

The Lecture Contains:

- ☰ The 'social' in social psychology
- ☰ A blind-following of the positivist philosophy of science
- ☰ BUT, application for 'whom' and for 'what'?
- ☰ The scientific status of alternative approaches

◀ Previous Next ▶

- If we look at the first lecture of this course, we find that the definitions of social psychology and the research focus of the discipline are intricately linked to the paradigm of science these belong to. Insights into the behaviour or experiences of people in their socio-cultural context, then depend upon the paradigm of science that has been used to study human lives in social situations. The focus of the final module and its lectures is to take a critical overview of the theories and application of social psychology in real life, and the emerging paradigms of scientific inquiry within the discipline. For this purpose the lectures are devoted to the following themes :
 1. Revisiting the meaning of 'social' in social psychology
 2. The historical context of the application of social psychology
 3. Future of the discipline: Promises of multi-paradigmatic approaches

The 'social' in social psychology

- Theory and application are bound by definition and the meaning of 'social' that has been adopted in that definition. McGarty and Haslam (1997, p. 7) point out five such prevailing meanings in social psychology texts:
 1. Relating to interaction between people
 2. Of, or pertaining to, society or culture;
 3. Of, or pertaining to, groups of people;
 4. Relating to problems affecting large numbers of people;
 5. Involving more than one person
- In all the lectures that we have covered in this course, a critical look at them will reveal that social psychology largely adheres to the meanings of social primarily given in the points 1, 3 and 5. When it comes to understanding human experiences in their socio-cultural or historical contexts, the mainstream social psychology does not offer much insight. Furthermore, when it comes to the problems affecting large number of people living in diverse cultural or socio-political contexts, much is desired within social psychology. Let us look at the potential reasons behind this skewed focus within social psychology research.



A blind-following of the positivist philosophy of science

- Moghaddam and Harre (1995, p. 71) are of the opinion that it is the blind acceptance of the methodology and the assumptions of positivist or logical empiricist philosophy of science as the parameters of judging psychology's or social psychology's status of being scientific discipline that is at the core of a reluctance among social psychologist to incorporate the meanings, contexts or problems of human life in their alternative approaches towards the discipline :

"In many cases it is grounded in a certain conception of the nature of "science" as the prime source of reliable knowledge of some field of interest. The only conception of the nature of science that would seem to stand in sharp opposition to the metaphysics and methodology of the alternative psychologies, taken together, is the positivist philosophy of logical empiricism. Only in that philosophy of science is it assumed that there are genuine data-driven research programs, and only in that philosophy is the concept of causality reduced in such a way that a regular concomitance of like events counts as a causal relation. ...Whether or not a research program is to get the accolade "science", then, seems to depend on the philosophical assumptions of those who made the assessment."



BUT, application for 'whom' and for 'what'?

- A blind-following of the positivist model of social psychology not only renders the discipline's approach being largely apolitical (paradoxically serving the interests of only the dominant sections, e.g., employers rather than the employees in organizations or top-down approach of the government rather than the bottom-up approach) but also predetermines the social psychologists focus only on the individualistic and intra-psychic elements in people's reaction to the 'social' while studying social behaviour (Dalal & Misra, 2002; Moghaddam & Harre, 1995).
- We must be reminded that there are some useful contributions made by social psychologists in understanding the social behaviour as we noticed in various topics covered in this course. The problem is not with the positivist approach per se, but it is the neglect of other meaningful alternative approaches to study human lives in the socio-historical context that denies a space to their experiences. As seen earlier, what impedes the use of these alternative approaches (such as social constructionist approach) is a view of 'science' that sets the parameters for scientific status for disciplines. Let us see how the

The scientific status of alternative approaches

- Moghaddam and Harre (1995, p. 72) are of the view that the alternative approaches to study social behaviour or experiences (such as the social constructionist approach) are in no way less valid or reliable than the mainstream positivist methods as the parameters for these are set by philosophy of science an approach adheres to :

“The accusation against alternative psychologies, that they are not “scientific,” is shallow. Insofar as it depends on the accuser’s adherence to logical empiricism as a philosophy of science, it is outmoded. In addition, if a post-positivist philosophy of science is the source of criteria of assessment, the mainstream methodology and metaphysics looks decidedly less satisfactory as basis for acquiring reliable and valid knowledge of the types and sources of human social behavior than any of the alternatives.”

The scientific status of alternative approaches

- In an interesting way, Moghaddam and Harre (1995, pp. 71-72) also showed that there is a possibility of evaluating the (experimental) research conducted in positivist paradigm from alternative approaches. Their intent was to illustrate the meaningfulness of the alternative approaches – specifically the dramaturgical approach – in studying the human (experimenter's and participants') experiences in their socio-historical context (of laboratory) in a scientific way:

“Such behavior is more accurately explained using a dramaturgical model, according to which the laboratory stage is set and the script is prepared and rehearsed, with a narrow gap being left in the script for the participant to improvise. Of course, such improvisation will most likely be made to fit the rest of the drama, so that most participants interpret the situation and improvise their part in a manner that follows a regular pattern.

The fact that behavior often does follow a pattern should not lead us to conclude that it has been “caused” by independent variable(s). For example, the presence of the scientist in the white lab coat no more “caused” participants in Milgram's (1974) study to administer lethal levels of electric shock to the (confederate) learner, than a red light at a cross-road “causes” drivers to stop. Participants in Milgram's study followed the plot and saw it as appropriate to improvise according to local rules (“follow the experimenter's instructions when in the lab”), just as drivers on the road intentionally follow driving regulations (“red light means one has to stop”). In both cases, some individuals intentionally choose to break the rules (by telling Milgram “I will not...” and walking out of the experiment, or by putting their foot down on the accelerator and speeding through the red light). Most people do not behave this way, but tend to follow the rules for correct behavior.”