Ethical Issues in Psychology

In psychology we study a huge range of subject matter, from the activity of a single brain cell, to the behaviour of large groups of football fans. Where research is not carried out with sufficient care for its participants we say that it has not been carried out ethically. Examples of research in psychology where human participants may well have suffered psychological damage include Milgram's obedience research where participants were deceived into believing they were giving electric shocks to another person. As a result of such studies, ethical guidelines have been produced which govern the behaviour of researchers. Ethical guidelines extend to the use of animals in research, meaning that researchers have an ethical obligation to do their best to ensure that suffering is minimised. A great deal of ethically questionable research has been carried out in psychology. For example, in Harlow's research, young Rhesus monkeys removed from their mothers clearly suffered anxiety and trauma as a result.

These days, all research in the UK is subject to very strict ethical controls. Researchers wishing to use animals must go through a demanding process of applying for a licence to do so. The welfare of animals is important in a laboratory setting since the responses of psychologically healthy animals are of much more use to researchers than those of terrified or traumatised animals. So it is in the interest of the teams conducting the work to keep the animals carefully and in good condition. How psychologists maintain ethically acceptable research is partly through the law and partly through guidance from the British Psychological Society (BPS). Professional researchers must submit an outline of their proposed research to a committee who decide whether participants will be harmed in any way. These committees assess the research on the basis of the BPS ethical guidelines. Ethical considerations (with humans) include informed consent, deception, debriefing, the right of participants to withdraw, confidentiality and the protection of participants from physical and psychological harm. If research is not carried out ethically, researchers risk being expelled from the BPS and so will find it difficult or impossible to conduct research in the future. As a result they risk losing their jobs.

It is almost impossible to conduct psychological research which does not in some way raise an ethical issue. It is important to have methods of dealing with such issues, should they arise. Researchers may for example deal with deception by informing participants of the true nature of the

study after they have taken part and then offering them the chance to withdraw any information gathered as a result of their participation. Ultimately psychologists must ask themselves whether in their research the ends justify the means. By this we mean that all research using human or non-human animals must be considered in terms of the value of the results when compared to the cost (both moral and financial) of carrying out the work. If chimpanzees are subjected to research with drugs and possibly surgery, and the result is a cure for schizophrenia, then many would say that the means (experimenting with chimpanzees) are justified, or made acceptable by the ends (the cure to a horrible, dangerous and sometimes life-shortening disease). It could be argued that if the Russians had not sent Laika the dog into space in 1957 we might not have a space shuttle and all the technological benefits that space research has brought; if Pavlov and Skinner had not conducted research with animals we might not understand the principles of learning as well as we now do.

Issue - Gender Bias

If research is biased towards men or women, it does not provide a clear view of the behaviour that has been studied. A dominantly male perspective is known as an *androcentric* bias, and this can have two forms. An *alpha-bias* is an androcentric bias in which the differences between males and females are exaggerated and so stereotypically male and female characteristics may be emphasised. Freud's theory, for example, can be considered to have an alpha-bias. A *beta-bias* is seen when the differences between males and females are minimised to that only the male view is considered and applied to both genders. This means life experiences which are unique to female experience are ignored.

In psychology, gender biases can also arise because of the way the research has been carried out. An example of this is where conclusions drawn from testing an entirely male sample of participants are generalised to the whole population, including females. There are many examples of this in psychology, such as the research of Asch, Milgram and Zimbardo, who never tested females. Some psychologists would argue that methodological biases are also found in the techniques used in psychology. 'Male preferred' techniques include carefully controlled and manipulated experimental methods. Females, however, prefer a less controlled, person-centred approach, such as interviews, where results come from personal participation and experience. Many psychologists would disagree with this stereotypical assumption.

The way in which the research is reported is also important. For instance, Bowlby's work on maternal deprivation implies that women should remain at home and look after children or risk maternal deprivation and long-term problems. The way in which the results of research are used and applied can also be influential with respect to gender bias. Maternal deprivation research for example might have been used to encourage new mothers not to return to work, so increasing gender inequality in society. When considering articles for publication, editors of scientific journals prefer data that show differences between groups. A finding where a difference is not found is called a *null-result* and data which show this are usually not published. This means that research that reveals a difference between men and women is much more likely to be published than research that finds no difference.

We may ask however, whether any action to reduce gender bias is necessary, and indeed, whether gender bias is a problem at all. Maccoby and Jacklin (1974) investigated the problem of gender differences in research and found that in most areas there was no gender bias. It would therefore be wrong to assume that all research has a gender bias. There are real differences between the way men and women perform on certain tasks, but these are mostly quite subtle and appear after analysing a lot of data. Maccoby and Jacklin show that women generally perform better on verbal tasks, and men on visual and spatial tasks. Schaffer (1999) says that women are more emotionally sensitive than men. An emphasis on these differences, rather than stereotypical ones, might help to clarify the real differences and similarities in the sexes.

The subtle differences that do exist between men and women may be exaggerated, to support the view that men and women are very different from one another. This encourages gender bias and can be used to maintain the gender supremacy of men in powerful positions in society. For instance, data suggesting that women are unreliable and relatively expensive to employ because they miss work due to problems of menstruation, pregnancy and childcare may not be challenged by research. To do so would threaten the position of the mainly male workforce.

Issue - Cultural Bias

Culture can be described as all the knowledge and values shared by a society. Cultures may differ from one another in many ways, so that the findings of psychological research conducted in one culture may not apply directly to another. For example, research produced in *individualistic* cultures may be designed , analysed and interpreted differently from research carried out in *collectivist* cultures. An individualistic culture is one where importance is placed on individual achievement, whereas a collectivist one is where there is an emphasis on the social group above the individual.

Ethnocentric approaches to research can result in ethnocentric bias. Such a bias occurs where a culture is judged and assessed in terms of the norms of another culture. This can exaggerate differences between cultures and lead to a distorted view of their differences. Similarly, an ethnocentric bias may arise because most research (approximately two thirds of all psychological research in the world) is carried out in North America. If we base our understanding of human nature and human behaviour on this body of research alone without assessing other cultures our view will be biased towards the behaviour of North Americans. These ethnocentric biases limit the the validity of research findings. Similarly, the vast majority of research carried out involves white North American or European participants, with less than 5% of participants being from other cultures. The results may well reflect this bias and so limit the validity of the findings for other ethnic groups. The antidote to ethnocentrism is *cultural relativism*, which is an approach to treating each culture as unique and worthy of study.

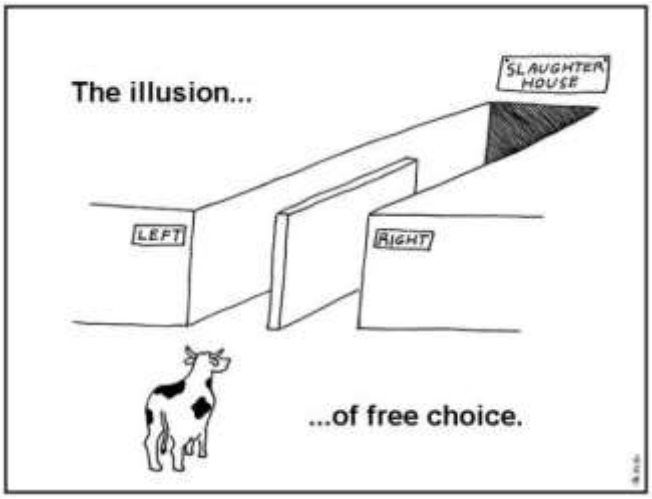
The *etic/emic* distinction should be considered when thinking about cultural bias. *Etic* refers to the study of a culture from the perspective of another culture. For instance, studying Eastern cultures from a Western vantage point can cause a distorted view and reduced validity of findings. An example of this is the application of the Strange Situation to measure attachment in infants. Based on data from this test one might come to an erroneous negative conclusion about the child-rearing

skills of Japanese parents since they seem to produce so many infants with insecure attachments. The concepts underlying the Strange Situation however are rooted in a Western perspective – it is an idea reflecting ideals and morns of Western culture, so must be treated with caution in cultures other than this.

An *emic* approach refers to the investigation of a culture from within the culture itself. This means that research of European society from a European perspective is emic, and African society by African researchers in Africa is also emic. An emic approach is more likely to have ecological validity as the findings are less likely to be distorted or caused by a mismatch between the cultures of the researchers and the culture being investigated.

An example of an etic approach which produces bias might be the imposition of IQ tests designed within one culture on another culture. If a test is designed to measure a European's understanding of what intelligence is it may not be a valid measurement of an African's , or Asian's intelligence. An emic approach would be to design a test specific to the culture being tested to provide more validity to the research method used and therefore more ecological validity to the findings. Studies of attachment which have taken an emic approach have reduced the cultural bias in the Strange Situation by adjusting it for use within specific cultures. Rothbaum et al (2007) for example introduced the uniquely Japanese concept of amae into his revamped version of the Strange Situation which also does not involve separation of the mother and infant.

Culturally biased research nonetheless has been common in psychology, not least because the vast majority of research is carried out in the West. The consequences of cultural bias are far reaching, and ultimately only serve to exaggerate cultural differences and misunderstandings.



Debate - Determinism and Free Will

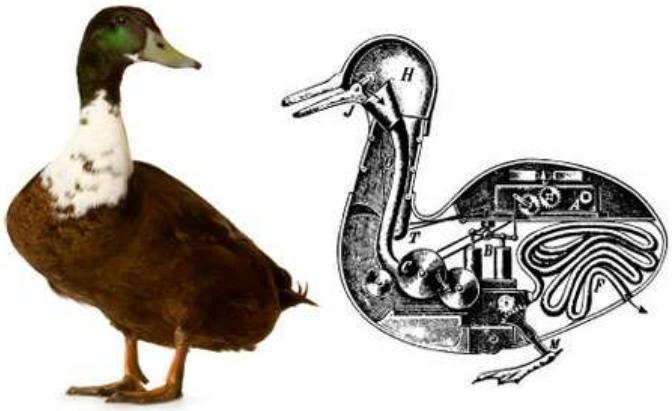
The free will/determinism debate revolves around the extent to which our behaviour is the result of forces over which we have no control or whether people are able to decide for themselves whether to act or behave in a certain way. A deterministic view is one which describes behaviour as not being under the control of the individual. A determinist point of view would say that behaviour is 'determined' by external and internal forces – that is, by the environment and by our biology. If something is not under our control, it is determined by something else. If something is automatic, it is not under our control. One of the most radical deterministsts was Skinner, who said that we do not have free will at all. Instead, behaviours are determined by our learning experiences, that is, what we are is a result of an accumulation of conditioned responses. Another example of a deterministic approach would be explanations which focus on the role of genetics in mental illness.

By arguing that humans can make free choices, the free will approach appears to be quite the opposite of the deterministic one. Psychologists who take the free will view suggest that determinism removes freedom and dignity, and devalues human behaviour. By creating general laws of behaviour, deterministic psychology underestimates the uniqueness of human beings and their freedom to choose their own destiny.

There are important implications for taking either side in this debate. Deterministic explanations for behaviour reduce individual responsibility. A person arrested for a violent attack for example might plead that they were not responsible for their behaviour – it was due to their upbringing, a bang on the head they received earlier in life, recent relationship stresses, or a psychiatric problem. In other words, their behaviour was determined. The deterministic approach also has important implications for psychology as a science. Scientists are interested in discovering laws which can then be used to predict events. This is very easy to see in physics, chemistry and biology. As a science, psychology

attempts the same thing – to develop laws, but this time to predict behaviour. If we argue against determinism, we are in effect rejecting the scientific approach to explaining behaviour.

Studying the human behaviour presents psychologists with a problem not shared by the natural sciences - that is, the unpredictability of its subject matter. Human behaviour appears to be only somewhat predictable, If you visit a shopping centre then you can be confident that, as long as other people play their roles, the experience will be unremarkable - it is predictable. There are occasions, however, when events do not follow this script, and you see someone behaving in a surprising (i.e. unpredictable) way. The vast complexity of human behaviour means that psychologists can never offer a complete explanation for behaviour which is 100% certain. This means that behaviour is not absolutely determined, and also means that it is not random and entirely unpredictable either. Clearly, a pure deterministic or free will approach does not seem appropriate when studying human behaviour. Most psychologists use the concept of free will to express the idea that behaviour is not a passive reaction to forces, but that individuals actively respond to internal and external forces. The term soft determinism is often used to describe this position, whereby people do have a choice, but their behaviour is always subject to some form of biological or environmental pressure.



Debate - Reductionism

Reductionism is the belief that human behaviour can be explained by breaking it down into smaller component parts. Reductionists say that the best way to understand why we behave as we do is to look closely at the very simplest parts that make up our systems, and use the simplest explanations to understand how they work.

Behaviourists such as Skinner explain all behaviour as being a result of past learning. The relationships between stimuli and our responses to them are the basis for all we know and how we behave. This is a reductionist view because complex behaviour is being reduced to a simple stimulus and response relationship. We might also consider the biological approach to abnormality as reductionist. The biological approach says that psychological problems can be treated like a disease and so are often treatable with drugs. Identifying the source of someone's mental illness as an imbalance of chemicals in the brain is being reductionist.

Reductionism works at different levels. The lowest level of reductionism offers physiological explanation: these attempt to explain behaviour in terms of neurochemical, genes and brain structure. At the highest socio-cultural level, explanations focus on the influence on behaviour of where and how we live. Between these extremes there are behavioural, cognitive and social explanations.

Supporters of a reductionist approach say that it is scientific. Breaking complicated behaviours down to small parts means that they can be scientifically tested. Then, over time, explanations based on scientific evidence will emerge. However, some would argue that the reductionist view lacks validity.

For instance, we can see how the brain responds to particular musical sounds by viewing it in a scanner, but how you feel when you hear certain pieces of music is not something a scanner can ever reveal. Just because a part of the brain that is connected with fear is activated while listening to a piece of music does not necessarily mean that you feel afraid. In this case, being reductionist is not

a valid way of measuring feelings. It is also argued that reductionist approaches do not allow us to identify why behaviours happen. For example, they can explain that running away from a large dog was made possible by our fear centres causing a stress response to better allow us to run fast, but the same reductionist view cannot say why we were afraid of the dog in the first place. In effect, by being reductionist we may be asking smaller, more specific questions and therefore not addressing the bigger issue of why we behave as we do.

It has been suggested that the usefulness of reductionist approaches depends on the purpose to which they are put. For example, investigating brain response to faces might reveal much about how we recognise faces, but this level of description should not perhaps e used to explain human attraction. Likewise, whilst we need to understand the biology of mental disorders, we may not fully understand the disorder without taking account of social factors which influence it. Thus, whilst reductionism is useful, it can lead to incomplete explanations.

Interactionism is an alternative approach to reductionism, focusing on how different levels of analysis interact with one another. It differs from reductionism since an interactionist approach would not try to understand behaviour from explanations at one level, but as an interaction between different levels. So for example, we might better understand a mental disorder such as depression by bringing together explanations from physiological, cognitive and socio-cultural levels. Such an approach might usefully explain the success of drug therapies in treating the disorder; why people with depression think differently about themselves and the world; and why depression occurs more frequently in particular populations.

The Nature and Nurture Debate

What's more important – what you are born with or what you learn during your development?

The two sides of the argument are summed up in the words *nature* and *nurture*.

The nature part of the debate refers to those of our abilities, strengths, weaknesses and characteristics that are determined by our genes. These are the characteristics that we inherit from our parents, and are determined not by our experiences but by our biology. People who strongly support the nature argument are called 'nativists' and in psychology we can identify a number of 'nativist' approaches. The clearest of them are those that argue for a genetic basis for behaviour, such as evolutionary and biological explanations. Biological approaches are those that explain behaviour in terms of genes, hormones and brain structure, which are not due to environmental influences.

The nurture part of the debate refers to the influence of our experiences after we are born. These experiences may be both physical (and refer to the environments in which we live), and social (referring to our interactions with those around us). Supporters of the nurture argument are described as 'empiricists'. Empiricists say that our characteristics are shaped by our experience. The most typical empiricist argument is expressed by those who take the extreme view that behaviour is purely a result of the environment. An example of this is behaviourism (or learning theory), which says that everything we are and everything we know is learned through conditioning.

We see this nature/nurture argument repeatedly in psychology. For example, in developmental psychology there is a debate about whether our biology and genetics or our experiences after birth are most important in the formation of our attachment bonds. On the one hand there is the evolutionary approach, which argues that attachment is instinctive; whilst on the other we have the view of learning theory, which suggests that attachments are conditioned.

The nativist and empirist approaches, of course, represent extremes. In reality most psychologists take an interactionist view and accept that behaviour is influenced by *both* nature *and* nurture. As can be seen in the important influence of culture on attachment and the differences in attachment types, a full understanding of attachment can only be achieved through consideration of both views. The debate in psychology is about the *relative* contribution of nature and nurture, not whether something is exclusively due to one or the other. It is limiting to describe behaviour solely in terms of either nature or nurture, and attempts to do this underestimate the complexity of human behaviour.

For instance, Bandura would say that we know how to be aggressive because we learn, from watching others be aggressive. Similarly, we know that some behaviours are acceptable and others are not, because we learn from watching other people behave; we learn that we are rewarded if we do good or acceptable things, and that we are punished if our actions are bad or unacceptable. In short, behaviourists argue that we are what we are because we have learned from our experiences to be that way.