





Psychology Today



“The essence of mindfulness practice is focusing on one thing in the moment.”

Will Baum, LCSW

- Home
- Find a Therapist
- Topics
- Tests
- Magazine
- Psych Basics
- Blogs
- Diagnosis Dictionary
-
- Search

BLOGS

One Among Many

The self in social context
by Joachim I. Krueger, Ph.D.



Joachim Krueger is a social psychologist at Brown University who believes that rational thinking and socially responsible behavior are attainable goals. [See full bio](#)

Troubles With Determinism

Everything happens for a reason.
Published on January 1, 2009



In my brushes with the [self-help](#) movement, I have repeatedly come across the phrase "Everything happens for a reason" (EHR). I don't know how common this belief is, but it seems to be widespread. At first glance, the EHR belief is an adaptive psychological response to distress. Many people are bothered by the idea of chance, or the lack of a reason. Research has uncovered some of the ways in which people reject the idea of randomness. Many gamblers believe that an odd number at the roulette table becomes more likely after a series of even numbers. Conversely, many basketball aficionados believe that a player who has scored several baskets in a row is now more likely to score again. Another form of chance rejection is the distaste for ambiguity as described by the Ellsberg paradox. Many people rather bet on drawing a red ball from an urn known to contain 50% (or even a smaller percentage of) red balls than from an urn containing an unknown proportion of red balls.

People who deny chance gain a sense of control that feels good and may be adaptive even if it is a bit exaggerated. By the lights of statistical theory, however, the denial of chance is irrational.

Related Articles

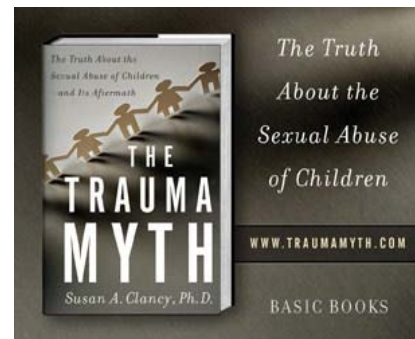
- [Disproving Myself Yesterday, today & tomorrow](#)
- [Guinea Pig Nation Identity, not Identity Theft](#)
- [Better To Have Loved and Lost...](#)

When scientists study how people make judgments under uncertainty, it may seem that the scientists themselves know and accept the idea of chance. I think that this impression is mistaken. Even the scientists who study misperceptions of randomness tend to endorse the doctrine of determinism, which states that every event is caused by prior events. If one knew everything that happened in the past and if one understood the mechanisms of causation, one would know the future. Of course, this implication of determinism is an idealization. In psychology and other sciences, results are usually messy, and scientists settle for a statistical distinction between systematic and random variation in the data. When they refer to chance, they are not necessarily expressing a belief in true, honest-to-goodness randomness. Instead, they are using the term "randomness" as a shortcut description of a jumble of systematic effects that is too complex to be unpacked. In other words, to determinists the notion of randomness is an epistemological trick. It expresses their ignorance of everything that lies beyond the boundaries of their theories.





In a way, believers in EHR seem to be the more principled determinists. They don't use the epistemological crutch of calling chance that which they cannot explain. However, they run into a bigger problem, which is that by denying uncertainty they overexplain the past. No matter how things turn out, they seem obvious in hindsight (an illusion that Baruch Fischhoff calls "creeping determinism").

An even bigger problem has to do with the future. Notice that the word "reason" is ambiguous. It can refer to a cause [lying](#) in the past, like a virus that caused a cold, or it can refer to a goal or some desired end state lying in the future. The idea of a pre-ordained end state is teleological. A believer in EHR may not know the final state of affairs, but will assume that a current event, even (or particularly) an aversive one, is a necessary step toward that state.

Subscribe to One Among Many
[Subscribe via RSS](#)



Recent Posts in One Among Many


-  [Doing one's duty as a counterpoint to destructive obedience](#) by Joachim I. Krueger, Ph.D.
-  [Ignoring a third, dissenting, opinion can lead to bad decisions.](#) by Joachim I. Krueger, Ph.D.
-  [Women choose whom other women choose.](#) by Joachim I. Krueger, Ph.D.
-  [Confidence predicts success, unless you choose your own challenge.](#) by Joachim I. Krueger, Ph.D.

[Positive emotions underlie spirituality.](#) by Joachim I. Krueger, Ph.D.

[More of One Among Many blog](#)

Most Popular Posts

- Most Read
- Most Emailed

- 1 [There Are No Bad Racks](#) by Christopher Peterson, Ph.D.
- 2  [Online Mindfulness Meditation Therapy for PTSD, Boulder Colorado](#) by Peter Strong, Ph.D.
- 3 [Martha Coakley and Modern Witch Hunting - Ritual Child Sexual Abuse](#)

DEPRESSION Is Serious.

Help Your Doctor Help You

Find a Therapist

Search for a mental health professional near you.

City or Zip

Submit

Find Local:

Acupuncturists
Chiropractors
Massage Therapists
Dentists
and more!

City or Zip

Submit

It is the teleological version of the EHR belief that is so attractive in folk psychology. When "stuff happens" (where "stuff" is a euphemistic place holder for the cruder term preferred in the vernacular), the folk psychologist not only rejects the chance hypothesis, but also the causal version of the determinism hypothesis. The problem with the teleological version of the EHR belief is that there is no good reason to think that life necessarily moves toward better things.

Still, there is a grain of wisdom here. We know that humans tend to evaluate events from a narrow perspective. When events occur that disrupt their lives, they are quick to label them "bad." They fail to see (at least at first) that some setbacks are only temporary, and that these setbacks often (though not necessarily) contain the seeds for later success or happiness. If bad events bring a variety of consequences in their wake, chances (!) are that some of these consequences are good ones. The question of "Who knows what this (apparent) misfortune is good for?" recognizes these possibilities.

The problem of determinism is a deep one, and I think that neither scientific nor folk psychology have come to grips with it. In scientific psychology, there is constant friction between deterministic theories, such as behaviorism (or any other theory describing "mechanisms") and theories stressing human agency. What academic psychology seems to be telling us is that human behavior follows scientifically detectable laws and that at the same time we have the power to choose and change apart from these laws.

Folk psychology, as I experienced it in the self-help culture, suffers from a similar paradox. On the one hand, the EHR belief suggests that we look at our past with compassion. We acted the way we did because we did our best and really couldn't have acted differently. On the other hand, the present holds a magical key to agency. After "blessing our past," we can take the opportunity to shape our future. This is an inspiring message, but can it be that we have a free choice now when our past behavior was fully determined? Suppose we walk away from an EHR workshop with new hope and resolve. If, after a year, we notice that we have not changed, we can bless our past again, concluding that we weren't ready to change. If, however, things go well, we can congratulate ourselves on our agency. We end up taking credit for the good and blaming determinism for the bad. Again, this self-serving pattern of attribution may be adaptive, but a partial, one-sided endorsement of determinism doesn't seem rational.

Print

Send to friend



2 Reader comments [join the discussion here!](#)

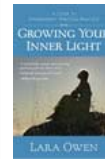
Tags: ambiguity, distaste, ehr, ellsberg paradox, even numbers, first glance, gamblers, honest to goodness, implication, judgments, misperceptions, odd number, psychological response, psychology and other sciences, random variation, roulette table, statistical theory, um



by Stanton Peele

4 [Great Marriages Abound!](#)
by Drs. Charles and Elizabeth Schmitz

5 [Modern Witch Hunters Manifest in Many Forms](#)
by Tamara McClintock Greenberg, Psy.D.



[Growing Your Inner Light](#)
Lara Owen
A comprehensive guide for creating a meaningful, daily, spiritual practice.
[Read more](#)



[Natrol](#)
Guard Your Immunity with Natrol® Immune Boost. Starts working as fast as 2 hours!
[Read more](#)



[Similasan](#)
Find your balance with Similasan Well Being.
[Read more](#)

Current Issue



[Heartbreak and Home Runs: The Power of First Experiences](#)
How early life experiences shape our character.

[MORE FROM THIS ISSUE](#)

[ISSUE ARCHIVES](#)

[SUBSCRIBE](#)

PING HELPS HELP MYSELF ME

click here to learn more >>

Psychology Today
© Copyright Sussex Publishers, LLC

The Therapy Directory [HealthPros.com](#) [BuildingPros.com](#)
© Copyright Sussex Directories, Inc.

[About/Contact](#)
[Privacy Policy](#)
[Site Help/Customer Service](#)
[Terms of Service](#)

[Therapy Directory Index](#)
[Healthpros Index](#)
[Buildingpros Index](#)