

# Biological determinism



Biological Determinism The theory of biological determinism has a history that is highlighted by racism, genocide, and prejudice, while remaining in the public spotlight of the unfolding science of genetic research. Phillip Rushton's book, *Race, Evolution, and Behavior: A Life History Perspective* (1995) reignited the century old debate regarding the social forces of nature versus nurture (Shaw, 100 Lecture, January 21, 2009). While most all sociologists and biologists agree that both elements play a part in the structure and development of an individual or society, there is wide spread disagreement as to the degree of influence that each component has. The role of biology and the role of the environment in shaping our social order sets the backdrop for the discussion on the validity of these competing theories.

Biological determinism is an invalid theory that is maintained in the popular culture to serve various extremist political ends.

Biological determinism contends that our genetic makeup is responsible for our appearance, mental condition and abilities, our destiny, and the choices that we make in our day-to-day life. In addition, the theory argues that our environment and social interactions have at most only a minimal effect on shaping our social being. For example, advocates of the theory believe that genetics controls our predisposition to use alcohol, exhibit violent behavior, or become aggressively greedy. The theory makes it easy to place the responsibility for academic achievement differences among the races on biology, rather than confront an educational system that disadvantages many minority students (Naiman 31). The theory states that the role of genetics is so pronounced that the person will have no choice but to act on these forces and become the product of their DNA.

Most modern thinking has discounted the effects of biological determinism

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and though they acknowledge its existence, they limit its inevitability. Social interaction plays a larger role in the formation of society's norms, values, and acceptable normative behavior (Shaw, 100 Lecture, January 7, 2009; January 14, 2009). The characteristics of ethics, morality, loyalty, and law are not biologically based, but are learned through the process of socialization and social interaction. According to Thornhill and Palmer, "Nature has no automatically transferable wisdom to serve as the basis of human morality" (117). While we have the biological potential, this potentiality is "a brain capable of the full range of human behaviors and rigidly predisposed toward none" (Gould qtd. in Arnhart 62). Genetics offers us options, but social interaction and our environment gives us the motive and the reason to act and to grow.

There are significant differences in gender, but many of them have been exaggerated for cultural and political purposes. Labeling the female as the weaker sex assured that employment would remain exclusively a male venue. Genetics defines our biological differences, but our social structure is constructed by way of choice. Large numbers of 20th century women became homemakers due to cultural tradition, not genetics or biology. According to Naiman, "human behaviour is the result of a complex interaction between inherited traits and social learning" (35). Genetics gives up opportunities and options, but they manifest from environmental forces and individual situations.

In conclusion, the theory of biological determinism has been largely discredited in recent years as more knowledge has become available on human genetics. While our genetic makeup is an important part of who we are, our social being is formed by learning, socializing, and environmental

forces, and is not limited by our genetic makeup from birth.

#### Works Cited

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