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# To what extent has theory and research on families been successful in transcending the individual-society dualism?

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By Damian E M Milton

The family can be seen as central to an individual's social and psychological life. From the earliest inception of social science disciplines, the family has therefore become a much researched topic to study. As psychologists and sociologists attempted to establish their respective disciplines in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, 'positivistic' notions of the use of scientific principles of research and methodology became dominant, in order to gain credibility in academia against the established 'hard' sciences and humanities. This dualism between the subject disciplines aided the establishment of research into family life that often separated its individual and social aspects. Developing concurrently with positivist methodologies and the growing gap in individual-society dualisms, was the rise of dissenting voices to this dualism that recognised this tension in the production of knowledge and the lives people inhabited:

"Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living." (Marx, 1852/1970:15).

This essay analyses the contributions made to research on family life by Discursive Social Psychology (DSP) and the Social Psychoanalytic perspective (SPP); and how these theories have been utilised to try and transcend the traditional dualisms and boundaries between previous theories that concentrated on either the individual or society as a primary focus.

The social anthropologist George Murdock (1949, cited in Haralambos and Holborn, 2004) studied many societies and cultures and argued that some form of nuclear family structure was universal to humanity. This notion also persisted in the normative theories driving Developmental psychology and early 'Psychological Social Psychology' (PSP) that tended to reduce social influences on family life to interpersonal processes within the family. By not highlighting the diversity of family life and assuming universality, these theories reinforced culturally specific ideals and notions of deviance to those who lived outside of normative expectations, such as those framed as 'single'. Developmental psychologists attempted to analyse the causes of various good or poor 'outcomes' for individuals (for example: educational success) and frequently associated mother-child interactions with these

outcomes (O'Brien, 2005, cited in Lucey, 2007). This approach reproduced the individual-society dualism and notions of a 'static' family devoid of historical context; focusing on processes within families in isolation. Little attention was given in these psychological theories to the impact of wider social influences (or micro interactions in macro-social theories). In recent decades, notions of the nuclear family being natural and normal have begun to subside as a dominant practice and discourse. Although often still seen as a site of primary socialisation by contemporary politicians, family structures and meanings attached to family life have radically altered; with more people cohabiting, living alone, living as lone or step parents, and having dual-incomes (Lucey, 2007).

In contrast to PSP theories dominant in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century research into families, was the establishment of Sociological Social Psychological (SSP) theories (or 'micro-sociology'). Originating in the seminal work of Mead's (1934, cited in Lucey, 2007) theory of 'symbolic interactionism', SSP focused on how societal processes impacted upon micro-level family practices in an inter-play between structural processes and human agency. In these theories (for example: Goffman, 1959, cited in Lucey, 2007), families were seen as fluid and performative processes, negotiated in the social interactions of everyday life. Therefore, the meanings associated with family life are not inert, but are representative of a diverse array of dynamic entities. These early SSP theories provided an important precursor for the emergence of discursive psychological research on family life.

For discursive social psychologists, people construct their identities through the use of language and discourse; consequently in their research, they analyse cultural 'texts' for the employment of 'interpretive repertoires' that individuals use to describe and 'situate' their own and others 'subject positions' within the discourse they implement (Lucey, 2007). In constructing an identity, people utilise dominant discourses that reconstruct longstanding cultural prejudices and oppressive ideologies in everyday practices of living. The use of language is thus rendered active in orienting social action, consequently constructing social reality as people perceive it to be. Within the use of language, people make use of 'discursive resources' that are never fixed but fluid and changeable through the dynamic process of social interaction. Powerful ideologies are reproduced when they become accepted discourse and are acted upon, producing a social reality that favours some at the expense of others. Discursive psychology often adopts a 'critical' stance, deliberately problematising the use of dominant discourse (including PSP).

Reynolds and Wetherell (2003, cited in Lucey, 2007) analysed 'singleness' in cultural discourse, in order to look at the boundaries of what is considered a 'family'. They found that being 'single' is constructed as the opposite of being in a family and related to unequal power relations between genders. Participants in their study drew upon 'interpretive repertoires' of both positive and negative connotation: independence, freedom and choice; yet also notions of social exclusion. These participants constructed personal discourses that were inconsistent and contradictory, often due to constraining sets of expectations internalised from dominant discourse, leaving the individual with a dilemma to resolve. Some participants constructed positive notions of singlehood, yet often had difficulty in explaining a desire for change; some talked freely about wanting a relationship, yet feared

being viewed as 'desperate'; whilst others created a reflexive account about the dilemmas they faced and alternated between repertoires. According to Reynolds and Taylor (2004, cited in Lucey, 2007) 'singleness' is framed in dominant discourse as a 'failure' and a 'lack' of acquiring a 'normal' family life and thus situated 'outside' the family. Rosneil and Budgeon (2004, cited in Lucey, 2007) argued that single people, rather than being isolated and anomic members of society, were often highly integrated into a complex network of kinship and friendship ties; however, they also argued that the discursive resources available to single women were inadequate for explaining their experiences.

Social research has long attested to the finding that women on average do far more of the childcare and household tasks within a family, even when they are in full-time employment (Baxter, 2000, cited in Lucey, 2007). Dixon and Wetherell (2004, cited in Lucey, 2007) by applying the methodology of discourse analysis, found that principles of equity in family tasks were seen as 'moral evaluations' that were made meaningful through everyday discursive activities, rather than an *a priori* fixed meaning. According to Lucey (2007):

"Unequal gender relations are deeply embedded in the way that domestic life is organised" (Lucey, 2007:79).

Hochschild (1989, cited in Lucey, 2007) found that domestic tasks performed by men were often viewed as 'gifts' or 'favours' in what Hochschild (1989, cited in Lucey, 2007) termed 'economies of gratitude'. Although interactively constructed discourses of fairness may persist in a family, they may represent an imbalanced relationship in the eyes of outsiders. The discursive social psychological research into domestic labour relations shows that personal discourses are infused by dominant patriarchal discourse that defines gender inequality as normative.

Another attempt to transcend traditional dilemmas such as the individual-society dualism was made in the development of SPP. This approach departed from both traditional developmental psychology and psychoanalysis. SPP assumes social and psychological aspects of life are linked together and utilises interpretive/qualitative methods in order to uncover the strategies that people develop, to defend against anxiety and its role in constructing individual and social lives. Where DSP and phenomenological approaches analyse the conscious narratives described by individuals, SPP builds an ontological representation of the conscious mind as being the 'tip of the iceberg', underpinned by a dynamic and conflicting unconscious mind (Lucey, 2007). As such, individuals are thought to introject (internalise) influences from the social world on an unconscious level. Whilst the majority of psychological research assumes individuals to be rational decision makers in the choice of social actions that they take; the unconscious mind is thought to influence how people feel, think and act. Accordingly, the individual and the social are seen as inseparable mutual influences upon one another. As Frosh (2003, cited in Lucey, 2007) argued, the relational subjectivity of individuals emerges from within the social domain. Therefore social inequalities of ethnicity, class and gender, along with the influence of social relationships (including external family, siblings and peers) are all seen to impact on unconscious

processes within the individual. From this viewpoint, SPP amalgamates notions of interior dynamics of the mind with its relationship to the 'social' concept of power.

Hollway (1984, cited in Lucey, 2007) utilising SPP; replaces the notion of 'choice' with that of 'investment', in the taking up of subject positions. SPP therefore emphasises emotionality, constructed as an opposite of rational choice (potentially feeding into patriarchal discourse rather than challenging it).

Edwards et al. (2006, cited in Lucey, 2007) interviewed two of five Bangladeshi sisters; who constructed their elder sister as the living embodiment of purity and goodness and dreaded the idea of being negatively sanctioned by her. By using an 'object relations' approach and the theory of 'ego-ideals' (Mitchell, 2002, cited in Lucey, 2007), Edwards et al. (2006, cited in Lucey, 2007) argued that the elder sister had been introjected as an 'internal policeman' or 'critical internal voice', exercising a powerful internalisation within the super-ego. They also found these narratives reflected moral and ethical codes internalised from their religious beliefs and community life. The sisters identified with their elder sibling as embodying dominant cultural values; thus they internalised powerful cultural discourses, as well as 'splitting', a classic defence mechanism of seeing others as either wholly 'good' or 'bad' in their attributes.

Families have always been a central topic of study for social scientists, yet traditionally (especially 'positivists' in America) research was segregated into the sociology of family structures and PSP, using 'positivist' scientific method to establish causes of developmental outcomes for individuals. With a growing number of traditions, from Marxism, through Feminism, SSP and finally post-structuralism, these traditional dichromatic distinctions and dualisms began to break down. Influenced by these traditions DSP, unlike PSP, does not view any clear distinction between familial phenomena and wider social activity; consequently, a family is not identifiable as a universally recognised static object. Following this theory, the individual is not divorced from the society in which they live. This is echoed in the Social Psychoanalytic perspective, yet instead of looking at 'what' discursive resources are drawn upon from society, this perspective attempts to explain 'why' people act and say the things they do, including what is hidden through the use of defence mechanisms (Lucey, 2007).

The examples of research into 'singleness' and the domestic division of labour, show DSP situates the experiences and actions of individual people within a wider historical and social context; and that constructions of social reality are always shifting, fluid and negotiated in ongoing social practices. The concept of discourse helps to transcend the individual-society dualism, by establishing interconnectedness between dominant discourses on a macro societal level and the agency of individuals in being producers and reproducers of discursive practices. By situating the individual within the wider social and historical context of 'discursive reality', DSP engages with traditionally sociological ideas of power and inequality, yet also shows how these realities are reproduced at a micro/individual level. In so doing, DSP also implodes the agency-structure dualism that has equally haunted social science since its inception, into an interactive co-dependent relationship; standing in stark contrast

to the universalising theories that preceded it. In criticism however, DSP may still be highlighting discourse at a macro 'social' level as more fundamental than the influence of individual agency, as the self almost disappears in a 'sea' of conflicting cultural tools.

In contrast to DSP, SPP focuses on the individual to a greater extent by ontologically assuming not only a conscious agent, yet one that is also driven by unconscious desires and anxieties. Unconscious processes merge with those of the social environment and are thus situated within culture and social inequalities of class, gender and ethnicity. The individual is seen as being more of a static entity than in DSP however, heavily influenced by early childhood experiences, rather than a highly changeable being. In criticism, its level of analysis can be viewed as epistemologically and ethically suspect, by assuming that its techniques are capable of gaining greater access to the unconscious mind than attempts by the individuals own consciousness. The 'five sisters' example in Edwards et al.'s (2006, cited in Lucey, 2007) research, were probably conscious of the intricacies of their familial relationships and could have equally been explored from a phenomenological approach that did not demote consciousness to a secondary consideration. SPP may have attempted to transcend the individual-society dualism, by analysing how influences from the wider community and culture in the shape of moral codes are introjected by the individual and affect the way they think and feel. SPP does not however, have the conceptual repertoire of DSP to account for the influence of social phenomena; yet both theories could be said to be focusing on different aspects of social psychology and could potentially help to inform each others practices.

## **References**

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