

Martin E. P. Seligman: The Implication of Learned Helplessness and Explanatory Styles on

Personality

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Psychology post-1960 was a new world. Many theorists were developing theories that strayed from the study of the unconscious and looked more at the behavior of a patient. Researchers believed it was important to study the perception of the patient and the amount of control that he/she may think he/she has. Martin E. P. Seligman was one of these researchers. From his theories, more information was gathered about personality and how perceptions of lack of control can affect a person's personality. One of Seligman's most famous contributions to personality psychology was his studies on learned helplessness and the subsequent explanatory style of optimists and pessimists.

Theorist

Martin E. P. Seligman began research on learned helplessness in the mid-1960s as a graduate student. He discovered the phenomenon of learned helplessness through a laboratory experiment using the technique of Pavlovian classical conditioning towards dogs being paired with an electric shock. After realizing that the dogs had acquired learned helplessness, Seligman wanted to determine if these findings could be likened to the way humans become helpless. Seligman's goal was to use this information to understand the origins of human helplessness and to learn how to cure and prevent it. With this new theory, Seligman was able to develop an idea about how the human personality is affected by learned helplessness (Schultz & Schultz , 2009).

Theory

The basis of Seligman's personality theory is derived from his first interaction with learned helplessness. Seligman defines helplessness as an intuitive notion that entails the belief that nothing one does will matter; one believes that their actions are futile (Maier & Seligman, 2016). Through multiple experiments with dogs, Seligman solidified his theories on learned helplessness when repeated results of passiveness and helplessness were found. Using these results of learned helplessness, Seligman developed his personality theory, which employed two explanatory styles – optimistic and pessimistic. Basically, if a person adopts an optimistic explanatory style, he/she will prevent helplessness; if he/she adopts a pessimistic explanatory style, then helplessness will be spread through all facets of life (Schultz & Schultz , 2009). Optimistic people typically attribute problems in their lives as temporary, specific, and external. Pessimistic people typically attribute problems in their lives as permanent, pervasive, and internal. An optimistic explanatory style is related to higher levels of motivation, achievement, and physical well-being, along with lower levels of depressive symptoms (Gillham, Shatte, Reivich , & Seligman, 2001). These explanatory styles are important when it comes to defining a person's personality. They also can have a significant impact on the health of an individual.

Research on Learned Helplessness – Proving Validity

Many studies have been done on Seligman's concept of learned helplessness. In 1967, Seligman and Maier performed an experiment in which dogs were harnessed and exposed to painful electric shocks. These dogs (the experimental group) had no way of escaping from the electric shock. The experimental group of dogs was compared to a control group that did not experience any shocks. Then, the two groups were each placed into a two-compartment shuttle box with electric shocks coming from the floor. The control group discovered that, to escape the

shocks, all they had to do was jump the barrier into the safe side of the compartment. The experimental group did not attempt to jump the barrier; they simply laid on the floor and gave up. The conclusions of this study were that the experimental group learned the shock was inescapable and independent of their response (Seligman & Maier, 1967).

Subsequent studies were done with human participants. One study exposed the experimental group to a loud noise. These participants were told they could turn off the noise by pushing the correct sequence of buttons. But, no matter what they pressed, the noise would not stop. The participants in the control group were able to turn off the noise by pressing an easy sequence of buttons. In the next part of the study, the experimental subjects had to stop the noise by moving their hand from one side of a box to the other. The control subjects had to do the same thing and they learned the solution quickly and easily. But, with the experimental group, the results were the same as in the previous studies – learned helplessness occurred because the participants believed that they had no control over the outcome and that their actions were independent of the result (Hiroto, Locus of control and learned helplessness, 1974). This study by Hiroto was important because it proved that learned helplessness could be applied to humans, as Seligman had theorized.

In 1982, Seligman and his colleagues furthered the research on learned helplessness by studying the health of rats in an experiment with three groups – an electric shock that rats could escape from, a shock they could not escape from, and a control group that experienced no shock. The rats were injected with malignant tumor cells with the expectation that half of them would reject the cells and survive. In the control group, this result was found in that 50% rejected the cells and survived. In the experimental group that could escape from the shocks, 70% rejected the cells and survived. In the experimental group that could not escape the shock, only 27%

rejected the cells and survived; these rats had developed learned helplessness (Visintainer, Volpicelli, & Seligman, 1982). This study was very important because it showed that learned helplessness can dangerously affect physical health.

Research on Explanatory Styles – Proving Validity

When Seligman expanded his theory to include the optimistic and pessimistic explanatory styles, many studies were carried out to prove the validity of this new idea. In 1993, Seligman and his colleagues wrote a book that detailed their study of learned helplessness and everything it entails. In this book, the health effects of explanatory styles were explained. It was found that people with an optimistic explanatory style were healthier than people with a pessimistic explanatory style. This, in part, is because pessimists believe their actions are of little consequence. This typically leads to the unwillingness of a pessimist to change his/her behavior to prevent illness in regard to smoking, dieting, exercising, or even getting timely medical treatment. A study in their book showed that optimistic people were less likely to get sick than pessimistic people. And when optimists fall ill, they were more likely to take responsibility for themselves by resting or going to the doctors (Peterson, Maier, & Seligman, 1993).

Another study showed how a person's levels of optimism and pessimism can change. For example, stressful life experiences can affect one's optimism. Adult primary caregivers for relatives with Alzheimer's disease were studied and their relative optimism and pessimism was compared to a group of adults who were not caregivers. It was found that the adults who were caregivers experienced an increasingly pessimistic viewpoint over a four-year period. They also were subject to higher levels of anxiety, stress, and physical health complaints (Robinson-Whelen, Kim, MacCallum, & Kiecolt-Glaser, 1997). This study is very important because it

shows that stressful events can increase a person's pessimism, which can have negative health effects.

Analysis of Theory

Seligman was the first psychologist to discuss the theory of learned helplessness. With the creation of this theory, animal and human behavior that previously had no explanation, could be easily explained. Through analysis, learned helplessness seems to undermine an organism's motivation for initiating otherwise instrumental responses to a stimulus (Hiroto & Seligman, Generality of Learned Helplessness in Man, 1975). Therefore, if a person is experiencing learned helplessness in a situation that requires his/her action, he/she typically will have no motivation to help themselves and will instead, accept what is happening without trying to change it. The reason that someone might give up and become helpless relates to that person's explanatory attitude. If that person is typically optimistic, then he/she will look at problems as temporary and due to external occurrences. A pessimistic person will see any problem as permanent and resulting from internal wrongdoings. These different viewpoints can plague an individual's every decision and can even impact someone's health. Analysis of the explanatory styles proves that a balanced optimistic thought process is better psychologically, emotionally, and physically for a person. But, if someone is too optimistic, they might have unrealistic expectations for their success, so it must be a healthy level of optimism (Schultz & Schultz, 2009). Being too optimistic can lead to severe disappointment with failure, which could transfer into helplessness.

Later in his research, Seligman discovered a relation between pessimism and depression. Depression is commonly seen as resulting from a lack of control over life events. In this sense, depression is like the ultimate pessimism. Usually, depressed individuals believe that they are helpless and that their actions are futile. For this reason, they typically see no point in trying to

do anything to fix their situation because their pessimistic mindset does not see any future solution to their problems. Seligman saw this same mindset in individuals with learned helplessness. Learned helplessness and depression can come hand in hand for some people because failure in one area of life can be generalized to failure in all aspects of life, which will lead to helplessness and depression (Schultz & Schultz , 2009). After analyzing the relationship between learned helplessness and depression, it is obvious that the reason some people do not recover from depression is due to their explanatory style. Learned helplessness does not have to become chronic depression. But, when the person who has become helpless is a pessimist, then they typically develop full-blown depression (Schultz & Schultz , 2009). Therefore, the explanatory style a person has is very important in determining his/her likelihood of experiencing depression.

Relation to Psychology and Personality

Seligman's theories relate to personality in psychology because explanatory styles make up a person's personality. A person's personality can be made of optimistic tendencies and thoughts, or pessimistic tendencies and thoughts. Therefore, the explanatory styles can directly influence the personality of an individual. Learned helplessness is also a characteristic of personality because it can mold the types of traits a person possesses. People with learned helplessness may exhibit feelings of hopelessness, discouragement, numbness, sadness, and many others. People without learned helplessness may not experience these same traits in pervasive ways. This new development in personality psychology is being used worldwide today. Learned helplessness and the two explanatory styles can be applied in situations such as sports, politics, religion, child rearing, and job performance (Schultz & Schultz , 2009). The reason these theories are so applicable to various aspects of life is because personality is in everything.

In sports, it's important to know what kind of explanatory style a player uses because it may affect the way that he/she performs in a game. Therefore, the impact of this theory is all encompassing and can be used in a multitude of different environments.

Conclusion

To discuss every single impact that learned helplessness and the resulting explanatory styles has had on psychology overall is difficult to accomplish in a single paper. But, it is important to acknowledge the hundreds of research studies that have been borne from this original idea. These studies have proved the validity of Seligman's research time and time again. As mentioned above, Seligman's theories are injected into every aspect of life. Now, when individuals are discussing concepts such as religion or politics, it is possible to analyze the explanatory styles they may be using. Once an explanatory style is discovered, the reasoning behind someone's beliefs can become quite clear. Seligman gave psychologists the ability to understand even more about a person's personality than they knew before from other theories. Without his work, learned helplessness may not be as easily defined and prevalent as it is today. In conclusion, the theories created by Seligman post-1960s have prevailed through the years and left a lasting impact on future research into personality.

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