

Social psychological research



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What are the strengths and weaknesses of a ‘critical’ compared to a ‘traditional’ approach to social psychological research? Limit your answer to one (or possibly two) areas of relevant research.

How does one identify self and are there a universal set of constructs that humans use in creating and living that identity? Such are the questions of social psychology, yet the ways in which theorists and practitioners go about trying to answer them differ vastly depending in large part on where one positions him- or herself in the discipline. For traditional social psychologists, the point of research seems to be to generate highly sophisticated and well-tested theoretical accounts (principles and explanations) of broad generality so that policy makers, organizational decision makers, community leaders – indeed, any private citizen – could benefit in their attempts to improve the human condition [Gergen, 1996]. Yet for critical social psychologists it appears to be that because they see themselves as part of a global agenda of resistance [Painter, 2004], they are more concerned with the systematic examination of how some varieties of psychological action and experience are privileged over others, how dominant accounts of ‘psychology’ operate ideologically and in the service of power [Parker, 1999] to spark their work. And because each group approaches its field from these disparate positions, it is little wonder that the way in which they reach their conclusions are often at odds with one another.

Take the traditional social psychologists for instance. Much of their work in identity theory and social identity theory has involved human experimentation and use of empirical data in an effort to distinguish between the autonomous self and the self that comes under control of others. For <https://assignbuster.com/social-psychological-research/>

instance, Tajfel [1970] used a group of 14- and 15-year old boys, and hypothesized that categorizing people, or putting them into groups, was cause enough to trigger them to discriminate in favor of their own group and against the other group. Building on that concept, Zimbardo conducted the short-lived Stanford Prison experiment in 1971 where participants were divided into two groups – guards and prisoners. Because guards eventually abused their perceived power, the welfare of the prisoners was at stake and the experiment was halted after just six days [Zimbardo, 1999]. According to many researchers, simply because the participants [tyrannical guards] were decent, well-adjusted college students, the findings suggested that anyone would veer towards tyranny if they were given a role as a member of one group that had power over another [Haslam and Reicher, 2003]. And Purcell and Reid, basing their work on the empirical studies of others concluded that identification with a group links an individual to the social world; in identifying with others, a person takes on “ both shared meanings, as to what that categorical label implies, as well as elements of a common agenda for behavior and action” [2004].

The underlying consensus of the traditional social psychological research then seems to be that concept of self is based in great measure on a liberal individualist framework [Sampson, in Parker and Shotter, 1990, p. 117] and is a mixture of the roles one assumes in life and the emotional significance and importance [Stryker, 1980; cited Akbar, 2003] assigned to the groups that one feels part of. These assumptions are then validated over and over in many studies through use and interpretation of data stemming from tools such as the Bem Sex-Role Inventory, Identity Style Inventory, Extended

Objective Measure of Ego Identity Status, the Ego Identity Process

Questionnaire, as well as the occasional structured interview [Schwartz and Dunham, 2000] and the the group identification scale developed by Brown, Condor, Mathews, Wade & Williams specifically devised to measure the three core facets of awareness, evaluation and affect, implicit in Tajfel's classic definition of social identity [Hunter and Stringer, 1999]. Most all results of these types of studies seem to suggest that identification with a group links an individual to the social world; in identifying with others, a person takes on “ both shared meanings, as to what that categorical label implies, as well as elements of a common agenda for behavior and action” [Purcell].

Critical psychologists are just as interested in this linkage to the social world but see inherent problems in looking at it from any pre-constructed interpretation or assumption. In their minds, rather than conduct human experiments, it is more beneficial to understand that the tools used in psychological study are constructs of the same oppressing powers that have caused the problems anyway and thus provide no real results. So, instead of research using the traditional tools, the critical social psychologists have turned to deconstruction, discourse analysis and action research planning.

Deconstruction is seen as useful as a way of disrupting theories, opening up *conflicts* [Parker, 1992]. As a research tool it is narrative and looks at a whole theory and works to discuss its flaws, piece by piece. One such example of this is Sampson's [in Parker and Shotter, 1990] deconstruction of the self. He began his argument by showing how the Western construct of the autonomous individual – and the work of social psychologists to understand

and perpetuate that construct – was at odds with the field's goal of bettering the welfare of all. Further, he suggested that in order to move forward and really work toward justice and betterment, we needed to recognize a variety of types of individualism so as to include people of less dominant groups and in this recognition also understand the interdependence of one to all [Sampson, in Parker and Shotter, 1990, p. 117-126], thus rather disrupting the idea that the concept of self rather than self in relation to others should be the focal point of the field.

Another research method used by critical social psychologists is discourse analysis, which looks at the crucial role of language in the construction of persons. Perhaps one of the most recognized works here is that of Carol Gilligan who, after numerous interviews, transcriptions of interviews, and analyses of those texts – as well as attention to the body and emotion characteristics during the interviews – found that women's voices, when they are comfortable speaking in them – drew attention to aspects of human experience that had not been discussed before and identity became connected to relationship with the world. It was the discourse analysis – using her method of voice-centered listening – here that led to her conclusions and that analysis was done by reading the transcripts several times – each time focusing on a specific area such as content, researcher's response, for concept self, for social context, etc [Brown et al, 1988; Gilligan, 1982]. A more traditional, if you will, use of textual analysis can be seen in study of what it means to be Australian to 1242 adolescents. In that study, Purdie had identified through content and grammatical analysis nine themes among 242 essays written by students. From those, she created a 45-

statement, 6-point scale instrument where the participants rated how strongly they identified with the statements [2003].

A third research tool for the critical psychologist is action research which involves making core assumptions clear, examining those assumptions in terms of practice, and working collaboratively to make improvements. It can be defined as a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview which we believe is emerging at this historical moment. It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities [Reason and Bradbury, 2001, p. 1]

For those educated in the pure sciences, some of the research methods used by critical social psychologists are considered little better than ego-centered forays into the philosophical. To the critical social psychologists involved in reshaping the discipline of psychology in order to promote emancipation in society [Austin and Prilleltensky, 2001] the measurements used in traditional social psychology are little more than constructs designed to perpetuate oppression and what critical social psychologists should focus on in their efforts to promote emancipation are reflection, research, and action, where discursive analysis, philosophical thinking [and] visions of a better future are part of the reflection and research consists of participatory action research and textual analysis [Austin and Prilleltensky, 2001]. Yet each of the two fields has some strengths and weaknesses.

Traditional social psychology has given us the ability to understand self in a variety of ways including being able to define ourselves by the roles we play and by the groups with which we interact. It has done so by experiment after experiment, and study after study, involving scientifically chosen [subjects] so that each person in the population will have a measurable chance of selection [Waksburg, 1995]. It has also done so by use of quantitative analysis of data stemming from those studies that allows, on the surface, little room for doubt. And even though Gergen noted not only is the subject matter itself [the study of identity] a social construction, thus not subject to empirical evaluation outside a particular tradition of interpretation, such research represents the arrogation of a uniquely western ontology of the mind to the status of the universal, [1996] it is important to remember that traditional social psychological has shown that psychological health requires a balance between individual autonomy and a psychological sense of community [Fox, 1985, p. 49].

However, all psychological insights [from traditional social psychology] have been gained through the erroneous application of positivist experimentation, the abuse of power and the colonisation of others' distress [Kagan]. While that is likely a gross generalization, there are other, more specific complaints with the field. Johnson and Eagly suggest that one problem is the narrative review of quantitative data because the reviewers' results could be disparate, leading to confusion, since there is no particular procedure for those narrative reviews [2000]. In addition, the artificial means by which participants are assigned to groups [Tajfel, 1970] or the insertion of the researcher into the experiment [Zimbardo, 1999] or the fact that subjects of

an experiment can merely react to, rather than change, imposed conditions [Parker, 1992] do not necessarily bode well for valid results. A further criticism of traditional research is that it can obscure the importance of the times and places in which knowledge is produced [because] the laboratory environment and the time limits of the experimental episode artificially constrain respondents and yet are invisible in the way knowledge is presented [Levine, p. 13].

Similarly, critical social psychology research has its own set of strengths and weaknesses.

On the positive side, and in answer to Parker's question how can this critical reflection be a contribution to knowledge [1999], we can actually see and hear the voices of people as they talk about identity, self, and connection to others. Discourse analysis, for instance, provides a way of describing the moral/political character of personal action (no individual can 'escape' from culture), thus we begin to see the social nature of subjectivity [Parker, 1992]. We also can begin to see the interdependence we currently have on one another, and how this may grow as society continues changing. From an intense study of language and relationships we have insight into the accuracy of generalized truth claims by being able to ask how do they function, in which rituals are they essential, what activities are facilitated and what impeded, who is harmed and who gains by such claims? [Gergen, 1995, p. 81].

Yet here too, there are flaws. As Ratcliff noted, that while the multiplicity of views brought forth by critical social psychologists is valuable, it often

appears that their goal is to educate others by finding data to support our views, rather than learn from data and if we know the conclusion before getting the data, is it really research [1999]? In particular, the use of discourse analysis is seen as problematic. Parker said that that taken on its own, [discourse analysis] can fall into the trap of re-describing the very cognitive apparatuses that a discourse-analytic psychology promised to dissolve [1992, p. 100]. It can also, like experimental research, obscur[e] the importance of the times and places in which knowledge is produced [Levine, p. 13] because the participant has no control over how the researcher interprets his or her words nor any control over which pieces are analyzed or in which order.

But maybe both fields have it all wrong. Marguerite McCorkle said, the primary purpose of research is to put the researcher in a situation such that professionally interesting behavior can be directly observed by the researcher [1990]. If this is the case, it leads one to wonder how the results of any such research could be deemed valid, reliable, or even authentic since the situation was pre-designed and moreover, it was pre-designed so as to achieve particular (i. e., interesting) results.

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