The Truman Experiment

External influences challenge free will

BY ELIZABETH NECKA
Columnist

Humans make sense of their world by assuming that behind all behaviors lies intent.

There's a fundamental supposition of rational behavior or, at least well-thought-out behavior. When your sleep schedule suffers, it's easy for an outsider to say, "Why did you choose to take on so many responsibilities?" Or let's say you are uncomfortable with your body — it's easy for someone to say, "Why don't you go to the gym more often?" It's easy to ask a friend, still torn up about a long-past break-up, "Why are you still letting him get to you?" But I'm not convinced that we consciously control all, if any, of our behaviors.

Is that too strong of a statement? It challenges the idea of free will, an idea I believe in. But look to the research of neuropsychology or evolutionary psychology, and it becomes evident how much of our behavior is determined by factors outside of our control. For example, a person's innate levels of a gene which helps grow brain cells predicts how much he or she will dwell on or replay a situation in one's mind. A woman's flirting behavior unconsciously changes depending on where she is in her cycle.

Biology and evolution aside, even subtle cues in our environment can affect our behavior without our conscious awareness. A series of studies by researchers at New York University suggest that some behavior is automatic and innately derived from our behavioral schemas, which are prey to external influences. Behavioral schemas are mental associations of behaviors that form a mental network. For example, a friendly behavioral scheme would consist of behaviors such as waving hello to a friend across the Quad, smiling at a stranger or making pleasant small talk when first meeting a friend's significant other. External stimuli can trigger which behavioral schema is activated within your brain and therefore characterizes the type of behavior you will exhibit.

In one of the NYU researchers' study, published in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1996, subjects played with a word scramble consisting of a string of five

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words ("they her send see usually"), four of which could be rearranged into a sentence. The subjects were divided into three groups: In one group, the word not used in the sentence was neutral (in the first example, "send"), in one group it was polite ("they her respect see usually") and in one group it was rude ("they her bother see usually"). The researchers were subtly priming for polite or rude behavioral schema. Although the influence was preconscious, subjects in the rude condition were more likely to interrupt a researcher who was in fake conversation with a actor to ask what the next step in the experiment was than those who were in the polite and neutral condition. In fact, nearly two-thirds of the rude subjects interrupted, compared to approximately 20 percent of the polite subjects.

Similarly, when primed with "elderly" words and traits ("they her wrinkle see usually"), subjects took longer to walk down the hallway to an elevator when leaving the experiment than those who were in the neutral condition. The difference in walking time, although only about a second, was a statistically significant difference between the two groups. It appears that when triggered to think of the elderly, slowness — a behavioral construct typically associated with being old — was triggered and subtly leaked into subjects' behaviors.

True, the research emphasizes that this influence is subtle. While external stimuli may activate certain behavioral schemas, these schemas don't make us do things we wouldn't already have done, given the context of the situation. Rather, the schemas affect the way we do something we were already intending to do. It makes sense that the rude subjects would interrupt the researcher — they intended to complete the experiment, and the priming changed the way they approached completion. It wouldn't make sense if they then left the experiment and decided to blow off lunch plans with a friend because they were feeling rude.

Self-Perception Theory says that we behave in a certain way and then examine our actions to decide what we must believe. So if we buy at the farmers market, for example, then we must support the local economy. This is counterintuitive as, again, our human rationale is that our behavior is controlled by our conscious decisions and not the other way around.

Are humans really that simple, though? What about individual differences? If our behavior was really so outside of our conscious control, all of the people in the same "rude group" would have responded the same way and interrupted the researcher. The ability to self-regulate and self-control, one person responding differently to the same stimuli across different situations, hints at free will. Perhaps some actions are less free than others, but the freedom exists to some degree. It's important to recognize that some facets of behavior are outside of our control because it helps to explain the things we can't even understand about ourselves. But it's not a steadfast rule.

Given the overwhelming reports that much of our behavior is outside of our conscious control, why do I still believe in free will? I'm playing my own devil's advocate with myself in this column. I'm challenging myself to find more concrete support for my beliefs, although the issue of free will may be too philosophical to be "solved" with scientific empirical data. I echo the words of William James, one of the founders of American psychology: "My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will."

"Megamind" is a megahit

"Megamind"

★★★★☆

BY KEN DUSOLD
Staff Reviewer

Each of us has a favorite superhero, whether it is the "Man of Steel" or "Spidey." However, villains seem to intrigue us even more. We love to see them, even when they are being pulverized by our hero or ironically setting up their own downfall. The public loves a bad guy.

DreamWorks Animation has taken note of this and, following in the steps of Universal Studios' "Despicable Me" from this summer, developed a story about a supervillain in "Megamind."

Will Ferrell opens the film with a voice-over narration, providing both a sneak peek at the film's climax and a humorous flashback sequence. At this point, we meet and become familiarized with how the evil and very blue Megamind (voiced by Ferrell) and his inherently strong, debonair and good-guy nemesis, Metro Man (Brad Pitt), came to be on Earth and fighting over Metro City. From the moment the voice-over begins, the parallels with the original "Superman" film become apparent. The self-deprecation on the part of Megamind is a good sign for a film parodying one of the greatest examples of over-the-top acting and romance in film history.

Megamind, whose rivalry with Metro Man begins when they are just days old and whirling through space away from their home planets' destructions, is raised in a prison where inmates teach him about their views on what is right and wrong. Metro Man, of course, grows up amid fabulous wealth, becomes popular and bullies the poor blue alien. Bullying leads to loneliness and the eventual realization for Megamind that evil might be his best chance at winning attention. The cute and universal morals to the story are not new but remain cute and universal, so no harm is done in adding them to a picture targeted at audiences under the age of seven.

Like Lois Lane, Roxanne Ritchi (Tina Fey) is always present to report on the ongoing battle between the two super-beings. Joined by her cameraman, Hal (Jonah Hill), Roxanne quite often happens to be part of the story herself. Megamind routinely kidnaps the spunky and sarcastic heroine with the assistance of his sidekick — the aptly named Minion (David Cross) — and threatens to harm her unless Metro Man agrees to leave town. As is required of all good-guy-versus-bad-guy scenarios, Metro Man saves her and the cycle repeats. As many of us lowly humans know, routines can get boring, so to shake the story up, a new being with super powers arises from the pits of mediocrity just as Megamind is faced with the nagging possibility that he is destined for something other than evil.

The film's plot is not the most original concept in DreamWorks' successful history, but it is refreshing nonetheless. The script provides Ferrell with generous amounts of witty quips and dialogue. Not normally an obvious choice for a family-friendly movie, Ferrell's childlike and strangely comforting voice is perfect for the protagonist.

Director Tom McGrath earns bonus points for leaving no available comedic stone unturned. Slapstick humor is well-used, as in a sequence when Megamind quickly takes the form of a museum curator to save himself the embarrassment of being caught by Roxanne wearing kiddie pajamas, and then safely placing her into a cab just seconds before the museum blows up behind him. This form of humor is mixed with the occasional farcical homage, as when Megamind takes on the holographic form of actor Marlon Brando's version of Jor-El (Superman's father) from the

Photo courtesy of megamind.com

Will Ferrell provides the voice of the protagonist villain, Megamind, in what could be Toy Story 3's biggest animated competitor of the year.

classic 1978 hit.

The film does suffer from one major flaw: It was filmed in 3-D. While this effect is more appropriate in an animated feature like "Megamind" than a live-action movie, it still dilutes the vibrancy of the color and magnitude of the artistry that is otherwise present. McGrath's choice to use 3-D was possibly motivated by money. At $10 per ticket, DreamWorks should see a decent return. However, its presence hurts the film's aesthetic quality.

Ignoring the 3-D effects (which is pretty difficult to do if you have glasses to begin with), "Megamind" is a terrific addition to this year's collection of animated works, arguably the biggest competition "Toy Story 3" will have during awards season. With such proof suggesting they still have creative and entertaining ideas, perhaps we can take this as a good sign that the folks at DreamWorks officially have closed the aging "Shrek" saga for good.