

Empiricism and
positivism: is
psychology a
science?



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Introduction

In trying to answer the important and complex question of whether psychology is a science, we will first take a brief look at two major philosophical influences that help to create psychology- Empiricism and Positivism. Then study the view of determinism, indeterminism and nondeterminism of different psychologists to discuss the mind and subject matter of psychology. And finally, try to compare determinism and free will and conclude writer's view on this original question " Is psychology a science?".

Empiricism

John Locke, David Hume and David Hartley etc were the British empiricists who stressed that the important of experience in the attainment of knowledge. And the only source of true knowledge about the world is sensory experience which is information that comes to our senses or our inferences between the relationships of sensory facts. The word empirical is often used with the concept of science which implies that science used observation, measurement of the world and collecting data in the environment. This view is contrast with the Rationalists who believed that knowledge is innate and inborn.

Locke maintained that the mind at birth was purely nothing, but experiences color it. This idea built into the behaviorist view of learning, like children can be made into anything that environment want it to be. The implication of empiricism on psychology include, firstly, the idea of conscious mind into simple ideas or overt behavior into stimuli response behavior and secondly,

provided us the theory of association for explaining how simple elements can be combined to form complex elements or compounds.

Thus the empiricist provided for psychology both a theory and methodology that most behaviorists made use of and is still influence today's psychology.

Positivism

Comte, the positivist, claimed that the only things we can be sure of is thing that can publicly observable. That is, sense experience that can be shared with other people. The data of science is observable and therefore can be trusted and only scientific information can be considered valid. Anything that is not publicly observable is suspect and is rejected because it is not a proper object to study. He did not believe psychology could not become a science because the only way to study the mind is using unreliable method of introspection. To study individual, it can be objectively studied by observing their overt behavior or through phrenological analysis. There are two significant impact of positivism on psychology: firstly, Darwin's evolution theory enabled psychology to be placed in field of biological science. Secondly, psychology can be treated experimentally under Wundt's psychology laboratory.

Determinism

All determinists believe that all behavior is caused and there are three kinds of determinism: the first one is biological determinism which emphasizes that behavior can be caused by physiological conditions or genetic predisposition, for example, mental illness was caused because of the lack of

neurotransmitter, dopamine, in the brain. And that people will suffer abnormal behavior. Most human behavior is genetically inherited. The second one is environmental determinism, stressed that the environmental stimulus as the determinants of human behavior. For example, behavior theory emphasizes that environmental stimulus determine our behavior. The third determinism is sociocultural determinism, it is a form of environmental determinism, but emphasizes on the cultural factors like rules, regulations and beliefs that govern human behavior. For example, everyone keep quite in the library automatically because the social norm of our culture is no talking in the library. So, the environment factor guides our behaviors.

Freud and Skinner, who are both determinists, agreed with the view that human behavior is caused.

The neo-behaviorist B. F. Skinner held the view that the person is not free. In his book "Beyond freedom and Dignity" (1971), he argues that behavioral freedom is an illusion. His famous concept of operant conditioning, suggested that when negative reinforcers are consider along with rewards, then almost all behavior is controlled by association of reinforcement which occur constantly in the environment. What we think that we are behaving freely is not accurate because we are merely free of negative reinforcement or its threat; our behavior is still determined by the pursuit of things that have been positively reinforcing in the past, and consists of responses that have previously been positively reinforced. When we perceive others as behaving freely we are merely unaware of their reinforcement histories and the association that govern their behavior. So, Skinner concluded that behavioral freedom is an illusion.

Other determinist, Freud, also rejects the possibility of free will. Every cause of human's behavior comes from within the individual's own unconscious mind; for Skinner's view, they are external.

However, from the view of inductive nature of science, it is clear that total predictability is impossible. The past does not logically predict the future, if it is true for physics, does it still true for human behavior? And how much more true it is? So if the main requirement of determinism is that behavior should be completely predictable, it does not seem to bring the same reason to the free will view after all.

Indeterminism

Some psychologists believe that human behavior is determined but since the universe is complex, we cannot accurately measure all the cause of our behavior. As Heisenberg said, despite human behavior is determined, we cannot know at least some of causes of behavior because we change that behavior when we are attempting to observe them. Psychologists who accepted this view believing that there are some specific causes of behavior but that we cannot accurately known. For example, when studying human's thought and behavior, just like social psychologists does in their experiment; one dependent variable can be caused by many independent variables. The problem of youngsters' drug abuse can be caused by peer influence, family problem, personal attitudes or others factors. The drug abuse behavior is determined, but we cannot accurately measure or discover all the causes.

Determinism versus Nondeterminism (Free will)

Our everyday common sense understanding is that people have the ability to choose their own course of action, to determine their lives and, to this extent, have free will. Free will could be exercised within physical, political, environmental and other sociological factors.

Sometimes, when we think about the concept of free will, it is also linked to the concept of responsibility; we normally think that people are responsible for what they do since they are the cause of what they do, that is they are not driven by any outside factors.

Most humanists or existentialists, like Carl Rogers, Rollo May and George Kelly etc assume that human behaviors are freely chosen and therefore cannot be tested by scientific method. This belief in free will is contrary to the view of determinism. Therefore, these psychologists are considered nonscientific. These psychologists are strongly influenced by the concept that our nature of experience and our knowledge of the external world are determined on how we interpret and define it. The universe is occupied only by the minds, and physical objects depend on and exist in individual's mind.

But the view of positivism in the nature of scientific psychology is different. They imply that behavior is determined by external events or stimuli and that people respond to it passively and, to this extent, are not free.

Determinism also implies that behavior is totally predictable, as they occur in a regular, orderly manner. And every human action has a cause.

An important distinction can be made between compulsion on the one hand and determinism on the other hand. Free actions are free from compulsion,
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but this is consistent with them being determined. The view which William James proposed called soft determinism. He argued that the question of free action is depending on the type of cause our behavior has. If our actions have as their proximate cause something like conscious mind, we can see them as free, rational, voluntary, purposive actions.

Some aspects of psychology are scientific and some are not. The psychologist used scientific method have provided very much useful information in every major area of psychology, for example, memory, personality, learning, perception, intelligence, motivation and psychotherapy.