Conceptual Issues and critical debates in Psychology PSYC3031 week 19

Free Will

This can be read in conjunction with some other resources and readings accessible from my teaching resources page http://www.brown.uk.com

Definitions and history:
Free will is a term which is often used but very rarely defined. Some folk definitions include:
“the ability to choose without constraints.”
“free will is the possibility of self-determination - the ability to have a premeditated influence on the unfolding of our biography.”
The Encyclopaedia Britannica says Free Will is: “in humans, the power or capacity to choose among alternatives or to act in certain situations independently of natural, social, or divine restraints. Free will is denied by those who espouse any of various forms of determinism.

Arguments for free will are based on the subjective experience of freedom, on sentiments of guilt, on revealed religion, and on the universal supposition of responsibility for personal actions that underlies the concepts of law, reward, punishment, and incentive. In theology, the existence of free will must be reconciled with God's omniscience and goodness (in allowing man to choose badly), and with divine grace, which allegedly is necessary for any meritorious act.”

In classical antiquity it was generally assumed that everything about humans was ultimately determined by unchangeable fate - which was sometimes thought to be revealed through oracles, mystics, priests, divine revelations, foretold by astrology or other forms of divination. Most Greek philosophers believed that their various theories implied a rigid determination of human actions. With the advent of Christian theologies the notion that humans can at some level make free choices - particularly about whether to do good or not - emerged as a foundational idea. This idea was not unique to Christianity but was gaining currency in the classical world at the time. The idea had also arisen in Persian and Hebrew religions and legal systems, and was supported by Roman lawyers such as Cicero 106-43 BC). There was a problem in reconciling this with the idea of God having infinite power, although around 420 CE Augustine (354-430 CE) suggested that while God might have infinite knowledge of the future we as humans could not - yielding what we might now see as a theological justification for free will. In the 1500s some early Protestants made theological arguments against free will, particularly with the doctrine of predestination. After the reformation, in the mid-1600s philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) asserted that minds operate according to definite mechanisms and therefore cannot exhibit free will. In the late 1700s with the European ‘enlightenment’ philosophers such as Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) - agreeing with earlier work by Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716) - claimed instead that at least some parts of our minds are free and not determined by definite laws. But soon thereafter scientists like Pierre-Simon Laplace (1749-1827) began to argue for determinism throughout the universe based on mathematical laws. And with the increasing success of science in the 1800s it came to be widely believed that there must be definite laws for all human actions -

providing a foundation for the development of psychology and the social sciences, or as they were briefly known in the early 19th century ‘social physics’.
In the early 1900s historians and economists emphasized that there whilst there were regularities in variables such as murder rates, suicide rates and mortality rates, there did not appear to be any simple laws for most aspects of human behaviour. But it was nevertheless typically assumed that methods based on physics would eventually yield deterministic laws for human behaviour - and this was for example part of the inspiration for the behaviourist movement in psychology in the mid-1900s. Psychology was getting more deterministic at a time when physics itself was getting less so: The advent of quantum mechanics in the 1920s, however, showed that even physics might not be entirely deterministic - and by the 1940s the possibility that this might be related to human free will was being discussed (albeit very speculatively) by physicists, philosophers and historians. Around this time Karl Popper (1902-1994) used both quantum mechanics and sensitive dependence on initial conditions to argue for fundamental indeterminism. And also around this time, in economics Friedrich Hayek (1899-1902) suggested - presumably influenced by work in mathematical logic - that human behaviour might be fundamentally unpredictable because brains can explain only systems simpler than themselves, and can thus never explain their own operation. Sometimes it is claimed that Gödel’s Theorem shows that humans cannot follow definite rules.

Questions of free will and responsibility have been widely discussed in criminal and other law since at least the 1800s. In the 1960s and 1970s ideas from popular psychology tended to diminish the importance of free will relative to physiology or environment and experiences. Brain mechanisms, genetic predispositions, rewards and punishments, childhood traumas and so on were often talked about as if they had a causal role. A little later, In the 1980s free will was increasingly attributed to animals other than humans. Free will for computers and robots was discussed in the 1950s in science fiction and to some extent in the field of cybernetics. But following the disappointments of artificial intelligence (it’s not turned out to be as intelligent as was hoped) this issue has been neglected.

Brains, minds and determinism

From the 1960s through to the present day, as researchers have studied the brain mechanisms allegedly responsible for behaviour, there has been an increasing concern that this appears to reduce our capacity for free will. There have been a number of attempts to reconcile the idea of free will with a knowledge of the brain’s structure and function.
Roger Sperry, who was responsible for the original split brain studies, put it in the following terms:

> “The proposed brain model provides in large measure the mental forces and abilities to determine one’s own actions. It provides a high degree of freedom from outside forces as well as mastery over inner molecular and atomic forces of the body[In other words it provides plenty of free will as long as we think of free will as self-determination. A person does indeed determine with his own mind what he is going to do and often from among a large series of alternative possibilities” (Sperry, 1983, in Corballis, 1998, p. 1084).

Although a neuroscientist by vocation, Sperry believed implicitly in free will as an emergent property of a determinate machine. Trying to relate this free will to the mechanisms of nerve impulses and synaptic transmissions led him to say:

> "Individual nerve impulses and other excitatory components of cerebral activity pattern are simply carried along or shunted this way and that by the prevailing overall dynamics of the whole active process (in principle – just as drops of water are carried along by local eddy in a stream or the way that the molecules of a wheel are carried along when it rolls down hill, regardless of whether the individual molecules atoms happen to like it or not (Sperry, 1969, in Corballis, 1998, p. 1085)

Since Sperry's day a number of more assertive biological discourses have sprung up to explain human behaviour. As Rose (2000) says: 'We live, inescapably, in a biologized culture. Not merely the sickness of human beings, but also their personalities, capacities, passions, and the forces that mobilize them – their identities themselves – appear at least potentially to be explicable in biological terms, and increasingly in terms of their genetic makeup." (p. 6).

In the courts however, as Rose notes, defences based on food, PMS or alleged genetic defects have not convinced judges and juries on the whole. Here, despite the development of biological criminology the overwhelming tendency is to see these events in terms of individual responsibility. Rose notes how many contemporary proponents of biological criminology are careful to avoid simplistic statements about biological determinism and eugenics, but at the same time the arguments are being advanced for the screening and control of people who may be judged to be 'at risk' on public health grounds.

> "Practices for the identification, calculation and management of biological risk factors will take their place among a whole host of others in an expanded role for criminal justice, in preventive interventions with those thought to be 'at risk of offending', in the new post-welfare strategies for control of urban environments by instrumentalizing the moralizing powers of families, churches, communities and space itself, in the assessment of offenders, in the development of regimes of preventive detention." (Rose, 2000, p. 24)

The fact that traditional dichotomies and oppositions of social and psychological thought—free will versus determinism, society versus biology— can apparently coexist quite happily in contemporary social policy and criminological thinking suggests that we need new ways of understanding the relationships of power, knowledge, ethics and subjectification that are taking shape within these new practices of control. Free will, at least in its classical opposition to determinism is obsolete.

Seeing ourselves in neuronal terms may be becoming a duty of biomedical citizenship, since failure to think about our brains in neuroscientific terms, or at all, not only invites risk but may increasingly constitute moral failure. (Pitts-Taylor, 2010: 649).

In Fullagar's (2009) paper, women who take anti-depressant medications are seen as having *allowed* themselves to be neurologically deficient. The power relations of depression diagnosis demand neurochemical treatment; without it, women are seen as lacking in self-care: 'The neurochemically deficient self is . . . required to exercise responsibility and self-control to restore and maximize their life potential via biomedical expertise' (Fullagar, 2009: 403).

Biological vitality, from the levels of surface flesh all the way to molecule, neuron and gene, has become a prime resource for ‘marketization’ in biocaptialist economies (Waldby and Cooper, 2008: 58).

Determining features of our self. The care of the self and the construction of identity packages.

‘The care of the self’ is part of Foucault’s understanding of the history of sexuality. The idea that the self is an object which we possess and have a duty to look after is one which brings with it the emergence of subjectivity – the ‘self’ evolved into a mindset, a way of behaving and a set of interactional idioms which spread through our collective ways of living. Foucault considers how society develops and inculcates its structures, processes and disciplines through techniques of objectification. Sex, especially as it is cultivated studied, typified and categorised became a social practice within the realm of subjectivity that gives rise to particular kinds of inter-individual relations. The ‘relationship’, the ‘visit to the clinic’, the visit to the ‘couples counsellor’ are confessional forms through with the individual is created. These exchanges and communications would at times become an occasion to create social institutions.

In cultivating our selves we are encouraged to reflect on what we can change and re-determine about ourselves. Weight, height, hair colour, clothes, place of residence, degree class obtained, occupation, gender, sex – all these and more are potentially subject to measurement, cultivation, change and redefinition. Universities now offer courses in lifestyle management.

> The brain has joined the rest of the body in becoming integral to self-identity, opened to self-styling and modification (Pitts-Taylor, 2010: 648).

Kids and consciousness

Childhood is repackaged as being valuable inasmuch as it can be reinscribed as pester power, movement has to do with motor companies and oil companies, play has to do with the leisure industry, and we are hailed by numerous discourses inviting us to redesign our thoughts, subjectivities and emotions. In relation to the mass media we become new kinds of persons.

For example, let us consider some of the debate about the effects of television on children. There has been considerable concern amongst politicians, broadcasters, social scientists and the general public about the ‘child viewer’. In post-structuralist thinking this process of categorisation itself is interesting because the people who are classified and the social processes around them are changed as a result of the classification. As Ian Hacking (1999) says about the child viewer:

> “Once we have the phrase, the label, we get the notion that there is a definite kind of person, the child viewer, a species. This kind of person becomes reified. Some parents start to think of their children as child viewers, a special type of child (not just their kid who watches television). They start to interact, on occasion with their children regarded not as their children but as child viewers. Since children are such self aware creatures, they may become not only

> children who watch television, but, in their own self consciousness, child viewers (Hacking, 1999, p. 27)

Or consider the role of children in urban spaces. As Weller and Breugel (2009: 630) put it:

> On the one hand, children are frequently portrayed as inherently vulnerable, incompetent and in need of protection from the risks of urban life, thus representing pure, innocent, 'little angel' notions of childhood (Jenks, 1996). On the other hand, and somewhat paradoxically, the presence and behaviour of (often older) children in public space are also regarded as intimidating and anti-social, and so detrimental to wider neighbourhood interaction (Valentine, 1996, 2004; see also Pain, 2003).

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