

Main divisions between mainstream and critical social psychology

[Science](#)



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

One of the main divisions between mainstream and critical social psychology is that of the methods adopted. Discuss with reference to the cognitive social and at least one other social psychological perspective. Social psychology has existed for about 100 years, before which psychology was a branch of philosophy. Social psychology studies individuals in their social contexts. It is a diverse discipline made up of many theoretical perspectives and variety of different methods are used in social psychological research. This assignment explores the main principles of different methods in social psychology.

It will look at the underlying theories or perspectives that organise contemporary social and discursive psychological research and knowledge and critically evaluate different theoretical perspectives and methods. Cognitive social psychology studies the information processing individual in a social context to analyse individual cognitions in controlled social conditions. It is a quantitative approach. It dominates psychological social psychology and emerged from the critique of behaviourism in the mid twentieth century.

Researchers use an experimental approach involving controlled experimental conditions to produce quantitative data that can be measured and analysed to produce statistically valid conclusions. Discursive psychology focuses on the external world of discourse, its meaning and effects and studies the socially constructed, situated and contingent identity. It is a qualitative approach. It emerged in the 1970s with the linguistic turn, and was influenced by sociological social psychology. Researchers use discourse analysis to produce qualitative data by conversational and textual analysis.

<https://assignbuster.com/main-divisions-between-mainstream-and-critical-social-psychology/>

Phenomenological psychology focuses on the detailed description of social experience derived through the senses. It is a qualitative approach using the rich description of experience. It studies the internal world of the psyche in relational settings and its effect on action using first-person written account of experience, interview and literary text. It originated in the philosophy of Husserl in the late nineteenth/ early twentieth century. Social psychoanalytical psychology or psychosocial studies the internal world of the psyche in relational settings and its effects on actions.

It is a qualitative approach. It looks at the conflicted psyche in dynamic relation with the external world. Using case study and free association narrative, interviews and observation qualitative data is evaluated through interpretation of what is unsaid as well as said. Its original development was in the clinic and it became an area of academic study in the late twentieth century. There are four overarching themes that can be used to interrogate a set of value issues that permeate social psychology.

These are known as interrogative themes and they are outlined below. Power relations are central to the way that all knowledge is produced and interpreted. Power permeates everything we do and all our relationships. Power is neither good nor bad but it is what is done with it that determines this. Power is relational and the balance changes in different contexts. It is contextual and situated rather than absolute. Questions of power were first raised in relation to the deception of participants in the name of science.

For example in Stanley Milgram's (1965) experiment where participants were required to give increasing levels of electric shock to Milgram's colleagues

<https://assignbuster.com/main-divisions-between-mainstream-and-critical-social-psychology/>

who posed as recipients of the electric shocks. The focus was on power relations between the scientist and participants, many of whom performed, as they believed, harmful and sadistic acts on the instructions of the scientist. Ethical guidelines in social psychology have been hugely influenced by this. The question of who has the power to interpret people's experiences applies to all social psychological research.

We need to be careful how we base interpretations on evidence, and we must interrogate how that evidence and those meanings came to be produced: within what assumptions and power relations. Power relations raise the issue of the relationship between the researcher and the participants. Another interrogative theme is situated knowledges. Knowledge always comes from a belief or view point Knowledge is always situated somewhere and sometime - it changes with time and is situated in terms of values, cultures, belief systems and history. It changes with social change.

Knowledge production needs to be situated at the level of every piece of research. Methods are highly influential in the knowledges that are produced. Another interrogative theme is individual-society dualism. The most enduring theme in social psychology is whether individual or society is privileged in the explanation of social psychological phenomena and derives from the wider dualism of explanations that have characterised western thought since the Enlightenment. Individual-society dualism often manifested in a reduction of explanation to either biological (often genetic) or social causes.

Sometimes 'both/and' explanations also suffer from this dualism because they behave as if there is no other level of explanation, only an 'interaction' between biological and social factors. Genuinely social psychological explanations get squeezed out. Agency-structure dualism is the twin problem of individual-social dualism. The binary terms 'agency' and 'structure' mirror the terms 'individual' and 'society' in the following way: if individuals are seen as relatively independent of social influence, they can be theorised as agents of their own destinies.

On the other hand, if social structures are overwhelmingly influential in individual action, people's choices and desires would be irrelevant.

Traditional social theory placed such emphasis on the power of social structures in governing people's actions that this led to self-determinism. A challenge for social psychology is to be able to understand the dynamic tension between desires and actions that are relatively free and ones that are heavily constrained by circumstances, rather than fall into assumptions on either side of the agency-structure binary.

This interrogative theme will help us remain aware of dangers which, like individual-society dualism, have strong political and ethical implications. All of these interrogative themes are useful in evaluating social psychological research and theories. There are differences and similarities between the four perspectives on social psychology that have been defined in this essay. They all have reflexivity because the researchers are prepared to put themselves in the picture of knowledge production. They are all explicit about the way their approach is appropriate to the object of analysis.

A difference between the qualitative and quantitative approach is whether the object of analysis is hidden from view. This is highlighted as an advantage of the cognitive social psychology experimental method and is also central to the free association narrative interview method which draws from the psychoanalytic concept of unconscious dynamics.

Phenomenological psychology, whose object of analysis is conscious experience, aims to elaborate qualities previously hidden from view through rich description. In contrast, discourse analysis is not interested in underlying significance but in words.

Whereas discourse analysis is interested in emotion terms, social psychoanalysis looks for emotions themselves, while the object of phenomenological analysis is the emotions that people are aware of and can therefore describe. Social psychoanalysis and the experimental method look for causes of actions, but discourse analysis rejects this, and phenomenology focuses on experience rather than its causes or motives. Control of the research setting is the issue that most clearly differentiates quantitative and qualitative approaches. Experimental psychology 'models' social processes in order to control them.

The other three approaches seek ecological validity by researching in social settings. Within the qualitative approaches there are differences in emphasis. Discourse analysts prefer to collect discourse as it can be found, although they also conduct interviews. The social psychoanalytical and phenomenological approaches rely in eliciting experience, often grounded in a narrative of actual events. Narrative is becoming an overarching theme in

qualitative social psychology, partly because of the critique of unstructured interview techniques on the grounds that they dictate the terms in which participants can give their accounts.

When interviews are relatively unstructured, participants have a tendency to give accounts in narrative form. It is useful to compare the different methodological approaches in relation to their analysis of The Guardian's story published on 24 May 2004 about an Iraqifamily, a mother an her children. The woman's husband (the children's father) had died in detention during the American/British invasion and the newspaper quoted the woman's response – ' I will always hate you people'.

The Cognitive Social Psychology Experimental approach outlined by Russell Spears states that experimental evidence is the lifeblood of psychology and experiments provide the control to assess causal relations and patterns among variables that may not be apparent to the naked eye. Whist acknowledging that we cannot reproduce in the lab the conditions that foster this kind of hatred, we can model some of the proposed processes and test implications of theories. The psychoanalytical perspective referred to by Wendy Hollway is a clinical rather than a research method.

Free association interviewing is used to reach beyond the structured interviewing that dominates qualitative research and risks constraining interviewees with assumptions provided by questions. Derek Edwards discussion of discursive social psychology proposes looking at the report and how the words and, descriptions and accounts are assembled and put to work. He focuses on the reports themselves , how they provide for causal

<https://assignbuster.com/main-divisions-between-mainstream-and-critical-social-psychology/>

explanations, invoke psychological states and build implications for politics and policy. This approach examines how people deploy commonsense psychological ideas.

Darren Langridge explores phenomenological social psychology as a descriptive enterprise. Data is collected through first person written accounts or interviews. The rush towards explanation is avoided. The aim is to identify structural qualities that are invariant across the experience, as well as those that are more idiosyncratic, focusing on the reasons but not the causes behind the phenomena in the hope of providing new insights that may enable us to effect change. In conclusion, there are similarities and differences between the methodologies used to explore the four perspectives in social psychology that have been discussed.

Each approach has its strengths and weaknesses, and all can contribute to the continuing development of theories and approaches within social psychology. References Milgram, S (1974) *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*, London, Tavistock. Spears , R. , Hollway, W. and Edwards, D. (2005) ' Three views on hate', *The Psychologist*, vol 18, no 9, September, pp. 844-7. *Social Psychology Matters Book 1, Chapter 2* by Wendy Hollway, *Book 2, Chapter 1 (Introductions)* – Open University Press. DVD 1 *Social Psychology : Critical Perspectives on Self and Others*.