History of social psychology

Social psychology as a discipline began towards the end of the 1900s when scientists began to carry out experiments to measure human behaviours. According to Kassin et al (2013: 6), " social psychology is the scientific study of how individuals think, feel, and behave in a social context". This definition brings an important aspect of social psychology, which is different from the other artistic and humanistic attempts that try to understand human behaviour, in that the discipline itself is a science. It systematically observe, describe and measure the thoughts, feelings, and behaviours of human beings as pointed out by Kruglanski and Stroebe, (2011). Another definition that was given by Gordon Allport (1954) cited in Hewstone et al (2012: 5) defined social psychology as " the attempt to understand and explain how the thoughts, feelings and behaviours of individuals are influenced by the actual, imagined or implied presence of other human beings". Although the definition can be argued based on the two perspectives of critical and experimental social psychology, Allport (1954) tried to bring out the notion that much of behaviour is influenced by social roles and cultural norms. However it still remains that the two perspectives of critical and experimental social psychology have divided opinions, ' are antagonistic and cannot be integrated' as pointed out by Rogers (2011).

Social Psychology began in the 19 [th] Century in America with an early experiment on behavior by Triplett (1898). In this experiment that took place in the early years, Triplett studied individual's behavior when placed in competition with others and he used cyclist to study the behaviors. It was from the results of this study that, carefully controlled experiments began as pointed out by Kassin et al (2013). The next decades which were dubbed the

Coming of Age, saw the continued refinement of the discipline with Lewin (1936) developing strategies and studies that focused more on the dynamic interactions that existed between people. In one of his studies, Lewin (1946) looked at the influence that situational variables have on person variables. The relationship between the two led him to conclude that behavior of a person at any given time is influenced by both his/her characteristics and the social situation they find themselves in. Other studies that took place around this time focused on the issues of conformity (Sherif 1936). However it was during the period of rapid expansion between the period of 1949-1969 that saw experiments obedience (Milgram 1974) and the prison experiments (Zimbardo et al, 1973) that really demonstrated the power of the social setting.

Also as this field was an evolving field, it was not long before it was embroiled by crises and reassessment based on the different approaches to understanding human behavior by the different Social Psychologists. One of the most fundamental contestation in the field was the demand for the field to become more relevant to target societies of study. Such lack of relevance is what made Fishbein (1997: 77-91) to comment that " accusations of engaging in experiments that are trivial and lacking originality have been often labelled against the field of Social Psychology". It was more like researchers were developing studies to pursue their own gains at the expense of finding solutions to real life problems affecting people something that led to the " emergence of crisis of confidence" in experimental social psychology as pointed out by Elms (1975). It was therefore the development of such and other crises that brought about the two perspectives of critical

and experimental Social Psychology, with different scholars and researchers aligning themselves to the perspective they believed to be the perspective that best study and explain human behaviour.

Most of the researchers that carried out experiments believed in the experimental field of Social Psychology that had led the way in the development of the field before the emergency of the critical social psychology side of the field. There was a strong belief in them that the only way to gain valid knowledge about social phenomena, processes and events is by using scientific methods something the critical followers disagreed with. The critical followers believed that science is not the only way to get knowledge especially when it comes to Social Psychology. The experimental followers further believed that the knowledge gained was ideologically neutral. This position stood in sharp contrast with the critical followers who believed that all knowledge, whether experimental or critical, was inherently positioned ideologically as pointed by Rodgers (2003: 11). The last of the elements that stood in between the two perspectives was to do with the experimental side believing in the social world being separate from the individual acting within it. This was at odds with the critical followers who believed that the social world is shaped by the people through their interactions with each other. Therefore it is the difference in these elements that has led to the two camps to be at parallel with each other when it come to Social Psychology and its study on human behaviour.

Early experimentalist believed in the objectivity and neutrality that quantitative research methods in Social Psychology brought to their research methods. This believe came about because of the traits associated with

quantitative research that there is always a quest for objectivity and distance between the research and his test subjects something that led to the avoidance of bias (Bryman, 2001). However the main problem that arose from the use of such quantitative methods was on the generalizability of the results to all similar situations and settings something that was refuted by critical thinkers. Mkhize (2004: 25) commented that, " in the quest to emulate the natural sciences that psychologists construed their discipline as an objective, value-free and universal science and in so doing considered issues to do with culture as an impediment". There was also a belief with the critical scholars that the experimental approach under modernism that assumed science is capable of discovering the real things and real happenings out there in the world was flawed. Critical scholars believe that knowledge is constructed and not simply discovered through science and the knowledge discovered through science was biased and based on what the scientists choose to observe, interpret and tell as observed and found.

Therefore it was the denying of the modernism approach under the experimental perspective that led to the postmodernism approach and the emergence of the critical thinkers. The critical thinkers had their commitment in social justice ideology that sought to gain knowledge from all social groups regardless of background and social standing. Their approach used qualitative methods that sought to better understand human behaviour without being objective. The approaches were mainly more on the inter-relationship of the individual and their particular social context they live in whilst recognising the boarder social structures in order to understand meanings of certain situations as pointed out by Gough and McFadden

(2001). This was a clear move away from the quantitative experimental approach that relied on white middle class American students for their experiments which they later generalised to cover all in the social setting. Although they did not wholly disagreed with all the knowledge discovered through scientific means, they pointed to instances where scientific knowledge was not useful. For example, critical thinkers pointed to " many diseases of modern life such as chronic fatigue syndrome that could not be diagnosed through scientific tests because they are socially and culturally constructed, defined and experienced" as pointed out by Rogers (2003).

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