Learned Helplessness

A theory put forward by Seligman, based largely on some pretty nasty animal experiments (but does the ethical consideration override the validity of the findings? Not for me), that the experience of being put in a position in which there is no possibility of escape from harm or pain can lead to an overall fatalism and resignation, in which it is believed that there is no point in trying to improve the situation. More generally, it can describe a belief in one's own powerlessness, which renders futile any attempt to learn.

Typical experiments include the demonstration that dogs, confined in a cage where they have no possibility of escaping shocks from an electrified floor, no longer attempt to escape such shocks when the opportunity is presented (this bears a resemblance to the anticipatory-avoidance learning experiment): and that rats, which normally swim for 48 hours before drowning in a tank, only manage eight hours after having been held tightly and long enough to cease struggling before being put in the tank.

Learned helplessness, although explored largely within the behavioural paradigm, is a form of meta-learning, or what Bateson would call learning II (or even III). It sets out a general orientation towards learning rather than an account of how a specific item of knowledge or skill is learned or not.

Its particular relevance has been explored to various forms of depressive illness, but it also provides an elegant account of disaffection among students, who have "given up" on the formal educational process as a way of learning anything. They have lost (or never gained) any sense of the connection between their efforts in school or college and any meaningful achievement, and therefore (from the educational standpoint) the major task for a teacher is to help them re-establish this link. On a wider front, the principle can be associated with the "culture of poverty" and the idea of a disenfranchised underclass.

Although the starting points could hardly be more different, there is a link with Mezirow's notion of "transformative learning": participants in adult basic education, for example, need to re-evaluate their whole position about their capabilities to learn, in order to be able to benefit from what is offered.

Seligman has since turned his attention to strategies for overcoming learned helplessness, "positive psychology" and how to be happy.

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Learned helplessness

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Comments welcome (even needed) please: email James Atherton

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