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SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY: A COMMENTARY ON ORGANIZATIONAL RESEARCH

Parisa Dashtipour

What is social psychology? The kind of answer you will get to this question will depend on who you ask, the epistemological and theoretical perspective they hold, and it will, to a large extent, also depend on the region of the world they live in and the university or faculty they work in. Social psychology is not a unified discipline; there is not one social psychology, but many social psychologies. However, despite the diversity of the field today, the positivistic approach is more pervasive and dominant than other approaches. This is the perspective which is usually taught in standard psychology courses and textbooks in most parts of the world and it is this version of social psychology that informs various applied fields, of which organizational behaviour is one of the most popular. Organizational social psychology involves the application of social psychological theories and methods to understand, inform and ultimately improve organizational practices. Organizations are ubiquitous to everyday life and they are the main instruments of capitalism. As long as social psychology is deployed to solve management problems, a critique of social psychology must include a solid critique of organizational social psychology.

This chapter will begin with a short historical overview, showing that social psychology was born out of an early interest in crowds or groups (Stainton Rogers 2011). It will then review the critiques made against mainstream social psychology, concentrating on the social identity perspective. The final part of the chapter will expand on the critical agenda by focusing on the applied field of organizational social psychology. The chapter will end by suggesting that organizational social psychology should renounce its fixation with groups *within* organizations and pay serious attention to critical management scholars who point to the relationship between broader societal ideologies and organizational life.

A longstanding interest in groups

Social psychology as we know it today began to appear between the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. A group of people who contributed significantly to the establishment of social psychology as an independent field of study was the so-called *folk psychologists*. In the 1860s, Heymann Steinthal and Moritz Lazarus studied the psychology of ordinary people and collectives. Their work was driven by the basic principle that individuals who belong to the same group tend to think in a collective rather than individual manner. The interest in the collective mind was reinforced by Gustave Le Bon (1895/1947) who drew on Tarde's (1890) concept of suggestibility and the 'group mind' to claim that in crowds people lose their individuality and capacity for independent rational thinking and become subjected to the irrational wills of the crowd. These very early theorists and their interest in group and collective behaviour have been significant in the later development of social psychology. In 1908 the psychologists McDougall published what is often seen as one

of the first social psychological textbooks in English (McDougall 1908/1960). Drawing on other social scientists, such as Le Bon, McDougall was significant in helping to establish social psychology as an independent discipline that would scientifically investigate crowds (Farr 1986). In the book *The Group Mind* (1920) he claimed that collectives that are relatively organized generate mental forces that are not exactly the same as the sum total of the attitudes of each individual group member.

However, soon enough, the interest in group and collective phenomena began to diminish as the discipline focused more on the individual. Allport (1927) dismissed the group mind thesis by arguing that the locus of study in social psychology should be individuals because it is individuals and not groups that act, think and feel. In his book *Social Psychology* (1924), he proposed a behaviourist approach based on the experimental method and underpinned by the assumption that social psychology should be concerned with observable behaviour and not waste its energies on unobservable mental states. The behaviourist approach faded away in the 1940s when during and after World War II a number of notable European Gestalt psychologists fled to the USA and established a different type of experimental approach that was less based on behaviourism and more on concepts such as group dynamics and group norms. Social psychology was thus yet again dominated by a focus on groups. Kurt Lewin, who has been a prominent figure within the field of organizational behaviour, was interested in the impact of groups on perception and action. Lewin alongside Muzafer Sherif established experimental social psychology as we know it today (Stainton Rogers 2011). In the 1940s and decades to follow, social psychological theories and approaches developed as a response to the socio-political issues of the time, such as the holocaust. The experiments conducted by Muzafer Sherif, Solomon

Ash, and later Stanley Milgram and Philip Zimbardo explored issues of influence, conformity and obedience, and could therefore be considered as critical in orientation (Hepburn 2003: 20).

Criticizing the critical work

Despite the critical potential of earlier work, the positivist perspective prevents social psychology from capturing real-world human experience. Many contemporary social psychology textbooks, such as Hogg and Vaughan (2002) – which is one of the most popular textbooks available on the market – introduce the discipline with Allport's (1935) (in)famous definition of social psychology: social psychology is 'the scientific investigation of how the thoughts, feelings and behaviours of individuals are influenced by the actual, imagined or implied presence of others' (Hogg and Vaughan 2002: 2). This definition highlights two issues. The first is the focus on science and the second is the social-individual division. Social psychologists tend to insist that their work is scientific, and they imply that experiments, or quantitative studies, should be prioritized over other research methods. Science is an approach concerned with hypothesis testing and causality and it values 'objective' observation. In standard social psychology courses and textbooks science is viewed as an alternative approach to dogma (e.g. Hogg and Vaughan 2002: 6). Students are often taught that the scientific experimental method is the most suitable method as it leads to objective generalizable knowledge about human behaviour. But the problem with experiments is that they create a false divide between the social and the individual, and this division is implicit in Allport's definition. In search for generalizable results, experiments tend to take

individuals away from their social context, which leads to a decontextualized understanding of mind and behaviour.

A relatively large group of social psychologists today reject positivism and refuse to believe in generalizable statements. Social psychology is therefore as Harré (1997) states, characterized by two conflicting perspectives; one that aims to arrive at causal, universal explanations to human experience, and another one which is critical of universalist claims and aims to explore the context-specific nature of mind and behaviour by emphasizing culture and language. These two approaches are often called *psychological social psychology* and *sociological social psychology*. It is generally agreed that the latter approach is dominant in Europe and the former in the USA.

To a large extent, it was the so-called crisis in the discipline that led to the solidification of these two strands and to the development of critical social psychology (Spears 1997). The crisis is often stated to have begun with Israel and Tajfel's (1972) criticism of mainstream individualist approaches. Another scholar who has been significant in setting the terms of the debate is Gergen (1973) who challenged the reliance on positivism, arguing that social psychology is more akin to history than to the natural sciences. One of the main issues that concerned scholars at the time was that social psychology had become little else than a technical scientific endeavor that was far removed from real-world issues (Hepburn 2003). Researchers were criticized for being too focused on individual cognitive processes, and for employing narrow theoretical and methodological perspectives. Even though the crises did not lead to any serious solutions to the problems that were raised (Augoustinos and Walker 1995), it did contribute to the development of a specifically 'European' social psychology that was explicitly social in its approach. Moscovici

(1972), one of the pioneers of this European perspective, was also a critic of North American research because of its individualist and capitalist underpinnings.

One paradigm that emerged out of the crisis was the social identity theory (for reviews of this theory, see Brown 2000; Hornsey 2008; Reicher, Spears, and Haslam 2010; Tajfel and Turner 1986). This theory was initially developed to make sense of the findings of a series of famous experiments known as the 'minimal group paradigm' which focused on intergroup behaviour (Billig and Tajfel 1973; Tajfel 1970; Tajfel et al. 1971). Later, self-categorization theory (Turner 1985; Turner et al. 1987) was developed as a branch of social identity theory and explored group processes in general. The influence of social identity theory has in recent years increased and it is today one of the most popular perspectives in social psychology (Hornsey 2008). This theory is often perceived as a critical approach, partly because it was born out of an interest in prejudice, oppression, conflict and social change. It also challenges much of the individualism in social psychology by emphasizing the impact of the social group on psychology. Despite this critical edge, however, the theory largely centres on cognitive processes. Parker (1997) points out that ironically, individual psychology and cognitive processes has become increasingly important in European research on social identity and groups. Social identity theory tend to present contextual and social issues as external to the individual, existing merely as a set of stimuli to which the individual responds. Self-categorization theory in particular tends to break the world down into separate levels and variables for use in experimental manipulation and statistical analysis (Condor 2003), and relations between groups are thought to exist as a series of outside stimuli that are cognitively processed within the individual mind. For example, 'maleness, masculinity, gender differences are all described as a "set of relations being

represented". They constitute the input to a representational process occurring within the individual' (Brown and Lunt 2002: 9). Researchers have also challenged the universalistic assumptions that underlie the social identity paradigm. Although some of Tajfel's writings cautioned against universal psychological explanations and 'truth claims', 'social identity theory is a universal theory, both in terms of its key concepts and its core assumptions about individual motivations' (Billig 1996: 346).

Discontented with the cognitivism, individualism and universalism of mainstream European social psychology, a group of scholars, influenced by social constructionism and discourse theory have developed something which is termed discursive social psychology. Discursive social psychology is a vast field and is itself deeply divided between, for example, those who adopt a 'bottom-up' approach and focus on the intricate details of everyday discourse (e.g. Potter and Wetherell 1987) and those who promote a more 'top-down' approach by emphasizing the significance in exploring what societal discourses do to us (e.g. Parker 1992) (see Branney 2008: 576). What both of these perspectives share is a focus on language and discourse and a dedication to qualitative research. The discursive perspective has been an important critical strand; it has challenged mainstream approaches, including the social identity paradigm, for neglecting communication and language (Condor 1996; Wetherell 1996: 280, see also the discursively orientated social identity research by Reicher and Hopkins 1996; 2001). From the discursive point of view, language is constitutive of social life and thus social psychology is defined as what happens between people and in language, rather than within individual minds. While the bottom-up version of discursive social psychology has in recent years become more part of the mainstream (Parker 2012), those unhappy with discursive psychologists' prioritization of discourse over subjectivity

(e.g. Frosh 2001) have contributed to the development of yet another critical approach referred to as 'psychosocial studies' (Frosh 2003; Frosh et al. 2003; Gough 2004; see also Henriques et al. 1984/1998; for a review of this field, see Frosh 2010, chapter 7).

Organizational social psychology

The above-mentioned challenges to mainstream social psychology have been important in demonstrating the continued prevalence of individualism and cognitivism, and they have helped to disrupt the faith in experiments as the ideal method. In this section, I expand on the critique of mainstream social psychology by examining some of the ways in which the discipline has been applied to understand organizational behaviour. This is significant because social psychology is not simply an academic exercise. As a component of the 'psy-complex' (Ingleby 1985; Rose 1989), it participates in the regulation of every-day life, including organizational life. It is largely by examining how the discipline has been applied that we can make explicit the ideological basis of its knowledge production.

Contemporary social psychology focuses on a variety of topics including attitudes, perception, social influence and prejudice (see for example, Hewstone et al. 2012). Applied social psychology involves the practical application of theories, research methods and intervention techniques to shed light on and solve various real world social problems. Applied fields include immigration, education, gender relations and mental health. The discipline has been particularly influential in the area of organizational behaviour. It could be stated that this interest in organizations is as old as social psychology itself; its seeds may be found in Steinthal and Lazarus' work on the influence of social organization on individual

mentality. What concerns social psychology is often considered as directly relevant to organizations. Organizational behaviour – a field of study which is becoming increasingly popular (Knights and Willmott 2012) – is to a significant extent shaped by research and theories that originate in social psychology. The latter has had a massive impact on the way in which organizational issues are understood and addressed. Social psychologists attempt to particularly understand the psychological factors underpinning individuals' behaviour in organizations. Areas of interest include leadership, group processes, motivation, organizational change, organizational culture and organizational performance.

Courses in social and organizational psychology are often presented as different to the more traditional organizational or industrial psychology perspectives because they take into account the social and contextual influences on performance (see for example Social-Organizational Psychology course description at Columbia University:

<http://www.tc.columbia.edu/orgpsych/index.asp?Id=General+Information&Info=What+is+Social-Organizational+Psychology%3F>). Despite this emphasis on context, organizational social psychology risks psychologizing organizational phenomena when it claims to 'use psychological insight to build an understanding of the minds of organizational members' (De Cremer et al. 2011: 6). Furthermore, insofar as it aims to 'provide conceptual tools and theories to tackle...managerial and organizational challenges' (De Cremer et al. 2011: 5) social psychology could be regarded as acting in the interest of management. This is evident in the assistance that social psychology claims to offer organizations, especially in managing outliers that do not fit the stated organizational vision. As De Cremer et al. state, 'when individual beliefs differ from organizational beliefs, it becomes critical to know how to merge those beliefs into a central, motivating culture' (De Cremer et al. 2011: 7).

Social identity theory is however a potentially critical approach to organizational social psychology. In the decades since Ashforth and Mael's (1989) influential paper, there has been an enormous interest in the application of social identity theory to organizations (see for example, Albert et al. 2000; Haslam 2004; Haslam et al. 2003; Herriot and Scott-Jackson 2002; Hogg and Terry 2001; Van Dick 2001). In organizational studies of identity, social identity theory is today the most well-known and influential approach (Alvesson et al. 2008). Social identity theorists have been driven by a concern for *both* the psychological and the social aspects of organizational life, and are therefore seen as opposed to the individualism of the organizational/industrial psychology perspective. Furthermore, in contrast to the latter, the application of social identity theory to organizations is based on the assumption that issues of power, politics and conflict are central to organizational and working lives and should therefore be highlighted and studied, rather than glossed over.

In *Psychology in Organizations* – a book which is nowadays listed as essential reading in organizational social psychology courses – Haslam (2004), reworks some of the most popular organizational topics from the perspective of social identity theory. Haslam shows that much of what traditionally has been perceived as an outcome of individual psychology, such as motivation, commitment, decision-making, leadership and stress are actually an effect of group processes. This is an important book in social psychology, not least for its critical outlook and its challenge of some aspects of managerial doctrine. Haslam states that the psychological internalization of the group means that individuals can 'engage in meaningful, integrated and collaborative organizational behaviour ... The fact that groups transform the psychology of the individual is seen not as a necessary evil but as an essential good' (p. 17). Social identity theory goes against traditional theories – including Janis (1982)

idea of 'group think' – by emphasizing that the influence of groups may lead to creative and socially enriching practices. On the one hand, this idea can be seen as progressive given that identification with a group is critical for the development of 'collective consciousness', social solidarity and social cohesion, and for the occurrence of collective action. If people in organizations define themselves as individuals, rather than as members of groups, they are more likely to be driven by a motivation to enhance themselves as individuals, to focus on their personal success and the attainment of personal resources. When social identity is salient, however, people are more likely to strive for collective gains and they are more prone to be sensitive to other people's opinions and show loyalty and commitment. The emphasis on groups and social identity is thus significant, especially as it challenges the mainstream focus on individual competition and the glorification of career development and personal financial and material growth. There is however a risk that this turns into an idealization of the group. We should be wary of the fact that the process of identification – viewing oneself as part of a group - that social identity theory often highlights as associated with positive outcomes – is exactly what is necessary for the manipulation and control of employee behaviour and subjectivity. Any theorization of identity should centre on the relationship between identity and control of employees (Alvesson and Willmott 2002). One of the reasons why social identity theory has not adequately made this control aspect more explicit than it should may be due to its positivist approach that views identity largely as a given, rather than as the continuous project of power. Thus, although it attempts to highlight politics and conflict as determinant factors in organizational life, its ultimate aim is to predict behaviour and to provide remedies to organizational 'problems'. Regardless of

well-intentioned challenges to the managerial prerogative and despite a focus in political processes, it still based on an instrumentally rational view of the organization.

Just like much of the general literature on social identity theory, Haslam's book is permeated with a tension between the desire to remain dedicated to a critical agenda – one that takes seriously the political and social embedding of mind and behaviour – and the persistence of a research program that claims to *explain* and *define* human experience, and that therefore takes part in the managerial mission to direct and control behaviour. Social psychologists participate in the political life of organizations in the very moment they state that theirs is not a project about politics (see Haslam 2004: 226). Politics is exercised when research claims to offer practical solutions to managerial concerns, such as, motivation, group productivity and decision-making (see Haslam 2004 p. 227). Notwithstanding the good intentions of the social psychologist, suggestions such as 'productivity on a group task will increase to the extent that group goals are congruent with a salient social identity' (p. 227) can be deployed in an attempt to manipulate and change behaviour within organizations in ways that further the interests of certain groups. In the very beginning of his book, Haslam justifies the need for social identity theory by appealing to the discourse of efficiency (Haslam 2004: 1). The application of social identity theory remains thus, to a large extent, a technical exercise and ultimately aimed at improving management outcomes. Despite its critical potential, the social identity approach to organization studies is in the end a functionalist one, driven by an assumption that there is a relationship between identity and behaviour and therefore, managers can utilize identity in order to generate behaviour that is to the benefit of the organization.

Conclusion: Critical management studies as inspiration

When investigating its 'applied' aspect, the role of ideology and power in social psychological research and theory becomes readily apparent. Organizational social psychology is largely driven by a desire to develop general universal laws about how people in organizations function. Even those perspectives that attempt to bring to light the dominance of context do not avoid employing a discourse permeated by generalizable truth-claims about how organizations work and how they can perform better.

Organizational social psychology often adopts a rather restricted understanding of the social and of politics. Despite recognizing that politics is endemic to organizational life, it is often 'micro-politics' – the politics that occurs between people or groups within organizations – which is of concern. As a result, the way in which broader structural factors, including an examination of how historical and cultural forces shape identities within organizations tends to get overlooked. Analysis that focuses on problems within organizations and neglects wider structural issues will inevitably be partial. Organizational social psychology needs to pay serious attention to critical management scholars who have in the past few decades posed a challenge to traditional theories of management (Alvesson and Willmott 1992). These scholars oblige us to consider the 'system-wide', neo-liberalist ideologies that influence management logics, perceptions and cognitions within organizations. Trying to comprehend social psychological processes in organizations without seriously recognizing such dominant 'extra-organizational' dynamics will inevitably be a futile exercise. Rather than being preoccupied with instrumental concerns, organizational social psychology needs to be driven by emancipatory interests. Furthermore, instead of

deploying energies into producing theories, methods and prescriptions in the hope that they will offer 'solutions' to managerial problems – instead of being preoccupied with prediction and control – social psychologists should aim to reveal the politically charged, messy, contradictory and ambiguous side of organizational life under capitalism.

Further reading

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Website resources

Mead project, <http://www.brocku.ca/MeadProject/inventory5.html>, Includes classical writings by social psychologists, including Allport and Sherif

Social Psychology Network, <http://www.socialpsychology.org/>, includes links to a wide variety of social psychology websites. It is a good source for exploring the kind of issues that social psychologists are interested in and the type of research they do.

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