

Committed Social Psychology

MICHAEL BILLIG

Loughborough University, UK

Committed social psychology refers to those social psychological approaches that aim to expose and change the existing power relations in the world in order to improve the lives of those who suffer psychologically as a result of disadvantage. Committed social psychologists claim that mainstream social psychology is inadequate for this task because it concentrates on analyzing interpersonal relations rather than relating psychological issues to wider structures of power. Since committed social psychologists criticize orthodox social psychology, they often refer to themselves as critical social psychologists. Their aim is intellectually and politically wider than applying existing theories to social problems.

The classic piece of committed social psychological research was conducted in 1931–1932 by Marie Jahoda, Paul Lazarsfeld, and Hans Zeisel, who were in the Institute of Psychology at the University of Vienna. They looked at the social and psychological consequences of unemployment in Marienthal, a small town near Vienna with almost 100 percent unemployment (Jahoda, Lazarsfeld, and Zeisel, 2002 [1933]). The study contained three features that would characterize later committed social psychology. First, the researchers were politically active; they supported the “Austro-Marxism” of the Social Democrat Party, which officially backed the project. Second, the researchers were determined to provide tangible benefits to the community, offering educational classes and social services to the community. Third, the researchers used qualitative interviews to enable the unemployed to speak directly about their lives.

Many years later, Marie Jahoda (1982) suggested that the Marienthal project benefited because it was not driven by existing theory or methodology. Instead, the researchers looked directly at the social world of Marienthal, immersing themselves

in the community and devising their own ways to demonstrate the devastating economic and psychological effects of unemployment. At that time, social psychology was comparatively undeveloped and consequently the researchers were not faced by a body of mainstream work that needed to be criticized. As such, the project was not strictly speaking a piece of critical social psychology, but it set standards for later work.

Superficially, the Marienthal project resembles the action research of Kurt Lewin, the so-called father of social psychology. However, there are differences. Lewin, who conducted experiments examining the effects of authoritarian and democratic leadership, was not studying actual communities. Also, Lewin was deeply interested in formulating social psychological theory, especially mathematically based field theory. Lewin's followers within mainstream social psychology discarded his field theory but maintained his goal of constructing universal theories which apply to all people. For instance, the theory of cognitive dissonance assumes that everyone, regardless of cultural and social background, is motivated to reduce dissonance. Critical social psychologists have rejected this assumption of universality because it fails to demonstrate how specific forms of social inequality produce particular psychological problems.

There is an important difference between the Marienthal study and today's critical psychology. Nowadays, critical social psychologists tend not to produce theory-free research but use ideas from feminist, Marxist, postcolonial, and antiessentialist theories in their work (e.g., Gough and McFadden, 2013; Sloan, 2000). Mainstream experimentalists, by contrast, tend to see such critical theories as undermining the so-called scientific and neutral status of social psychology.

Like the Marienthal researchers, critical social psychologists seek practical ways to assist and to give voice to the disadvantaged. In her book *Just Research in Contentious Times*, Michelle Fine (2018) describes her research as listening to the smothered voices of those who are marginalized, such as the white working class of the United States, women in prison, children

of color attending underfunded schools, and Muslim Americans living in an atmosphere of Islamophobia. Similarly, in Central and South America, liberation psychology has aimed to give voice to the poor (Montero and Sonn, 2009).

There is no single way of doing committed social psychology. Projects tend to be bottom-up: The researchers begin with a specific social problem and then adapt methodologies to study that problem. In this regard, committed social psychological research, at its best, still upholds the traditions of Marienthal.

SEE ALSO: Action Research; Lazarsfeld, Paul (1901–1976); Lewin, Kurt (1890–1947); Social Psychology; Social Psychology, Applied

References

- Fine, M. (2018) *Just Research in Contentious Times*, Teachers College Press, New York.
- Gough, B. and McFadden, M. (2013) *Critical Social Psychology*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.
- Jahoda, M. (1982) Reflections on Marienthal. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 65, 355–358.
- Jahoda, M., Lazarsfeld, P.F., and Zeisel, H. (2002 [1933]) *Marienthal: The Sociography of an Unemployed Community*, Transaction, New Brunswick, NJ.
- Montero, M. and Sonn, C. (eds) (2009) *Psychology of Liberation*, Springer, New York.
- Sloan, T. (ed.) (2000) *Critical Psychology*, Macmillan, Basingstoke.