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A critical comparison of Cognitive Social Psychology and Discursive Social Psychology.

By Damian E M Milton

The methods used by social scientists are inextricably linked to the theoretical foundations that underpin their practices. The practical methodological strategies employed by researchers are thus informed by ontological (nature of reality) and epistemological (how knowledge is claimed) arguments pertaining to the nature of lived reality. Taylor (2007) states that throughout the twentieth century, the dominant paradigm in Social Psychology was that of the Cognitive perspective, with the largest amount of funding dedicated to it, the largest number of published research articles, and the largest number of practicing academics. This 'mainstream' paradigm echoed the dominance found in all social science research by 'positivist' scientific method. This essay contrasts the theoretical and methodological differences between the Cognitive Social Psychological paradigm and that of Discursive Social Psychology, a far more recent set of ideas and concepts that emerged far more recently in psychological debate and which is often represented as highly 'critical' of the positivist mainstream.

Early psychologists attempted to establish psychological principles and early experiments tended to focus on 'measurable' phenomena such as perception and memory. These methods were also used by psychologists to question a broad range of social psychological questions, focusing on the individual as the 'object' of their analysis (Moede, 1920; Allport, 1924, cited in Holloway, 2007a). The early dominant paradigm in psychology was that of Behaviourism, yet this was usurped by the Cognitive paradigm in the latter part of the 20th century.

Two main traditions can be found within the Cognitive Social Psychological perspective. The first (based largely on American Psychological Social Psychology – PSP) frames the individual as having limited cognitive resources to implement at any time (the 'cognitive miser'). The ontological assumption being that these cognitive thought processes shape the social world. The second based on European Social Identity theory (Tajfel, cited in Holloway, 2007a) where cognitions are seen to be structured by group membership (thus involving more of an interaction between the influence of the individual and society).

The Cognitive perspective attempts to look for the causes of behaviour, by testing the causal role of controllable and measurable variables; primarily using quantifiable methods of data collection and using standardised statistical techniques to analyse the potentially significant patterns and correlations in the data and highlight possible causal effects. A controlled environment is seen as necessary to isolate the effects of particular causal interventions. In order to isolate variables, the Cognitive perspective is deliberately reductionist in order to rule out other possibilities of causal relations. The preferred method of investigation is therefore the experiment. Participants are unaware of the experimental manipulation of

variables, which can only be explained in a debriefing (raising an ethical issue of deception). Due to ethical concerns being raised over a number of studies, it is now necessary to seek ethical approval for research, where deception is minimised and participants have the right to withdraw their data from resultant research findings.

Perhaps due to various criticisms made concerning the ecological validity of experimental studies, Cognitive theorists have also employed experiments in field settings, set up to look at certain issues within a naturally occurring environment. Methodologies such as surveys, case studies and combining qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques are also used.

Alongside the development of the 'mainstream' scientific tradition, a number of competing paradigms were evolving within the social sciences that took an emancipatory view to research, such as Marxism and Feminism. Stainton Rodgers (2001) argued that feminist research challenged the 'malestream' epistemology of what constituted knowledge (including the pathologising of femininity); and was explicitly political in advocating for radical social change. Also, in America, there was the development of 'Sociological Social Psychology' (SSP or 'micro-sociology') based on symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934; Goffman, 1959; and Becker, 1963; cited in Holloway, 2007a); and the ethnomethodology of Garfinkel (1967, cited in Holloway, 2007a). These theorists argued that society preceded the individual and that the self was formed in the process of interaction. These developments were then followed by the 'linguistic turn' in philosophy and the establishment of a 'new paradigm'. The 'post-structuralism' of writers such as Foucault (1970, cited in Holloway, 2007a) argued that theory and claims to knowledge were forms of situated discourse, embedded in wider cultural practices. For Foucault (1970, cited in Holloway, 2007a), social behaviour is a discursive activity that leads to the construction of meaning. Not only did these theories problematise the individualism of Cognitive theories, but also the idea of a social agent acting upon an autonomous will.

Due to the critiques proffered by the variety of theoretical views that developed in Europe and America, there was said to be a 'crisis' in mainstream social psychology in the 1970's. Some criticised the use of deception and the reductionist findings of experimental research (Silverman, 1977, cited in Holloway, 2007a), whilst others criticised the individualist stance of Cognitive models, leading to a cultural discourse of individual responsibility for success and failure (Sampson, 1977, cited in Holloway, 2007a).

Stainton-Rodgers (2003, cited in Taylor, 2007) argued that 'critical' theorists had challenged the use of experimental methods and championed interpretive methodology, to the point that these represented two clearly segregated camps. Taylor (2007) suggests that a pivotal aspect of experimental methodology is the use of 'control' which models the world according to variables. This can be contrasted to discursive social psychology that emphasises the multi-factorial, overlapping, contradictory and complex nature of social phenomena. Prilleltensky and Nelson (2002, cited in Taylor, 2007) argue that taking a 'critical' perspective is more of an approach than a field of study. For Gill (2003, cited in Taylor, 2007), this involves a political project and a participatory epistemological stance

toward research 'participants'. The idea that binds the plethora of critical theories in unity is that objectivity is not possible within social research. This can be contrasted to the positivist assertion that value-free research in the social sciences is not only possible, but seen as a standard of credibility.

Influenced by Foucault (1970, cited in Holloway, 2007a) and the American SSP tradition, Potter and Wetherell (1987, cited in Holloway, 2007a) utilised discourse analysis as a method in Social Psychology. As an example, they used the concept of 'attitude', instead of locating this concept in the mind; they argued that attitudes were not fixed, but changeable upon context. They suggested that people employ 'interpretive repertoires' amassed from their surrounding culture to explain social reality. Potter and Wetherell (1987, cited in Holloway, 2007b) criticised the use of the Likert Scale (1932, cited in Holloway, 2007b), popular in psychometric testing, by arguing that when participants read a statement, they are not commenting upon the same 'object of thought', thus findings from such results are not generalisable. The kind of knowledge produced by Likert Scales was thus seen as limiting the complexity of human expression and as potentially producing false universals.

Discursive Social Psychology takes its inspiration from the work of post-structuralists and SSP. The ontological assertions made by this perspective frame the individual and the social world as constituted through discourse and social practices; and challenges the 'essentialist' notion that personhood is a fixed and ongoing phenomenon, or that social reality is in some way 'out there' and analysable prior to human constructions of it. Thus DSP is not interested in the underlying 'causes' of human social action. Individuals within discourses are positioned in shifting relations of power. According to this perspective, power permeates every human relationship, yet is not absolute. For Foucault (1970, cited in Holloway, 2007a), people develop their identities located within a cultural context, rather than being perceived as separate from it. By stating this argument, Foucault (1970, cited in Holloway, 2007a) challenged the traditional polar dualism of causation of phenomena being embedded within either the individual or social structure.

The main methodological focus in Discursive Social Psychology, is the analysis of the construction of meaning through 'talk' and 'text' and the cultural resources that individuals draw upon, in order to make sense of a complex social reality. The dominant method of DSP is 'discourse analysis', which involves analysing how people draw upon existent discourses to frame their identities and build 'interpretive repertoires' for understanding the social world. Within these repertoires, subject positions are taken up, therefore researchers are also committed to reflecting upon their own positionality. Discursive social psychologists challenge the ontological status of language being reflective of 'inner states'. Contrasting the Cognitive perspective, identity is seen as an active/interactive process, where discourses are challenged by others and individuals occupy 'shifting' and flexible identities.

The once dominant position occupied by positivist social science may have been permanently displaced by the 'linguistic turn' and thus the 'mainstream' has started to 'shift'. It is rare in the cotemporary climate for knowledge produced by research to claim ideological neutrality. Knowledge is primarily seen as situated within paradigmatic

philosophical considerations, motivating many to adopt a 'post-positivist' or 'mixed methods realist' approach, applying whatever method pragmatically 'best' answers the question asked. The methodological distinction between 'mainstream' and 'critical' theory begins to erode, when both utilise a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods.

In conclusion, it is the philosophical rather than necessarily methodological differences between the social psychological perspectives that demarcate their boundaries. Having said this, both 'mainstream' and 'critical' social psychology have developed by critiquing each other; and as methodological divides begin to erode, the theoretical divide has also begun to narrow, bringing into question the usefulness of the 'mainstream' versus 'critical' divide. Perhaps, the biggest difference remaining between the perspectives is of an ethical nature, with 'critical' theorists explicitly highlighting power relations embedded in knowledge production and the advocacy of alternative voices. This essay has shown a powerful relationship exists between the methods used by researchers and the knowledge they produce. 'Critical' theory explicitly emphasises power relations in order to try to advocate for and improve the lives of marginalised groups in society; and have critiqued Cognitive models for reifying and perpetuating existing power relations; including that between researcher and participant (Taylor, 2007). Discursive social psychology situates itself within a critical stance by emphasising the socially situated nature of their interpretations and their resistance to attempts to establish universal 'truth' and indeed problematise the very notion of normality.

References

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