



An Introduction to Social Psychology

Individual-Society Dualism

Wendy Hollway:

Individual-Society Dualism is the most enduring theme in social psychology, but it's a problem. It's social psychology's biggest problem maybe. The tendency to think on the one hand that things are produced by individual action, that individuals have clear boundaries, that they're not linked to others, that they're autonomous, that they are rational decision makers who are not unduly influenced by the world around them.

On the other hand, there are ways of thinking in social psychology which say: yes, but influences from social, the social sphere are so, so pressured, so heavy, so influential, that people are not really just the single individual, they are so connected to and influenced by social forces.

Ann Phoenix:

One of the things we're saying in this course is that such a dichotomy, dichotomies are actually never helpful, and this is, is a really unproductive dichotomy. So to focus only on the individual without recognising that they're always inextricably linked with society, with the social, is not really very helpful, it's not productive at all.

Wendy Hollway:

We as a discipline are perched right in that gap. Are we there to explain individuals or are we there to explain how they function in the wider society? And the standard definition of social psychology is the study of individuals in their social context.

And so it's about putting those two things together, and any framework that actually tends to say things are either due to individuals or due to social forces, actually pulls apart what we are trying to build a bridge between.

Ann Phoenix:

Take the example of people becoming students in higher education. Now I've done a piece of research with Caroline Kelly who's also part of this course, which is on mature students. Those students are terrified when they become students. They think they'll be found out that they're not clever enough. There are all sorts of things that they don't know. Now that sounds as if it's very individual, as if this person has brought with them their own shortcomings, their own fears and it's all just individual. But of course this is in a context where there are social expectations about what it is to be a student, and where from society they've got notions of what students should be like, what they should admit to. And therefore the very fact that they feel not so confident means that they feel that they're not a proper student. The two things are indivisible- what they've got from society, what they see around them and what they bring. So individual and social always together.