

A discussion of the methodological differences between mainstream and critical social psychology with reference to the cognitive social and the phenomenological perspective

by Patricia Karsten

Social psychology can be seen as a discipline divided into two different camps – mainstream and critical social psychology. Mainstream social psychology has its historical roots in the scientific tradition, dominated by the experimental and quantitative approaches, as for example in the cognitive social perspective. Manifold criticism against the methodology, but also against the underlying theoretical assumptions of mainstream social psychology led to the emergence of ‘critical’ social psychology, which is rooted in a philosophical tradition and has become particularly strong in Europe and the U.K. Critical social psychology developed a qualitative, non-experimental methodology, as for example in the discursive, the social psychoanalytic and the phenomenological perspectives, which aim at exploring subjective meanings (Hollway 2007a). Contrasting the cognitive social and the phenomenological perspectives shall highlight the ways in which different methods are a consequence of the different methodologies, different theories about the person (ontology), and different ideas about what constitutes knowledge (epistemology) adopted by mainstream versus critical social psychology.

As representative for the mainstream approach to social psychology, the cognitive social perspective focuses on the experimental method when researching social psychological issues. Social psychological experiments are typically conducted in a laboratory, aiming at controlling the social setting in which variables are manipulated to assess their effects on a behavioural outcome. For example, in an experiment in the context of psychology of space, the effect of an individual’s ability to control its environment on intellectual performance was assessed (Haslam and Knight 2006, DVD 1, DD307). It was found that performance in the two experimental tasks was best when participants were allowed to decorate the experimental room to their liking, and worse if they were first allowed to decorate, but then had the room re-arranged by the experimenter. The performance deterioration was interpreted as resulting from the challenge to participants’ identities immanent in the act of re-decorating their room, suggesting the generalization that intellectual performance benefits from individuals’ agency to control their environment.

This research example illustrates how the cognitive social perspective focuses on individual cognition influenced by social settings, and how it aims at acquiring knowledge by controlling and manipulating these settings, following the paradigm of the scientific method (Hollway 2007b). Outcomes are quantitatively analyzed using statistical methods. Findings from this type of research are valuable, but critical social psychologists have argued that the experimental method and statistical techniques cannot capture the richness and complexity of many social psychological phenomena, resulting in severe limitations to the research that can be conducted in this perspective and to the types of knowledge that can be gained from it (Danziger 1996, as cited in Hollway 2007b). Consequently, critical social psychology developed a different methodology, centred around qualitative approaches that intend to explore meaning and discourse, based on the assumption that social phenomena are created through the interplay of social actors, instead of locating them inside an individual’s cognition.

This approach leads to different types of research questions, which necessitate different research methods. In the phenomenological perspective for example, the focus is on exploring the ‘lived

Citation: Karsten, Patricia (2010) A discussion of the methodological differences between mainstream and critical social psychology with reference to the cognitive social and the phenomenological perspective, from <http://www.patriciakarsten.com>

experience' of individuals. In research interviews, participants are encouraged to give detailed accounts of their personal emotions and experiences related to the phenomenon of interest. This approach makes it possible to gain rich knowledge about qualitative aspects of human social experiences, but it requires the researcher to set aside as much as possible his prior conceptions about the issue under investigation, and to open himself to another person's world, a process called 'Epoché' (Langdrige 2008).

To illustrate, in a study about multiple sclerosis, phenomenologist Linda Finlay reports the experiences of a mother who had a slight numbness in her fingertips, which would typically be seen as a relatively mild symptom. But when the person described that she was no longer able to feel her baby's skin properly when she touched the baby's face, it became clear that the seemingly minor impairment profoundly disrupted that person's emotional world. Setting aside prior understandings about the relative importance of certain impairments made it possible to gain deeper understanding about the real nature of the person's experience (Finlay 2006, DVD1, DD307). From this example, it also becomes evident how the researcher, through his role as an interviewer, is part of the process of producing the findings and thus exerts an important influence on the research results. Qualitative approaches like the phenomenological perspective explicitly acknowledge this aspect by being reflexive about the role of the researcher in producing knowledge (Hollway 2007b).

Critical social psychology thus interprets the researcher's role in terms of a power relation (Hollway 2007a). In this view, the researcher frames participants' responses right from the beginning by informing them about the aims of his research, a consequence of ethical requirements which are the basis for informed consent to participation. This leads to 'demand characteristics', as participants may try to respond in a way they think is important for the research, possibly leaving out aspects they consider of 'only personal relevance' or where they fear they will not be understood. Then there is the power of the researcher that lies in his interpretation of participants' responses, in selecting and emphasizing those aspects he deems important, when presenting the results of the research. The power of the researcher is rather visible in qualitative research, but it equally applies to quantitative and experimental approaches, where traditionally the researcher has been seen as neutral, merely uncovering facts that exist independently of the researcher himself. But in devising experimental settings, designing experimental tasks and interpreting statistical findings lies similar power to influence the knowledge that is produced.

For example, from Milgram's well-known experimental research regarding obedience to authority, it has been reported that depending on the conditions, up to 65% of the participants were ready to administer lethal electric shocks to a third person when told to do so in an attempt to aid that person's learning. Luckily, the experiment was based on deception of participants, and the third person was a stooge who did not suffer any harm. The results were interpreted as evidence for a generalized finding that ordinary men would act excruciatingly cruel when 'obliged' to do so (Milgram 1977, as cited in Hollway 2007b). But in deceiving participants about the aims and nature of the research, by devising a setting where many participants complied to the instructions that were given, and by presenting the experiment's results without discussing why many (more than 35%) participants did not obey despite the authority of the research situation, the enormous influence of the researcher upon the knowledge produced becomes apparent.

In critical social psychology, the importance of situating knowledge appropriately is therefore emphasized. Milgram's experiment and methodological choices needs to be seen in its historical

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and societal context, as it took place in the United States and was motivated by the desire in the aftermath of the second world war to better understand how the attempted genocide of Jews and other people could have taken place in Germany under Hitler and the Nazi Regime. At the time of the experiment, scientific knowledge was seen as valuable beyond ethical considerations about the well-being of participants, despite observations about the considerable emotional stress they underwent during the experiment (Hollway 2007b). But experiments like these have promoted the discussion about research ethics. In conjunction with societal changes, the ethical climate has changed, and psychological research is now under close scrutiny of ethics committees, with the aim of protecting participants from undue stress. Ethical considerations would require methodological changes, which might nowadays effectively prohibit research like Milgram's obedience to authority experiment. It can be assumed that different types of knowledge will result from methodologically adapted, ethically appropriate studies (quantitative or qualitative) which today aim to further explore obedience to authority.

Mainstream and critical social psychology also differ with respect to their assumptions about the causes and responsibility for social psychological phenomena, reflecting the North American distinction between Psychological Social Psychology (PSP) and Sociological Social Psychology (SSP). PSP and mainstream social psychology both focus on the individual, searching for psychological explanations, whereas SSP and critical social psychology see the interaction of individual and society as a driving force, with a preference for sociological explanations (Hollway 2007a). These different positions regarding the individual – society dualism have corresponding differences when it comes to explaining in how far an individual has the power to construct his life within limitations of societal restrictions.

But although the individualistic PSP position generally assumes more agency than the society-oriented SSP view, methodological boundaries between the camps with respect to the agency-structure theme are not clear-cut. For example, cognitive social studies like the above cited identity in space experiment acknowledge and explore the impact of different social settings, while phenomenological research focuses on the individual perspective of lived experiences. The different methodological choices of mainstream and critical social psychology thus cannot be associated directly to either individualistic or structuralistic explanations, rather they reflect the different epistemological positions regarding what is considered knowledge and how it can be gained.

To summarize, the main methodological difference between mainstream and critical social psychology is that between a quantitative, experimental approach in the scientific tradition and a qualitative, meaning-oriented approach in the philosophical, hermeneutic tradition. These differences in epistemology go along with different ontologies, where the cognitive social perspective understands the person in terms of individual cognition influenced by social settings, whereas the phenomenological perspective focuses on lived, embodied experience as central to a person's identity. Consequently, mainstream and critical social psychology employ different methods which result in very different types of knowledge.

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