

The Illusionary Causation of Self-Concepts within Psychological Behaviour Change Theories

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Abstract

Psychological theories include aspects of the self that attempt to promote healthier behaviours. Implicitly these theories imply an individual causal role of behaviour, with the agentic self dictating the course of life's events. However, despite the popularity of self-related concepts, the self may not necessarily play a true causal role in behaviour. This brief commentary provides an argument for a distinction between self-concepts described with popular psychological behaviour change theories and causation. Such a distinction should be kept in mind when trying to alter behaviour.

Keywords: *Behaviour Change; The Self; Causation; Free-Will*

Self-concepts

Within psychological theorising, there are a number of constructs explicitly including 'self' within their title such as self-esteem, self-efficacy and self-determination. Despite their similarities, subtle differences are apparent; self-esteem refers to what one thinks about themselves, self-efficacy refers to what one thinks about their ability, and self-determination refers to whether the individuals' motives are internally construed. In addition to these self-concepts, there are also constructs that relate to an individual's control, without including the self-title; perceived behavioural control, for example, refers to the amount of control one perceives to have over environmental influences. Furthermore, there are psychological theories dedicated solely to the role of perceptions of the causal self. Locus of control [1], for example, refers to whether one perceives life's events to be under their control; one can believe that the course of events is either down to themselves or luck, fate and chance.

The different constructs mentioned are not necessarily influenced by one another and should be seen to act independently. For example, one could have an internal locus of control over courses of action, yet have low self-efficacy to perform a specific behaviour (i.e., to run for half an hour). Conversely, an individual could be highly efficacious in their ability to perform a specific behaviour (i.e., to take daily medication), yet have an external locus of control of their life. In addition, whether one values their self-worth may be irrelevant for such behaviours. The independency of several related constructs has also evolved from scientific research. For example, within the Theory of Planned Behaviour [2], the perceived behavioural control construct was introduced due to the lack of volitional control over certain behaviours (i.e., to attend regular doctors' appointments). Although originally conceived as being synonymous with self-efficacy, differences between the two provided a separation between these constructs. In this case, one could have high perceptions of their ability to execute behaviour, yet not have the required resources to do so.

In addition to these psychological theories targeting an agentic self, there are also philosophical assumptions and worldviews pertaining to the freedom of human action. For example, existentialism, which is a branch of humanism, places freedom within the absurdity of life. Specifically, individuals are advised to create their own meaning within an utterly meaningless world. Buddhism practices spiritual development and the self-discovery of wisdom from travelling through the path of enlightenment. Thus, each individual has the potential to be 'awoken' when realising this potential.

Actual freedom?

Despite the interest in concepts relating to the self and freedom, there is still the question of whether or not freedom does exist. For example, theories pertaining to health psychology investigate how cognitions relating to the self can be manipulated to bring about successful behaviour change. The Theory of Planned Behaviour [2] targets salient behavioural, normative and control beliefs, which are those most prominent within an individual's mind. Although an individual may be aware of such beliefs, they need not necessarily be the cause of them. Indeed, there is a strong argument that behaviour is a cause of rather than a product of self-efficacy. Asserting interactions are not linear, Bandura [3] does include reciprocal determinism with his Social Cognitive Theory. He also suggests the mastery of performance to be the most effective way to increase self-efficacy. Consciousness may therefore be inadequate to attribute mental phenomena with causation. Nevertheless, this illusion that a conscious self causes behaviour is not one that particularly concerns psychologists. Indeed, such definitional differences may be a cause of the problem.

Problems of definition?

Bargh [4] suggests the arguments put forth by philosophers are different to that of psychologists. For example, as outlined above, psychologists imply freedom by an awareness of causation. Thus, making one believe that one has the beliefs, control and ability to perform behaviour is enough to place an agentic self at the heart of change. Philosophers, however, attempt to establish the cause of causation, thus take a position that awareness of causes does not infer they were any less caused than a cause that one was unaware of. Rather, one would have to be the uncaused cause to be the true causal agent. As such, psychology appears to scratch the surface of an actual causal self; philosophy attempts to get to the heart. There is also a distinction between free will and freedom of action which may lead to further confusion. Freedom of action refers to things that prevent the realization of a willed action, thus shares similarities with the psychological construct perceived behavioural control. Increasing controllability allows an action to be performed, not necessarily a freed will.

Utility?

There is an argument of whether it is just the person's view of free will that is important. That is, is it not better to think of oneself as a free, causal agent? Greater self-efficacy increases behavioural performance, an existential mind may make one happier, and an internal locus of control may lead to greater achievement. However, the utility of such self-concepts need not get in the way of causation; this evidence is insufficient to infer a true causal agent. Lending an example from theology, an improved life due to belief in a deity does not itself prove the presence of a deity.

The quote below by Arthur Schopenhauer nicely illustrates the illusionary self;

"Let us imagine a man whom, while standing on the street, would say to himself: "It is six o'clock in the evening, the working day is over. Now I can go for a walk, or I can go to the club; I can also climb up the tower to see the sunset; I can go to the theatre; I can visit this friend or that one; indeed, I also can run out of the gate, into the wide world, and never return. All of this is strictly up to me, in this I have complete freedom. But still I shall do none of these things now, but with just as free a will I shall go home to my wife". - Schopenhauer

Conclusion

This brief commentary has provided a distinction between concepts relating to the self and causation. Such concepts are crucial within psychological theories, but these theories automatically assume that they are free. The article argues that conflating popular self-concepts

with causation is erroneous. Although it may be easy to confuse the two, there is a clear distinction between believing one is an agentic, causal self, and actually being the creator of one's life's events.

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