

Phenomenology and social psychoanalysis theories



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

- Darrin Paul

Discuss the idea that phenomenology and social psychoanalysis provide both unique and useful contributions to social psychology. Illustrate your essay with examples of research or topics from at least two different blocks of the module.

Part 1

Within social psychology there are a considerable number of social psychological perspectives that adopt different theoretical frameworks in order to study how social factors and processes influence human behaviour. This essay will focus on two such perspectives, phenomenology and social psychoanalytic by outlining their unique aims, theoretical and methodological features and the knowledge's they produce. By incorporating research findings and psychological topics, consideration will be given to how each perspective has influenced and expanded psychological understanding by challenging mainstream cognitive social experimental approaches.

The diverse origins of social psychology have led to a historical development in which similar psychological processes are studied and analysed within different theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches by a diverse range of social psychologists. Experimental social psychology originated in the early twentieth century from the scientific tradition which formulated that certain natural laws of behaviour and consciousness can be discovered through scientific measurement and experimentation, which produces data that can be generalised and applied to all people across time.

The Cognitive social perspective which is the most dominant in social psychology mainly employs quantitative psychometric methods such as laboratory or field experiments, to examine the effects that social stimuli exert on cognitive processes. It adopts the ontological assumption that people are information processing individuals whose thought processes are shaped by the social world. The individual is viewed as socialised thinker with limited cognitive resources and fundamental processing biases, although it acknowledges the impact of social influences on the individual, these influences are viewed as temporary influences. Cognitive social approaches are dualistic because they view the individual as separate from their social context, where they either have agency or are influenced by their social situation (Hollway, 2012).

Critics of cognitive social perspective would suggest its methodology is more influenced by the principles of the scientific method, rather than the phenomena it investigates. Critical social psychologists question how complex research inquiry can be reduced to laboratory based experimentation, preferring instead to study the complexity of individuals experience and meaning within the context of their social settings.

Psychologists from the phenomenological and social psychoanalytic perspectives challenge mainstream cognitive social assumptions concerning ontology, methodology and the quantitative methods it adopts, preferring more naturalistic studies which employ qualitative methods to explore how knowledge is produced (Hollway, 2012).

The social psychoanalytic perspective is a theoretically plural discipline that draws on post Freudian psychoanalysis and Kleinian object relations as well <https://assignbuster.com/phenomenology-and-social-psychoanalysis-theories/>

as analysis and concepts from discursive psychology. What differentiates it from all other social psychology perspective's, is its fundamental assumption that human behaviour and consciousness are largely determined by dynamic conflictual unconscious motives, where structure, content and dynamics of the psyche are not always available to conscious awareness. ' The self is formed both psychically and socially in dynamic intersubjective relations with others, where unconscious motives are frequently in direct conflict with conscious thoughts and intentions' (Hollway, 2012 p. 129). In response to the conflict provoked by unconscious anxiety, latent defence mechanisms such as splitting (polarisation of good and bad), projection (the expulsion of unwanted aspects of self) and projective identification (identification with projected elements), are employed to protect the self against unacceptable reality truths that can return into conscious awareness. These intrapsychic defence mechanisms are not passive but have a profound influence on the construction of the individual psychologically and socially, by inadvertently affecting their decisions, actions and relationships (Hollway, 2012).

Psychoanalytic methodology adopts a qualitative and interpretative analysis, which places an emphasis on how language is used and subjective meaning is constructed. It holds the notion that the individual is never consciously aware of their motivations or the meaning of their actions and dialogue, therefore social psychoanalytic methods set out to explore the individual perceptions of lived experience. Researchers seek to analyse the contradictions and conflicts that arise from unconscious desires and anxiety defences through the analytic application of splitting, projection and projective identification. Through the use of free associated narrative

interviews, participants are encouraged to talk openly and freely to allow unconscious motivations to surface. Full and detailed transcripts of interviews allow analysis to focus on the relation between the internal world of the psyche and the subjective understanding of an individual's responses and actions in relation their external world and others. Unlike other psychological perspectives, psychodynamics consistently places an importance on non-verbal communication and mannerisms; it uniquely provides a set of concepts for exploring an individual's idiosyncratic communication and meaning systems (Hollway, 2012).

Interpretative phenomenology has its roots in the concepts of the phenomenology philosophy of Edmund Husserl and existential philosophers such as Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, whose focus centred on the nature of existence and the study of the appearance of things or 'phenomena', in order to gain an understanding of the individual's subjective experience of the world in which they exist. The phenomenological perspective uniquely looks to examine the experience of the embodied self in relation to other interconnected embodied individuals and the wider world at large.

Phenomenological psychologists view the person as not having any fixed core or essence, it's their actions in the world define their being as embodied individuals in relation to others. Unlike the social psychoanalytic perspective there is no attempt to examine the psyche, focus is on the subjective lived experience of 'lifeworlds', the individual's 'appearance' of things within the context of life setting. Ultimately the psyche is continually being 'turned out' on the world, 'the self is consciously and actively creating meaning out of experience' (Horton-Salway 2012).

Similar to the social psychoanalytic perspective, phenomenological methodology is qualitative and hermeneutic but unique in its methodology and focus of analysis. It seeks to gain an understanding of individual perceptions of the world by focusing on experience and phenomena. Data is gathered by analysing the accounts of people's 'lived experience' through interviews and first person accounts, attention is given to the specific ways people reflect and experience their 'Lifeworld', through which meaning is constructed. Participants are encouraged to recount every detail however seemingly irrelevant in order that data can be systematically analysed for themes of the lifeworld and its distinct heuristic structures that phenomenological investigation seeks to uncover. These structures are temporality (the experience of time), spatiality (the experience of space), embodiment (the experience of one's own body), intersubjectivity (the experience of relationships with others), the aim is to explore layers of meaning by developing a thematic descriptions through a deeper level of analysis (Horton-Salway 2012).

There are other key features which distinguish the phenomenological perspective from others; researchers attempt to be reflexive through epoche or bracketing, which involves the analyst initially suspending their own expectations, attitudes and prejudgements of a research topic to focus on the participants account and understanding with a sense of naivety.

Following epoche, phenomenological reduction a methodological procedure is designed to return 'things in their appearing' in order to fully understand the nature of the phenomena under investigation. Emphasis is on description of phenomena and the avoidance of theoretical explanation or interpretation

in order to stay with lived experiences in the immediate and present.

Hierarchies of meanings are avoided in order to 'horizontalise' experience and treat all features of description as of equal importance and significance. Finally verification of findings is incorporated to enable accountability to the understanding of the data produced and ensure that analysis does not move beyond it (Horton-Salway 2012).

Both approaches share commonalities but have distinct differences in conceptualisations and implicit assumptions, both provide useful resources in challenging dualistic notions of the self and society, structure and agency to provide interrogative themes. They view the self as situated and dynamically fluid through our experiences and the meaning that we gain. Social psychoanalytic theorists challenge the notion that individuals are unitary, self contained entities separate from society, they highlight the importance of inter-subjective relationships with others, where complex unconscious dynamics drive latent motives and desires. The individual cannot be separated from their social worlds where introjected (internalised) parts of significant others and the influence of wider social morals and values are merged with one's unconscious needs and desires. Alternatively phenomenological theorists concentrate on the lived and embodied experiences of individuals, arguing that the individual and the social can not be set apart or broken down, people are always viewed in relation to the world in which they exist. People can not be separated from the constructs of their world, for example, body, context, culture and time, since these constructs form conscious experience. Ultimately individuals are seen as having self awareness and choice, they are active autonomous agents

involved in shaping their identity, rather than passive entities. Social psychoanalytical theorists adopt a different perspective, they propose that due to psychic determinism, where unconscious representations impact the individual's definition of self, individuals therefore have less autonomy and agency (Hollway, 2012).

Definitions of self are a central topic within social psychology, theories produce knowledge of the self which reflects their methods and ontology basis. Hollway (2012) uses case studies to highlight how each perspective uses analysis to gain distinct understandings of how the self is made up. She cites two studies, one conducted by Simon Charles (2000, as cited in Hollway) in which he uses a phenomenological method to conduct research into working class experience and Hollway's social psychoanalytical study to explore the life experience of Vince in order to gain a 'social psychological understanding of agency' (Hollway, p. 137). In the phenomenological study Charles's aim was to convey the impact that social setting has on individual thoughts, feelings and experiences and how they 'have unconsciously learned to be in the world' (Hollway, 2012). Analysis provides a distinct rich insight into people's situated working class experience of suffering; his transcripts convey the rhythm, tone and emotion of speech and dialogue, which enables him to go beyond the surface meaning of individual experience. Charles is able to approach the issue of class differently from other distanced approaches which overlook how class experience is formed through a world defining context, he states 'flesh inhabiting a particular social realm' (as cited in Hollway, p. 136) to go beyond the individual-social

dualism by showing evidence of the lived experience of a social identity (Hollway, 2012).

Hollway and Jefferson (2012) use free association to explore Vince's agency and to gain insight into unconscious motivations that go beyond self-conscious, intentional presentations of the self, which challenge the social cognitive model of self as a rational, conscious free agent. Hollway's research shows how Vince resolves his conscious desires not through his conscious mind but through a conflicting unconscious desire, expressed psychosomatically through his body as symptoms. The data produced would indicate that Vince goes beyond the agency-structure dualism by showing evidence of an unconscious conflict that result in a 'split between aspects of his bodily and conscious intentional self' (Hollway, 2012).

To critical social psychologists meaning is key to people's actions in social situations not just their behaviour, focus should be on real world issues such as the fundamental attribution error. Mainstream cognitive social psychologists have used experimental methods to explore how individuals attribute causes of behaviour and actions to either themselves or others. Research would suggest that there is a tendency to attribute others behaviour to individual dispositions rather than external situational factors, mainstream cognitive approaches focus on information processing in the individual and biases that appear to be inherent in the attribution process. Social psychoanalysis would define such distortions or biases as defence mechanisms against anxiety that is provoked as individuals attempt to accurately understand rationality and exert control over their social environment. Conversely the phenomenological perspective challenges <https://assignbuster.com/phenomenology-and-social-psychoanalysis-theories/>

whether the error exists, Langdridge (2012) argues that cognitive social studies have failed to consider broader social contexts. Phenomenologist's dispute the idea that individuals are separate and self contained units but rather integrated parts of the environment where the individual and the world unfold in relation to one another, therefore it's not possible to discover the causal relationships of attribution. Unlike other perspectives phenomenological understanding uniquely sees the individual as a consciously embodied agent who perceives others through their senses not through cognitive processes (Langdridge, 2012).

In considering the phenomenological and psychoanalytical approaches it becomes clear that each have distinct and unique aims, critical psychologists from each perspective seek to challenge mainstream cognitive social theories of the self and society, structure and agency and how knowledge is produced. They both move away from the individual-society dualism, though the methods they adopt are markedly different. They seek to explore the production of meaning in everyday interaction and dialogue, rather than what could be determined as artificial experimentation. Both perspectives have explored further our understanding of self, social psychoanalysis looks for the hidden emotional meaning and connections in dialogue, while phenomenologist's search below the surface for the meaning behind experience. Through qualitative methodology, researchers attempt to provide useful and insightful knowledge that allows us to gain a wider appreciation of the psychological topics under investigation and provide solutions to issues that have a place in expanding our knowledge of psychology.

Word count: 2152

References:

Hollway, W. (2012). *Social psychology: past and present*, In Hollway, W., Lucey, H., Phoenix, A., and Lewis, G. (eds). *Social Psychology Matters* (p. 28-54) . Milton Keynes: The Open University.

Hollway, W. (2012). *Methods in social psychology*, In Hollway, W., Lucey, H., Phoenix, A., and Lewis, G. (eds). *Social Psychology Matters* (p. 60-88) . Milton Keynes: The Open University.

Hollway, W. (2012). *Self*, In Hollway, W., Lucey, H., Phoenix, A., and Lewis, G. (eds). *Social Psychology Matters* (p. 120-143) . Milton Keynes: The Open University.

Horton-Salway, M. (2012), *DD307 Project Booklet*. Milton Keynes: The Open University.

Langdridge, D. (2012), *The fundamental attribution error*, In Langdridge, D., Taylor, S., Mahendran, K., (eds). *Critical readings in social psychology* (p. 95-124) . Milton Keynes: The Open University.

Part 2

After eight months of frustration, head scratching and enjoyable revelations I get to the end of the course and realise that social psychology is about an exploration of how our emotions and motivations develop and are controlled, also how we behave in social situations, as well as how social situations influence us. It's not just concerned with people's deeper and often

<https://assignbuster.com/phenomenology-and-social-psychoanalysis-theories/>

unconscious motivations for thinking and acting in the manner that they do, it is also concerned with many other phenomena. An understanding of the four main perspectives has helped to gain a deeper knowledge and applied understanding of many of the psychological topics and themes; it has helped me to map together in a structured way their assumptions and the methodology that researchers engage in. The nature of the psychological explanations and discussions have been enjoyable, different topics such individual and social selves and social identity theory have increased my understanding of identity and group dynamics, which I feel will be of benefit when it comes to my clinical practice as a counsellor.

At the start of the course many of the interrogative themes and theoretical perspectives seemed confusing and complex but as the course progressed things became clearer and much more cohesive. It's been an eventful and challenging journey through social psychology; I've enjoyed the course material but struggled with some of the TMA's. Overall the course has broadened my knowledge of social psychology and gave me a deeper understanding of the complexity of the main theoretical debates, perspectives and arguments. Through an understanding of the critical social perspectives I feel I've gained an understanding of the different extents that individuals can be studied within their natural social settings and how the results can provide a better understanding of how people are relationally situated and embodied.