

## Chapter #2

### **SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY: DISCIPLINE, INTERDISCIPLINE OR TRANSDISCIPLINE?**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

Social Psychology sits at the confluence of two disciplinary discourses: the psychology of sociological matters and the sociology of psychological processes. Of course these are not simply discourses but represent the entire disciplinary organisation of social psychology as a subject and what it counts as legitimate areas of enquiry within its academic boundaries. These boundaries cut across the apparent divide between psychology and sociology, between the individual and the social, between the intra-psychic world and the world of human actions. However, this interdisciplinary appeal can also be considered as tapping into two broader discursive frameworks based upon the maintenance of an inner-outer dualism on the one hand and a rational and emotive dualism on the other. This chapter considers the way in which these discursive dualisms have given social psychology its *raison d'être* and its distinct dynamic and appeal as an academic subject. However, the recent turn to discourse within the discipline has not only provided it with the radical potential to study the construction and operation of these dualisms, but has also thrown into relief its interdisciplinary tensions again. This discourse on discourse involves a struggle for explanatory power in terms of either examining the ways in which psychological accounting is implicated in a flexible way as part of social practices at a 'local' level, or moving up an explanatory notch to a consideration of the operation of discourses on a more deterministic 'global' level. The chapter concludes by considering this new discursive territory, rooted in social psychology's origins.

*Keywords:* cognitivism, discipline, discourse, dualism, interaction.

#### **1. INTRODUCTION**

It was over a century ago in 1908 that two books were published that first bore the title 'social psychology'. Although these books addressed social psychology, they did so in divergent ways that were to set the course of this academic area as a discipline, interdiscipline and eventually perhaps, a transdisciplinary endeavour. The British psychologist William McDougall in his book examined basic instincts and the emotions that accompany them. Whilst, his book has had little influence on modern social psychology, he nonetheless set out the course for psychological social psychology (PSP) as being concerned with explanation 'down' at the level of the individual, including how people behave in relation to others. For example, McDougall sought to explore the nature of the gregarious instinct and how this is manifested in relation to others. In the same year sociologist Edward Ross published his book on social psychology which considered imitation and the mob mind. This book set the course for sociological social psychology (SSP) in terms of people's behaviour and thought processes as the result of social interaction and in particular related to 'social problems'. This has persisted over the ensuing century with topics such as rioting and violence attracting considerable research funding for social psychologists, and linked to seeking the means of social control.

These psychological and sociological strands have remained largely distinct and segregated during the course of the past century. This twin focus on the social and the

psychological has led to different disciplinary emphases as well as the creation of an interdisciplinary academic area which draws upon sociology and psychology, as well as other social scientific disciplines. Social psychology straddles these two disciplines and, as such its *raison d'être* involves examining the ways in which both social and mental processes relate to people's actions. What, precisely, this means however, remains a matter of historic debate both between and within the disciplines of psychology and sociology. What weight is to be given to the social, the psychological, and the interaction between the two? Is it the study of the psychology of sociological matters, or the sociology of psychological processes? These questions raise the issue of very different levels of explanation.

In attempting to understand how people interact with one another and live their lives, psychologists are inclined to give greater attention to the notion of mental processes and characteristics of the person. They track back to the 'inner' world of the person, so to speak. Sociologists, on the other hand, are inclined to give greater attention to the social settings and social relations. Instead of focusing on the 'inner workings' of the person, sociological attention is directed toward action and meaning, to *how* people maintain or challenge the meaning of what they do *through* interaction. To put it another way, rather than assuming given characteristics of personhood, sociologists, start by looking at the ways in which we *do* society: how the interaction we engage in is shaped, and in turn shapes, the social order. Sociologically-inclined social psychologists are more likely to examine patterns of interaction in order to understand how social institutions, identities, and actions endure or change. Perhaps these differing perspectives are best explained by analogy based on an old joke: "A blind Venetian is not the same thing as a Venetian blind." Social psychology can be different things and its location at the confluence of sociological and psychological concerns makes for considerable fluidity of theory and methodology.

## 2. THE DISCIPLINE OF PSP

The object of PSP is the individual mind. This is its explanatory patch, its academic territory. However, Howitt et al. (1989) point out that much of what is considered as social psychology is the leftover areas from its parent discipline of psychology. Areas such as developmental psychology, organisational psychology and clinical psychology all involve a great deal of social explanation but have carved out for themselves levels of explanation that arguably have a poorly developed inclusion of the 'social' in their theories and applications. However, it is the grip of cognitivism that has dominated PSP in terms of a focus on intra-psyche explanation of social behaviour. This focus has manifested itself in a concern with various forms of mental architecture or machinery such as attitudes, attributional processes and social representations. Leaning in this direction has placed social psychology very much within the mainstream concern with cognition but arguably at a cost of a poorly defined concept of where the *social* lies within social psychological explanation.

This came to a head in the 1970s in what became known as the 'crisis' in social psychology. Social psychologists such as Gergen (1973) began to point to the historical dimension of what were considered as psychological universals. Alongside this there was a questioning of the role of experimentation and a recognition that social psychologists were operating within a disciplinary boundary that was stifling any concern with wider socio-political issues. However, in spite of some trenchant and hard-hitting critiques that emerged out of this period (e.g. Henriques et al. 1984; Parker, 1989) PSP remained wedded

to an intra-psychic level of explanation, for example in the notion of social representations (Moscovici, 1982; 1984).

PSP has largely remained bound to a set of topics that have now become ossified as being the main concerns of social psychology. These are recognisable in many social psychology textbooks (e.g. attitudes, social influence, attribution, self-concept etc.). As noted above this collection of topics has come to define the 'objects' of social psychological investigation within psychology departments as well as being passed on to generations of undergraduate students. This is particularly the case in the USA where the connection between social psychology and sociology has become much weaker over the course of the past half century (Oishi, Kesebir, and Snyder, 2009). However, in contrast to this, there has been something of a revolution or more accurately evolution, especially in British PSP, that has taken place over the past couple of decades and that is the turn to discourse analysis and qualitative research. Much of this derives from the 'other side' of the disciplinary divide, SSP.

### **3. THE DISCIPLINE OF SSP**

Mead (1934) is often credited with being the sociologist who most influenced the course of SSP, and it is interesting that his focus was the issue of symbolic representation, largely through language. This focus on the social nature of language and representation is a trademark feature SSP and sits in opposition to more psychological concerns with language as a window onto cognition. In this sense the contrast between the two approaches to social psychology is clear but there is, often as not, a space left in SSP for an assumed psychological architecture that mediates between the self and others in interaction. This can be seen, for example, the work of Parsons where the social actor is guided by internalised rules, roles and norms (Parson & Shils, 1951).

However, this defining sociological concern with the nature of social order was to find later expression in the work of Goffman, but most important for later developments in SSP, in the Garfinkel's project of ethnomethodology, and its offshoot in the form of conversation analysis. This kind of approach differed markedly from PSP by drawing upon ethnographic accounts or an examination of the minutiae of conversational exchanges in 'naturalistic' setting in order to show the nuanced and delicate procedures by which social order is constructed. This kind of approach was later imported as a kind of Trojan horse in PSP, notably in the seminal work of Potter & Wetherell (1987), *Discourse and Social Psychology: Beyond Attitudes and Behaviour*. This kind of approach is addressed in more detail below but suffice to say that it has perhaps more than any approach to date gone some way to unseating the centrality of PSP as the dominant approach to social psychology.

### **4. INTERDISCIPLINE**

As Weingart (2000) has observed, talk of interdisciplinarity is fraught with paradoxes and although social psychology can be considered an interdisciplinary field its parents still tug it in one direction or the other, as if they were engaged in the affections of their offspring after a divorce. Certainly interdisciplinarity is often regarded as 'desirable' and is set in contrast to being overly specialised. However, the disciplinary organisation of sociology and psychology has generally meant that a genuine interdisciplinary approach to social psychology has proved elusive. This is unfortunate and has meant that social psychology has arguably suffered in terms of lacking an over-arching theoretical perspective. There have been attempts, notably through the work of Parson but also

Moscovici (1982, 1984) in his attempt to make use of Durkheim and to theorize the notion of the 'thinking society'.

However, it is also apparent that social psychology has considerable scope to involve other disciplines such as anthropology, political science and linguistics. Each of these areas has contributed to some degree or other a more interdisciplinary form of social psychology. For example, the importance of culture has aided social psychology in providing a broader perspective on gender, whilst the inclusion of a political science perspective has helped in studying political persuasion and voting patterns. However, it is the turn to language where the greatest degree of cross-fertilisation has occurred, and it is to this area that I wish to turn to in greater detail next.

## 5. TRANSDISCIPLINE

Perhaps the most significant impact on social psychology over the past quarter of a century or so has been the turn to language. This now constitutes a major body of work but again there are divisions that are rooted in social psychology's project of linking whatever is taken to be the 'social' and the 'psychological'. Perhaps the most influential approach has been that of discursive psychology (e.g. Edwards & Potter, 1992) which has fed through into an impressive range of work on a variety of topics. This work is heavily influenced by conversation analysis and, as such, considers in detail the ways in which psychological discursive formulations are produced and oriented towards. This involves an agnostic stance with regard to the internal status of psychological phenomena. These psychological representations provide the means for a varied way of engaging in social and institutional life and a means of making it intelligible and orderly. Cognitive references to 'thinking', giving 'reasons', 'knowing' 'interpreting' or 'understanding' provide publicly accountable criteria for agency. They provide both the means for ordering people's lives as the basis for agency and a way for others to consider, judge and assess these actions in the way that they are orientated towards in terms of duality of inner mind and external world.

The emotional basis for action that can be presented as understandable, as a means for literally moving a person to do something, or indeed for inaction. It is often portrayed as an influence on how people think, where thinking is taken as reasoning and emotion as providing a means of supporting this as in terms of action or as something that skews or bypasses the reasoning process. Reason implies stability and order in how people conduct themselves; unchecked emotion can be seen as threatening in terms of association with lack of order.

This duality is interesting in terms of the ways in which emotion discourse can be a flexible and useful means of characterising action. As Edwards (1997) notes emotion discourse can be put to a great variety of uses within a range of social practices due to their flexibility as an accounting resource:

- a. They can be contrasted with cognitions in terms of their less deliberative nature.
- b. They can be taken as being as 'understandable' and appropriate as how any reasonable person would react.
- c. They can be characterised as being the outcome of events or in the nature of the person.
- d. They can be treated as being kept under the control of a person's reasoning or as reactions that resist control.
- e. They can be presented as the interaction of mental and physiological systems, as natural, or as derived from moral and ethical concerns.

Studying participants' orientations, either in terms of direct psychological accounting, or in terms of orientating towards aspects of the inner/outer dualism allows for a level of analysis in terms of the study of the orderliness of social action. In this way a major cultural dualism is maintained: taking people's 'outward' accounts and actions and considering these as representations of what they are like 'inside' as thinking and feeling agents. This derives from accountability within practices rather than as being taken as the result of some sort of inner mental cognitive processing and exchange of representations.

The notion of these two separate realms is therefore a major rhetorical feature that is incorporated into how people interact with one another. It provides a means of trading on notions of 'sense making' as well as the portrayal of people's inner mental states. There is a huge cultural imperative to be seen to be intelligible and to be able to convey one's 'thoughts' and 'feelings' in the form of judgments, reasons, and evaluations as the outcome of some kind of mental *process*. In perceptual-cognitive processing terms it is an "input-process-output" model.

The nature of this order is therefore seen as being founded upon a discourse related to mental processes in order to account for how we perceive matters and as the basis for action. In this way events are placed prior to this operation, as having happened and needing to be communicated, to be 'understood' in terms of emotional response. In this communication model there is a realm of people placed in amongst events and occurrences and a realm of mental operations requiring to be brought together. Here rationality is associated with the psychological notion of 'perception'. Accounts of an about actions are presented as part of texts of 'meaning' in which a mental processing system is assumed to be brought to bear upon matters in order to display these as the result of psychological agents who reach 'decisions', *have* feelings, have deliberated on something or other or who have can account for something in a way that 'make sense' to others who can understand a course of action. It is interesting to note here how even accounts that allude to emotions as the basis for actions may nonetheless be treated as rational in terms of their accountability or intelligibility. We can see why a person might act in a particular way given certain circumstances and the way they react to and deal with these.

By not starting with some pre-defined model of the actor, especially the traditional cognitivist model in which the 'problem' becomes one of understanding how people perceive matters, it is becomes possible to treat 'knowledge' and 'reality' as cultural categories maintained or challenged within a range of social practices. The significance of such an analytical move is that it allows the focus of study to become how the relationship between 'mind' and 'reality' is not, for most people, some philosophical issue but a rather a practical sociological construction. Much has been written recently about the discursive means by which people construct such an association (e.g. Edwards & Potter, 1992; Edwards, 1997; Potter 1996; Potter & Edwards, 2001; Potter, 2003; te Molder & Potter, 2005; Weatherall et al., 2007). Potter (2012) perhaps best sums up this approach by referring to it as a more "naturalistic social psychology" that is rooted in everyday practices in which analyses are situated within the social, physical and institutional context of interaction. However, there is another stand of discursive work that attempts to examine these constructions in terms of structural constraints and issues of power and it is to this that I now wish to turn.

Perhaps the most well know work in this area is associated with that of Parker (e.g. Parker & Burman, 1993; Parker, 1998). This work draws upon a Foucauldian notion of discourse and is seeking to examine discourse as linked to subjectivity and power. This form of discourse analysis is often subsumed under the broader heading of *Critical Social Psychology*. Now whilst this work has an explicit political dimension it has been challenged for offering an overly deterministic explanation of discourse. Of course the counter to this

has been that the more conversation analytic inspired form of discourse analysis has little to say about power. There has been some attempt to pull together both of these areas (e.g. Wetherell, 1998) but for the most part they have remained segregated. Parker (2013) has recently attempted to categorize different approaches to discourse analysis into eight different types; from the more conversation analytic end of the spectrum through to critical discourse analysis. This discourse on discourse analysis has itself attracted critique in terms of drawing boundaries and lines of demarcation between different approaches, as well as generating hierarchies of criticality (Augoustinos, 2013).

However, there is another strand of work that can be thrown into the mix; those who argue that recent discourse work have failed to understand and grasp the significance of Ludwig Wittgenstein's later philosophy. A key proponent of this view is Coulter (2005) who brings to ethnomethodology a Wittgensteinian attention to the logical grammar of concepts and argues that conceptual analysis is invaluable in appreciating language use in logico-grammatical terms. Language, as Coulter (2010) later argues, is not a system to be conceptualized in terms of a tripartite division between grammar, syntax and pragmatics but rather is a very much related to logico-grammatical usage in which the words themselves are self-sufficient. This approach is critical of the search for the psychological in discourse, implying that, far from eschewing mentalism, it is in fact a form of "closet Cartesianism" (Sharrock, 2009). Neither does the sociological application of generalisations escape this critique, for as Sharrock and Dennis (2008) argue in examining the concept of rule-following, people may on occasion need rules explaining to them in order to understand a person's actions, but they do not need how rules explain explained to them.

Yet there are other approaches in social psychology that have also taken an alternative, and yet broad philosophical perspective in attempting to bridge socio-psychological analytical dualism. Notable in this regard, is the work of Hwang (e.g., 2012, 2013, 2015a, 2015b) who has argued in favour of a culture-inclusive psychology base on a "one mind, many mentalities" (Shweder et al., 1998). In this approach the aim is therefore to formulate theories that represent what is considered as the universal nature of the human mind as well as the mentalities that derive from particular societies. The approach draws upon critical realism (Bashkar, 2008) and the analytical basis of the socio-psychological dualism in seeking to bring together universal mechanism of the human mind with culture-inclusive theories on Confucianism. While this chapter is not the place to give a detailed explanation and critical appraisal of this approach, it worth pointing out the breadth and reach that it aspires in seeking to adopt multiple philosophical paradigms that offers alternatives to the mainstream presumption of individualism. This takes social psychology into new territories where it can act as a means of forging linkages between other philosophies, paradigms and cultural understandings. Indeed, to further shake up investigations the social psychological terrain, Shotter (2015) has recently argued, it is time to move beyond assuming and seeking after-the-fact patterns and regularities of pre-existing entities to thinking in terms of before-the-fact indeterminate and ephemeral things. In other words, to focus on humans deal routinely with the shaping of the 'thisnesses' or 'thatnesses' of events in the course of interaction.

What these kinds of different positions indicate is that social psychology can also be considered as a transdiscipline; a perspective that cuts across many other areas and disciplines (Scriven, 2008). It not only involves *drawing* on other disciplines but arguably these other disciplines seek to draw upon it, not as a disciplinary field, but rather as a *discourse* about the place of the social and the psychological in our lives.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This twin focus on discourse at the local as well as more global level is again part of the legacy of social psychology. The need to connect local actions with wider social forces is both at one and the same time social psychology's strength as well as its problem. Although the recent turn to discourse has eschewed the atomism and individualism that was part of earlier work it has still thrown up issues of trying to connect how people act at a local level with a broader framework. Thus whilst discursive psychology is capable of showing how people orientate towards each other in their discourse as being driven by an internal machinery of mind, it offers little in the way of explaining where this derives from.

Those who adopt a broader explanatory framework in terms of the structural constraints of discourse fail to adequately offer a social psychology of action. Instead what we have is a very broad brush picture of how discourse operates. The origins of social psychology in both psychology and sociology effectively make this local/global split inevitable as it pulls in these different directions. This need not be a problem in the sense that this tension has kept social psychology as a thriving discourse and academic pursuit over the past century. Perhaps the challenge now is to consider social psychology not so much as a discipline but a dynamic cultural discourse.

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