.e. they are free to choose and are not acting in response to any internal or external biological pressures. However, it is important to realise that free will does not mean randomness, and determinism may not necessarily lead to predictability.

The eighteenth-century author Samuel Johnson had an easy solution. “We know the will is free; and there’s an end to it.”

**KEY TERMS**

- **Determinism** Behaviour is controlled by external or internal factors acting upon the individual.
- **Free will** Each individual has the power to make choices about their behaviour.
- **Hard determinism** The view that all behaviour can be predicted and there is no free will.
- **Soft determinism** There are some factors that allow for some element of free will.
- **Psychic determinism** The principles of learning theory have been applied to many areas of behaviour, such as aggression (page 238) and eating behaviour (page 166).
- **Scientific determinism** Scientific research is based on the belief that all events have a cause. An independent variable is manipulated to observe the causal effect on a dependent variable. For example, in your Year 1 studies you learned that fear phobias may develop as a consequence of conditioning – a new stimulus will evoke an emotional response which can be learned if the item ‘dog’ is paired with being bitten. Such a phobic response is also unlearned through conditioned (e.g. systematic desensitisation).

- **Culturally relative** The idea of ever finding a simple determinist formula from psychological research is unrealistic.

Do it matter?

There have been attempts, in criminal cases in the US, for murderers to claim that their behaviour was determined by inherited aggressive tendencies and therefore they should not be punished with the death penalty. Stephen Mobley, who killed a pizza shop manager in 1981, claimed this happened because he was born to kill, as evidenced by a family history of violence. The argument was rejected; and Mobley was sentenced to death. In practice, therefore, a determinist position may be undesirable as it would allow individuals to ‘excuse’ their behaviour.

Determinism is also an issue in the treatment of mental disorder. If we take the view that disorders such as schizophrenia and depression are determined by an individual’s biology (genes and neurotransmitters), then it follows that treatment should target their genes or neurotransmitters. However, such determinist treatment may then block the consideration of other treatments that might be beneficial, such as cognitive behavioural therapy.

**EVALUATION OF FREE WILL**

The illusion of free will

Just being able to decide between different courses of action is not free will, but it may give us the illusion of having the freedom to put forward the behaviour we wish. Skinner’s point was that a person might choose to buy a particular car or see a particular film, but in fact these choices are determined by previous reinforcement experiences.

Culturally relative

The idea of self-determination may be a culturally relative concept, appropriate for individual societies only. Collectivist cultures place greater value on behaviour determined by group needs.

Research challenge to free will

The free will position received a significant blow from research conducted by Benjamin Libet (1985). They demonstrated that contact comfort, not food, determined the formation of an attachment.

Research methods

In Chapter 1 we discuss the features of science, including the nature of hypothesis testing. Consider the experiment by Loftus and Palmer (1974) on eyewitness testimony, which was part of your Year 1 studies. In this study participants were asked to estimate the speed of a car in a film. There were five groups of participants, each given a different verb in the key question; for example, “How fast was the car travelling when it hit the other car?”

1. Explain why this study is described as an experiment. (2 marks)
2. In what way is the experimental approach a determinist approach, compared to other research methods in psychology? (3 marks)
3. Name one research method in psychology, which is not determinist. (1 mark)
4. In the Loftus and Palmer study which variable was the one doing the ‘causing’? (1 mark)
5. Explain how confounding variables may challenge the determinist nature of Loftus and Palmer’s research. (3 marks)
6. Explain one strength and one limitation of this kind of determinist approach to research in psychology. (4 marks)