

Introduction

Core topics for SP (according to the BPS) are:

- Close relationships
- Attitudes
- Attribution
- Intragroup processes
- Intergroup processes
- Conformity
- Individual differences

DD307 does not present a 'before and after' story - debate and criticism is an ongoing part of how SP changes and develops.

Some authors do tell it as a 'binary' story - e.g. **Hollway**; **Stainton-Rogers** - i.e. as a period of crisis which led to divergence of work into 'mainstream' and 'other' (critical disciplines).

But some areas that started in the 'critical' camp have now gained popularity and prestige in their own right - for example, discursive psychology.

Prilleltensky and Nelson - critical psychology is an approach rather than a field in itself.

Gill - 'critical' = a political project and an epistemological stance.

Critical contrasts

Those who argue 'critical social psychology' is a separate sub-discipline of SP (e.g. **Hepburn**, **Stainton-Rogers**) identify a number of contrasting positions. These encompass differences in:

- Research practices
- Underlying methods
- Assumptions about the creation of new knowledge
- The purpose of research
- What the larger project of psychology is about

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While there are obvious differences between quantitative and qualitative research, a more subtle distinction is that between description and interpretation.

Phenomenologists argue the two cannot be neatly divided but it is one way of thinking about a number of SP research issues.

Such a distinction is relevant to the type of knowledge claims made - so are relevant to the 'epistemological stance' (**Gill**). E.g. Surveys and observations used to create statistical analyses are intended to represent an external 'real world'. Such a view of what knowledge is contrasts with social constructionist research (**Phoenix**) - where no straightforward representation is argued to exist and which explicitly acknowledges the role of the researcher in interpreting data (quantitative or qualitative).

Also related to the issue of objectivity - and whether this is actually possible to achieve in research. The assumption that it is possible underlies scientific research but is challenged by critical psychology - e.g. **Billig** - SP is not value free as it reflects the culture in which it is produced.

Interpretive methods are more likely to be used by critical psychologist (but not all interpretive researchers classify themselves as 'critical'). The 'critical' label is usually adopted to mark concern with issues of power and inequality in contemporary social contexts.

Experimental SP models the world in terms of variables, using an element of control to figure out cause and effect. This necessarily results in a simplification of the world as it is. Contrasts markedly with the 'untidier' world-view of psychosocial researchers for example.

Such distinctions highlight the purpose of research - but they are not the same as a researcher's model or theory.

Research that attempts to model and predict is conducted by people who are aware of the complexities in the world - but they deliberately put aside such detail to concentrate on particular applied explanations or interventions.

Research that embraces the complexity has an opposite purpose - to draw attention to it, explore it and make multiple connections - an explicit feature of discursive research for example. Psychoanalytic research takes this further and incorporates unconscious meanings too.

The larger project of SP is debated too - experimentalists (**Eagly** and **Chaiken**) argue it is about 'understanding the causes of behaviour' (e.g. in groups - relating to prejudice and conflict); CSP might argue the use/misuse of power and inequality (e.g. gender, race, class) are the main issues to be addressed - e.g. within institutional settings such as hospitals, prisons and schools.

CSP is social in nature - as it is always socially situated. This is very different to ESP work which attempts to find universalities of personality and behaviour, for example. CSP turns from the external characteristics of the self to tackle the experience of selfhood (**Gough** and **McFadden**) - subjectivity. Linked with 'subject' (psychoanalysis) and 'subject position' - **Foucault's** concept of how identities are derived from where we are located in a socio-cultural context (i.e. not from within us). **Hepburn** argues subjectivity is the central concern for CSP.

The delineation and exploration of subjectivity (e.g. is it rational or unconscious; fragmented or unified) has become the major project for many SP researchers - as an alternative to the concerns with the causes of behaviour (**Hollway**).