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Human Freedom from Perspectives Across the Social Sciences

Almost any academic discipline has something to say about human experience. Anthropology, linguistics, and philosophy all use different tools and methods to tackle what is ultimately the same question – what is the phenomenon of human consciousness made up of and what are its characteristics? To give a full account of human behavior in their answer, each discipline must work out some conception of human freedom, its reach and its limitation. Every academic of these respective disciplines has their own ideas, so it is best to focus on one in each to gain better insight into how they would answer this question. In anthropology, Ruth Benedict focuses on how culture promotes and obstructs various personality traits, or *potentialities*. The more an individuals’ personality traits are acceptable in their society, the more freedom they have to take the actions they want. In the world of linguistics, Benjamin Whorf argues that it is how the structure of the language of a society conceives of *things* and *events* that determines how people interact with the world, and therefore determines how people interact with the world, and therefore, determines freedom. What limits freedom then is the particularities of the language spoken by an individual. In philosophy, Michel Foucault sees freedom as something that starts with the institutional manipulation of *discourses* through power and is the result of the influence those discourses then have on the ways a human can possibly act within those discursive guidelines. Although all three authors have an equally comprehensive conception of human freedom and its origins, the structures that they use from their field (culture, language, and power, respectively) increasingly place limitations on freedom, from Benedict’s vague idea of the cultural selection of potentialities to Foucault’s strict, always present, and all-encompassing discourses.

Throughout her account of several North American indigenous cultures, Benedict develops a notion of human experience that focuses on personality. Subsequently, an implicit definition of human freedom is derived from the particularities of each culture, how they select for certain personalities over others. Benedict views each person as having a place on “the great arc of potential human purposes and motivations” (Benedict 1934:3225\*). Therefore, human behavior and experience originate predominantly from a predetermined set of personalities that prescribe potentialities. From this we can gather that Benedict’s notion of freedom is the simplistic idea of people fulfilling their potentialities by acting out their desires to their own ability. It is important to note that Benedict argues that human action, and subsequently freedom, only exists in its cultural context. She specifically states that “no individual can arrive even at the threshold of [their] potentialities without a culture in which [they participate]” (Benedict 1934:3427). This shows how her conception of freedom cannot be separated from culture, which will be important in discussing how culture limits freedom.

Benedict accounts for how freedom is restricted in the least strict way out of the three authors being discussed. This is because the restrictions on freedom come from the very same vague notion of culture that freedom is tied to. This occurs in a process of selection, where certain potentialities are favored over others. Benedict says that out that arc of human potentialities, every society selects just a few and then “its institutions tend to further the expression of its selected segment and to inhibit opposite expressions” (Benedict 1934:3437-3438). Those with acceptable personalities are liberated, allowing them to fulfill their potentialities to their fullest, while those with personalities that are less accepted have this freedom limited. To explain why all cultures filter personalities in the processing of promoting some over others, Benedict’s notion of culture most be looked at in more detail. To put it succinctly, Benedict views a “culture, like an individual, [as] a more or less consistent pattern of thought and action” (Benedict 1934:761). To focus first on how individuals are patterned, it’s clearly just a rephrasing of the idea of human freedom being the constant ability to fulfill ones’ potentialities. She parallels this with society overall, which explains why each society, just like each individual, selects out of the arc of potentialities. The limitations on freedom imposed by the institutions of a society are the least strict of any author because individuals are still free to fulfill their potentialities as much as they can, even if doing so will be met with great scrutiny. This is unique to her theory because the limitations on freedom are solely restrictive whereas the other theories view limitations as generative; creating the potentials, not selecting for them out of a predetermined set. The skepticism Benedict gives to the rigidity of her ideas is immediately clear by the amount of vague language that she uses when discussing them. As just a single example, when she talks about the patterning of culture, she uses the phrase “more or less” (Benedict 1934:761). Considering she recognizes this instead of putting forth the sentiment that her theory is rigid, Benedict doubtlessly has a comprehensive and legitimate conception of human freedom grounded in an anthropological base.

Benjamin Whorf, a linguist, also sees human freedom as something determined by patterns, but instead of patterns of action it is patterns of language. Since Whorf does not formulate an explicit theory of freedom on his own, his ideas on language must first be dissected. According to Whorf, when humans think about the world in a processing of making sense out of it, they do so through a linguistic lens. This is because all we receive from the world is percepts gathered by our senses, which our mind must work to make sense of. This is a linguistic because the mind processes information through thought, and individuals think in their own language (Hull 2017). Out of this general psycholinguistic theory, an implicit idea of freedom can be formed. After giving several examples of the link between language and action, Whorf explains that “a certain line of behavior is often given by the analogies of the linguistic formula in which the situation is spoken of” (Whorf 1939:365). This essentially explains freedom as the ability to take actions based on what one understands about the world. Whorf sees all acts as directly influenced by language since there is no other way to interpret, and subsequently interact with, the world.

The limitations placed on freedom are therefore quite a bit stricter than Benedict’s since they are generative. This notion is derived from Whorf’s extensive linguistic research with the Hopi language. In Hopi, things and events are conceptualized in drastically different ways than in Standard Average European, or SAE, which means that the way Hopi interpret the world, and therefore choose their actions, is different. These differences in action because of the differences in language are what Whorf calls habitual behavior, and it can be thought of as the main structural limitation on freedom in his theory. Whorf delves into an example on how the Hopi people have a habitual behavior of focus preparing for events with a great deal more effort than most groups of SAE speakers. This, in part, originates from the fact that verb and noun characterization in Hopi emphasizes the conscious availability of things and events to ones’ senses (Hull 2017). This leads to a focus on “the intensity-factor of thought,” which is the origin of several habitual behaviors, from good-willed preparation for events to the actual events themselves, like how “thought power is the force behind ceremonies” (Whorf 1939:373). In an abstract way, the way that the Hopi language influences the habitual behavior of the Hopi people shows how their freedom is limited. Benedict may have seen this as a societal selection for people with personalities that tend to be well prepared and well intentioned, forcing individuals to abide by the cultural norms. Whorf sees this habit as something that was generated by the structure of the Hopi language. In fact, this limitation is even more strict than Benedict’s because it may be much more difficult for a speaker of Hopi to even conceive of thought as something insignificant due to the high levels of importance thought receives through language in every aspect of life.

Michel Foucault sees freedom as originating through something quite similar to language, something he calls discourses. Like Benedict, Foucault never sees individuals in modern society as lone actors, but as participants in a social group. This is because every single individual in a society is a product of power, which constantly “produces reality” by creating “domains of objects and rituals of truth,” which the “individual and the knowledge that may be gained of” (Foucault 1975:205) them belongs to. This positive notion of power means that all human action is determined by what is made possible by those objects and truths prescribed by power. Therefore, for Foucault, the origins of freedom lie in the social group. This can be explained in slightly different terms when Foucault refers to the soul. To Foucault, “the soul is the prison of the body” (Foucault 1975:30) because all actions and movements of the body are dictated by a soul, on which has “been built scientific techniques and discourses, and the moral claims of humanism” (Foucault 1975:30). The construction of the is a process led by power. This soul-body duality is another way of showing that the origins of human freedom are a result of how the mind is essentially created by the powers within a social group.

Power to Foucault is the simultaneously the origin and limitation of every action a human can conceive of. Power has its hold on individuals through its influence on discourse. Foucault gives an example of this through discussion of law-making during the early period of the modern criminal justice system, when many stories of “great criminals [were] celebrated in the almanacs, broadsheets, and popular tales” (Foucault 1975:112). The power-wielding, law-making institutions of the time used “the recording of punishment” to make the crime “no longer appear as anything but a misfortune and the criminal as an enemy,” which shows how “discourse [became] the vehicle of the law” (Foucault 1975:112). This is just one of many examples how power uses discourses not to prevent behavior, but to alter the source, changing how individuals think, and ultimately behave. Since power works through discourses, and discourses are what make possible various ways of being (ways of acting) through altering peoples’ minds, power is a positive, constructive force in Foucault’s view. This is how power limits freedom to Foucault, and since it is generative, just like Whorf’s linguistic theory, it is extremely strict. In fact, it is stricter than Whorf’s theory because although one can easily imagine the structures of quite different languages and form habits accordingly, Foucault’s discourses eliminate even the possibility of acting or thinking in ways that power decides to exclude.

The generative approaches to human freedom, that see their respective structures of focus as creating action instead of just forcefully limiting it, are stricter in how free humans can be. Particularly, Foucault’s philosophical and all-encompassing notion of discourse is by far the most restrictive in that the origin and restriction of freedom is one in the same. Although all three authors covered take on the question of human freedom from different fields and disciplines, they still share some common ground. Although none of them explicitly define human freedom, it can always be implicit defined by looking at how they outline human action and experience. Furthermore, none of them have entirely contradicting theories, and considering they’re all equally legitimate ideas, a synthesis could doubtlessly be formed from them. This may be simply because they are each using such different perspectives to tackle the problem.

**Citations**

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