

Theories of depression analysis



In this essay I will outline and explain at least 2 strengths and 2 weaknesses of the explanations of depression, via 3 different main forms of psychological explanations for depression. These approaches are Psychodynamic, Behavioural and Cognitive. Depression is something that will affect most people's lives at some point. This is when you feel down, sad, tearful and even hopeless. You might even feel like you have the world upon your shoulders and so everything is blown out of all proportion. Depression is normally triggered by an event or change in your life which has an impact on your mood. It is a mental disorder, but is also known as a mood (or affective) disorder. There are many types of depression and also the length of time you can experience depression varies a great deal. Your mood stability is important as it colours your perceptions, thoughts and behaviour. In order to stay positive and motivated it is important to have a stable emotional state. There are many psychology theories to show the cause of depression and how this might be dealt with.

The psychodynamic approach looks at the subconscious and past experiences, mainly from childhood. Freud's theory for depression argues that the symptoms are similar to the way we feel when grieving. Freud goes on to explain that because depression is often set off by a loss, which could either be a real loss or symbolic loss, such as the end of a relationship or even employment. The psychodynamic approach, and Freud, suggests that this is linked to our past experience or from a significant incident during our childhood. He proposes that when we experience bouts of depression we will revert back to childhood and at the worse can revert to a child like state.

One psychologist to support the psychodynamic approach and Freud's

theory on depression is Roy (1981). In his study he showed that children who have lost a parent are more likely to have periods of depression later on in their life. This strength to the psychodynamic approach to depression is supported by Waller et al (2000). In his study on Men who had lost their fathers during childhood, he found that they scored higher on a depression scale than boys who did not experience this bereavement. Again this was also true of a study by Blifculo (1992). He showed that anyone whose mother died in childhood, was more likely to suffer from depression. However there are weaknesses in these studies, as shown in a study by Coope et al (1992). He suggested that loss of any kind can only explain a small percentage of the causes for depression. In real terms this only goes on to explain 10% of those that experience loss later become depressed. This shows that there must be additional causes in order to explain depression, and therefore it is important to look at the psychological factors on a wider scale. Freud's theory believes that this is your super ego being more dominant. However just because you have a dominant super ego will not necessarily mean that you will in fact get depressed, freewill therefore is not considered. Another weakness in Freud and Roy's theories, is that this is psychologically deterministic and although there is evidence, the findings are not consistent and are virtually impossible to test.

An alternative approach to look at depression is the behavioural approach which focus's on reinforcement. This is a pure science approach using the study of animals and observing behaviour and how behaviour is learnt. Ferster (1965) looks at the causes of depression, indicating that this is due to a reduction of reinforcement. This was supported and expanded by Lewisohn

(1974), who proposed that events such as the death of a loved one can cause depression, because this reduces positive reinforcement. This is explained in terms of receiving less positive reinforcement, due to fact that a depressed person is likely to spend less time socialising, which causes their friends to be concerned, which reinforces the depressed behaviour. This is only true at the start as often friends will become bored of trying to help the depressed person. This is also true of the proposal by Lewinsohn's model of depression, which argues that with the concern and attention it is actually reinforcing the depressed behaviour, thus creating a cycle of learnt behaviour, which is hard to break especially if you are depressed. This is known as operant conditioning and not receiving enough positive reinforcement can induce depression. Lewinsohn also suggests that people who are depressed are also lacking in social skills and suggests that people prone to depression are often less sociable. Another behavioural theory is by Seligman (1974), who believes learned helplessness is a cause of depression. In his experiment carried out on animals, he administered electric shocks to caged animals who could not escape when they tried. This made the animals show signs of helplessness in the form of lethargy and loss of appetite, which could be related to signs of depression. The animal's doors were left open and restraints removed, but they did not try to escape. This is known as classic conditioning, showing that behaviour can be learnt. Behaviourist's also believe that this conditioning can also be unlearned. Seligman applied this theory to explain depression in humans using the term learned helplessness. Learned helplessness is when you believe that you are unable to change your situation so you give up and lose your will to try. It is questionable as to how comparative it is to use animals in studies and apply

the results to human beings. A study by Gotlib and Colby (1985) found that people who were previously depressed are no different to people who have never been depressed, in terms of looking at negative events without resigning to helplessness. So this suggests that helplessness could be a symptom rather than an actual cause of depression. Also the weakness in this approach is that this may only explain one form of depression, namely unipolar depression, which is a major depressive disorder, which unlike bipolar only has depressive moods and no history of mania. The behavioural theory only explains depression to a certain extent, and does not take into account the thoughts and feelings of the person. Abramson et al (1978) revised this theory combining the two psychological approaches, cognitive and behavioural, and revised Seligman's helplessness theory into the hopelessness theory. Cognitive behavioural therapists are taking in to account the maladaptive behaviour and dysfunctional thinking looking at depression from a wider perspective. This has been successful in treating people in overcoming psychological problems including depression. It is therefore argued that just looking at depression from a purely behavioural approach is flawed.

The cognitive approach looks at the human brain including;- attention, perception, learning, memory, thinking, problem solving and decision making. When we look at depression from the cognitive approach it assumes that negative beliefs affect the way we think and therefore the way we feel. This is true of a study carried out by Beck (1967). He suggested that depression is a result of negative thinking and catastrophising which he labelled as 'cognitive errors'. This was supported by a further study by Beck

(1991), where he identified that there are 3 parts of the brain affected by depression, perception, memory and problem solving thus changing the normal cognitive processing and the person becomes preoccupied with negative thoughts. Beck argues that depression is more likely in individuals who develop a negative self-schema. This is when a person has negative beliefs or expectations about themselves and the world around them. Beck adapted his theories on personality and applied it to depression in people. He called these cognitive distortions. These include arbitrary interference, people suffering from depression are likely to focus on certain aspects of a situation rather than looking at problems as a whole, and therefore drawing conclusions without sufficient information. Selective abstraction, which is when you focus on a single aspect of a situation, ignoring other aspects. On the other end of the scale is to over generalise, which is when people make a broad conclusion based on a single event. Magnification & minimisation exaggeration is where an event is blown out of all proportion. Finally Beck's theory of the personality is when you personalise negative feelings of another person. This is when you take on another person's negative feelings, when it may not have anything to do with you. All these theories therefore play their part in making illogical decisions and have an impact on the depressed person. However there are weaknesses in the cognitive approach in understanding the causes of depression, as it does not take into consideration the biochemical imbalance which was challenged in a study by Hammen (1995). In addition the cognitive approach offers not explanation for why the same negative events in someone else's life would not cause depression and therefore is over simplistic. Lewisohn (1991) has a major criticism as there is contradictory evidence in his studies finding that

depressed people were no more likely to have negative thoughts, than people who did not develop depression. This suggests that hopeless and negative thinking is a consequence of depression, rather than a cause.

To summarise, the psychodynamic approach looks at the causes of depression from the significant loss at childhood to a symbolic loss. It suggests that depression has the same symptoms as grief. While this may explain the trigger for some types of depression, there is little evidence for an absolute connection. Whereas the behavioural approach argues that depression is a result of lack of positive reinforcement and enters into a cycle of negative reinforcement and learned helplessness theory. This is derived from the classic conditioning theory. Behavioural theories believe that depression can be unlearned by rewarding them for non-depressive behaviour. This approach has ethical arguments and how the observational studies on animals can be applied to human beings. Its reliability is questioned due to the reductionist view, as depression can not be explained in one single factor. The correlation of the two theories both behavioural and cognitive may be a more substantial way of explaining the causes of depression. Abramson (1978) Revised the helpless theory and looks that interpretations people make of the world around them and a link between the learned behaviour from their past. The cognitive and behavioural approach shows the illogical manner in which we think and behave, but is a reaction to depression rather than a cause Barnett & Gotlib (1988). Cognitive is the more modern approach and is used widely in today's society. It looks at the positive and negative schema taking into account our personality traits. Looking at perception and how this has an effect on how

we see our self, world and future. When people are depressed it suggests that we have a narrow and distorted view and thus having no control over there lives. As an explanation to depression this approach is psychologically deterministic as it suggests that individuals whom are not sociable will become depressed. It is also argued that negative thinking is an effect of depression rather than the cause. However the Psychodynamic, Behaviour and Cognitive approaches do go into explaining and inevitable helping those with the mood disorder, namely depression. Depression does affect 78% of us in our life time. These approaches have been successful in their own right and may go on to save 3000 – 7000 peoples lives that are lost to suicide each year, while suffering from depression. It is thought that a more holistic approach is required to treat depressed patients and treatment should be tailored to the individual.