

# Social cognitive perspective and phenomenological perspective



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The quoted text is taken from ' Social Psychology' (Hollway et al 2007, p. 35). It challenges the accountability of certain methods in their ability to accurately reflect the reality of social phenomena. Implicitly understood in this statement is that qualitative methods are better suited than quantitative methods. Qualitative methods are better able to reflect " richness and complexity" of lived experience than quantitative methods which are capable of " limiting, constraining and distorting" it. This is a polemical stance that has accompanied the growth in qualitative methods since the 1980's.

The Social Cognitive Perspective (SCP) and Phenomenological Perspective (PP) demonstrate how strikingly different methods can be. They have different epistemological stances and make different ontological claims. The nature of being (ontology) is understood differently in social psychology, such as the information-processing individual in a social context (SCP) or the experiencing, embodied individual in relation with others (PP). Limitations and benefits of the SCP and the PP are illustrated by a critical review of Milgram's 1970s experiment on ' obedience to authority' and the works of Eatough and Smith (2006) on " feelings of anger in the context of the lives of individual women".

Gregen, K. J. (1973) in his account of social psychology as History gave voice to a debate about the relative merits of social psychology methods. In particular whether social psychology as a discipline was scientific in nature or should be considered as contemporary history. Gregen argued that social psychology was a product of historical and cultural climates which constantly changed, producing theories and knowledge that did not prove to be

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consistent. In this light it was suggested that the prevailing quantitative scientific methods should give way to more descriptive accounts with appreciation for how knowledge is situated within a social-cultural-historic context. These themes of situated knowledge are highlighted by Milgram's findings on 'obedience to authority'.

Milgram demonstrated through his experimental conditions the potential for acts of cruelty to be committed by a stranger (research participant and executant) to another stranger (researcher assistant and victim) because they were following orders (researcher and authority figure). His findings have been widely cited and used in psychological text books as factual scientific accounts. They have however been criticised on a number of ethical and substantive terms (Holloway et al 2007, p. 53). For example Milgram recorded that participants were "observed to sweat, tremble, stutter, bite their lips, and groan as they found themselves implicated" (Milgram, 1977, p. 112; in Holloway et al 2007, p. 54). The use of deception and unnecessary stress to research participants is seen by many as being unjustifiable. Milgram himself was less concerned with the immediate distress caused and was satisfied that questionnaires sent after one year showed participants felt positively towards the experiment (Milgram, 1974, p. 195 within Holloway et al 2007, p. 52).

In Milgram's time research ethics were not as developed as they are today. Arguably the overall benefit of the research was deemed more important than any minor stress caused. This insight is perhaps justifiable given

Milgram's interest in trying to understand how hatred and persecution of

Jews under Hitler's Nazi Germany could have happened. Milgram's

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experimental conditions ' in which one agent commands another to hurt a third' reflected his underlying theory that elements of authority, executant and victim were central to obedience and hostility (Milgram, 1977, p. 102; in Holloway et al 2007, p. 53). Apart from ethics critics such as Harre 1979, p. 105 argues that there are substantive problems with his study. Harre notes that the issue of trust was overlooked; trust as a possible response to power was likely key to participants' behaviour as an executants.

In fact 40% of participants did not follow the instruction to inflict pain on the victim, however these accounts are given little attention. Similarly the research setting was changed because of a perceived influence of ' Yale University' on giving authority to the instruction to the executant. It was moved from the university's laboratory to the basement and then to a nearby town called ' Bridgeport'. But, Milgram, 1977, p. 116 believed that the level of obedience in Bridgeport, although somewhat reduced, was not significantly lower than that obtained at Yale with 48% vs. 65% opposed. 17% between sites can be interpreted as statistically significant (Holloway et al 2007, p. 53). Ultimately the reliability and validity of Milgram's findings can be questioned on a number of points. Although Milgram sort scientific objectivity he failed to consider ethical questions fully, did not explore the relevance of the research settings or participants' personal experiences.

PP provides an interesting perspective to juxtapose with traditional scientific methods. It has in its own right a long established history dating back to the C18th from philosophical works by Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre, et al (Smith & Woodruff 2009). As an approach to social psychology it became popular alongside a humanistic <https://assignbuster.com/social-cognitive-perspective-and-phenomenological-perspective/>

perspective in USA during the second half of the C20th. It seeks detailed descriptions instead of explanations for human behaviour, addressing all aspects of a topic, and suspending judgements and assumptions that may be held by the researcher (Hollway et al 2007, p131). Linda Finlay (2009) in “Debating Phenomenological Research Methods” acknowledges that variations in methodology have flourished within PP. The competing visions of how to practice phenomenology stem from different philosophical values, theoretical preferences, and methodological procedures.

Smith’s Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is however one that has become popular. Smith argues that his idiographic and inductive method, which seeks to explore participants’ personal lived experiences, is phenomenological in its concern for individuals’ perceptions. He also, however, identifies more strongly with hermeneutic traditions which recognize the central role played by the researcher, and does not advocate the use of bracketing (Smith, 2004). The competing visions of how to practice phenomenology stem from different philosophical values, theoretical preferences, and methodological procedures. Eatough and Smith (2006) used interpretative phenomenological analysis of feelings of anger in the context of the lives of individual women. Specifically they used descriptive tools to explore three analytic themes – the subjective experience of anger, forms and contexts of aggression, and anger as moral judgment. They concluded that meaning making is a fundamental process in how the participants formed emotions. The descriptive accounts from the interviews with Marilyn (one of the research participants) were given as a

case in point. Eatough and Smith (2006) believed that Marilyn's anger towards her mother was changed by her self-reflections and counselling.

It can be argued that "richness and complexity" provided by PP in its account of women's anger by Eatough and Smith (2006) far outreaches that by its SCP counterparts. The SCP remains however the dominant perspective in social psychology and has been helped by innovations in research methods. For example, Fazio et al (1995) work that has built on the concepts of 'cognitive errors' and 'biases' implicated in prejudice thinking (Fiske and Taylor, 1991). Their research has suggested that subtle forms of prejudice are now more pervasive than blatant forms. Their experiment measured response times of white undergraduates when classifying stimulus words as either being positive or negative meaning; after viewing random photos of black and white faces. They found evidence of inhibition and facilitation effects which were largely automatic, unconscious associations, between the colour of faces and positive or negative evaluations.

In conclusion, the quoted text implicitly suggests that methods such as those used by SCP can be "limiting, constraining and distorting" but perhaps this is only half the story. Although quantification can be accused of being myopic, failing to appreciate 'richness and complexity' in the account of the social phenomena under question – they often do so knowingly. The scientific tradition of looking for cause and effect relationships in social psychology continues to be dominant over other methodologies. This reflects the willingness of the discipline to continue to strive for objectivism, statistical reliability and validity, and ultimately for the advancement of practical application. Moreover, as Gregen, K. J. (1973) noted social psychology <https://assignbuster.com/social-cognitive-perspective-and-phenomenological-perspective/>

methods are constantly adapting and evolving the work of Fazio et al (1995) on subtle forms of prejudice being testament to this. In contrast “ richness and complexity” of qualitative methods such as PP often comes at a cost as the research is time-consuming may have limited practical application.