

Psychogeography and feminist methodology

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Abstract

This paper will suggest how a psychogeographical methodology can be developed as a new method for feminist psychologists, in the study of urban and rural environments. One of the limitations of situationist psychogeography is its grounding in the male gaze. In addition, men have had privileged access to and time to participate in such activities. Drawing on Feminist geography, Queer theory and Gay/Lesbian writing, core concepts such as embodied subjectivity and heteronormativity can be used to develop the theoretical base of a feminist psychogeographical methodology. In this paper, I will outline how feminist psychogeographical research might be conducted; the 'situationist' approach of using bodies as research 'instruments' means that innovative data may be gathered through the experience of walking and seeing the world through the situationist lens. Finally, the implications of this work for personal and political social transformation will be addressed.

Keywords

Psychogeography, situationism, feminism, walking

Introduction

In recent times, psychological research has begun to study the signification and experience of the visual world and urban environments (Dixon and Durrheim, 2000; Hook, 2007; Reavey, 2011). However, one of the key limitations of such research has been a lack of consideration of the extent to which research can create radical social change. Moreover, critical academic research (critical psychology, for example) has largely tended to be detached from activist work and practice and has adopted a somewhat apolitical vision of radical change (Bridger, 2010; Hayes, 2003). One of the key strengths of situationist work is that it draws together activism, art and theoretical knowledge to consider the analysis and critique of environments in modern society.

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However, there has been limited theoretical and empirical work on situationism and psychogeography within the disciplines of psychology, geography, Feminism, Gay/Queer/Lesbian studies and Cultural Studies. The majority of published research on situationism and psychogeography focuses on providing historical overviews of the development of situationist theory and practice (see for example, McDonough, 2009; Plant, 1992; Sadler, 1998). In this paper, I argue that there is potential value in a situationist approach for feminist psychologists, producing innovative methods and new kinds of data. I will therefore now turn to the work of the situationists and consider how their work could inform feminist psychogeographical methods of investigation in psychology.

The situationists were a group of radical poets, artists and writers who were concerned with how environments affect how people feel and behave. In particular, they criticised the gentrification of urban environments in capitalist societies. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, they developed a practice called psychogeography, which 'could set for itself the study of the precise law and specific effects of the geographical environment consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behaviours of individuals' (Debord, 1955; n.p). The situationists typically used a method called the *dérive*, a particular way of walking for the purpose of exploring the impact of urbanisation. This practice was intended to disrupt the habitual ways in which individuals normally experience environments. *Dérives* were not designed to be ordinary walks, such as walking to get from home to work, to go shopping or to visit people. Investigations were usually focused on the impact of particular sites where buildings were being demolished to make way for new shopping centres and high-class living areas. Participants would wander around these environments, taking interest in the forgotten and neglected areas of urban environments, and observing how people navigated urban spaces. Situationists such as Chtcheglov (1958) wrote poetic and surrealist accounts of cities. Debord (1958), Debord and Jorn (1957) and Khatib (1958) wrote political theoretical treatises on how urban environments needed to be reclaimed from capitalist enterprises and party political groups, as well as creating subversive maps. Therefore writing, art and practical activities were examples of political activism and intervention with the aim of challenging the capitalist formation of space (Debord, 1958; Vaneigem, 1967) and to begin to envision what non-capitalist environments would look like.

The situationist critique of the gentrification of environments is arguably of continuing relevance, particularly in light of town and urban planning in both western and non-western countries. However, the situationist approach to psychogeographical research retains a masculinist bias. Accounts from former situationists such as Ralph Rumney suggest that some situationists held sexist and anti-feminist views in terms of what women should and should not do in domestic environments. In addition, prominent female situationists such as Michèle Bernstein were not properly acknowledged for their contributions to the development of situationist theory:

One of the curious things about the IS [sic] was that it was extraordinarily anti-feminist in its practice. Women were there to type, cook supper and so on. I rather

disapproved of this. Michèle has been an extraordinarily powerful and perceptive mind which is shown by the fact that she is among the most important literary critics in France today. A lot of the theory, particularly the political theory, I think originated with Michèle rather than Debord, he just took it over and put his name to it (Rumney, 2010; n.p).

This bias has begun to be addressed by some feminist geographers, critical psychologists, narrative psychologists and community activist groups in order to study men and women's experiences of social environments, as well as to challenge gendered inequalities in society. Precarias a la Deriva (2005) (translated in English as Precarious Women Workers Adrift) are a group of feminist, critical, political activists and academics based in Madrid, Spain. They draw on elements of situationism and the practice of the *dérive* to explore the effects of home, work and leisure environments on women's lived experiences of the world and are particularly concerned with how the structural conditions of capitalism impinge on women's experiences. Similar work has been conducted by a group of narrative psychologists based in East London (Burnett et al., 2004). They conducted a *dérive* to reflect on how their gendered subject positions were shaped by the structural demands of paid work, childcare and other commitments and found that it was actually very difficult to 'divert' themselves from routine patterns of behaviour and ways of being in the world. Their method of writing a *dérive* account is useful in developing the documentation of psychogeographical research. Finally, Grup de Lesbianes Feministes (2005) (translated into English as the Feminist Lesbians Group) is composed of critical psychologists and lesbian, feminist and anti-capitalist activists based in Barcelona, Spain. Their work aims to challenge their ascribed social positions as 'consumer-market subjects' and they argue that all public spaces should be used as 'political space for collective creativity based on new forms of social, sexual and affective relations' (2005: 109). In their work, they use a range of psychogeographical and situationist-inspired strategies, including *dérives*, social protest and street theatre.

The work of these groups suggests how 'research data' can take the form of a variety of traditional and non-traditional formats including writing, art and street performance. Their work is useful in developing psychogeographical methods for psychology; in my own psychogeographical practice, I engage in *dérives*, write narrative *dérive* accounts, take photographs and produce artistic maps in order to document the research process (see Bridger, 2011, forthcoming).

Core concepts for a feminist psychogeography: Embodied subjectivity and heteronormativity

The concepts of embodied subjectivity and heteronormativity are arguably central to Feminism, Critical Psychology and Feminist Geography and are therefore important in the development of a feminist psychogeography.

Gill (2008: 40) argues that subjectivity is inherently gendered. The concept of gendered subjectivity can be used in making sense of embodied experience.

Psychogeography as a practice involves walking through various places, and the gendered body is therefore like a 'vehicle' through which the person experiences and makes sense of their relation both to others and to place. The study of how bodies can be used as research instruments has largely been neglected (Cragg, 2003; Longhurst and Johnston, 2008). However, in geographical studies, the materiality of bodies and embodied experience has been of central concern since the publication of work by writers such as Longhurst (2001). Various ways of theorising bodies in relation to place have been considered in key geographical texts (for example, Browne et al., 2007; Davidson et al., 2005). Other visceral modes of experience may be the focus of psychogeographical walking; Brown and Durrheim (2009) discuss the role of various types of embodied activity in relation to how individuals construct experiences of the world through talk and text. However, this is not to argue that bodies can simply be reduced to texts.

Furthermore, it is important to consider bodies and embodied experience in relation to place (Nast and Pile, 1998). Johnston and Longhurst (2010) argue that power and sexual politics are part of the fabric of environments, and Brown, Browne and Lim (2007: 2) argue that 'sexualities are geographical'. I argue that a feminist psychogeography should aim to study how the structure and content of gendered experience of place is determined by the nature of places themselves, and how our gendered experiences and behaviours can shape those places in turn. There is a burgeoning literature on the sexualisation of space (Binnie, 1995) and on geographies of sexuality (Binnie and Valentine, 1999; Browne et al., 2007).

The concept of heteronormativity can call into question society's taken-for-granted assumptions of gender and sexuality. Waitt et al. (2008: 782) argue that 'heterosexuality is always assumed to be the benchmark against which other sexualities are measured or compared'; in relation to place and space, it is important to consider the extent to which space can be sexualised and to challenge what Knopp (2004: 123) refers to as the 'heterosexist world'. It may be argued that through 'queering' public and private spaces, it is possible to contest hegemonic, gendered norms, opening up new anti-sexist forms of understanding (Johnston and Longhurst, 2010). Gorman-Murray (2006) provides examples of how gay Australian men openly express their sexuality in environments that may be seen as both public and private. For example, they may turn their homes into public spaces by hosting gay social gatherings where members of the gay community would be invited, as well as engaging in same-sex relationships and watching gay films privately at home. The home here is of course only a public space in this specific context, and there is a need for research that explores the performance of gay sexualities in more openly public spaces. Nonetheless, such practices may serve to create greater awareness of non-heteronormative lifestyles amongst the population and arguably this may help to 'normalise' the somewhat stigmatised gay community. This means that a consideration of public and private spaces and how such spaces are used by men and women should be important to consider.

If we now turn to the disciplines of geography and psychogeography, we can find further evidence of problematic heteronormative and masculinist assumptions. Rose (1993: 137) argued that that 'various forms of white, bourgeois heterosexual masculinity have structured the way in which geography as a discipline claims to know space, place and landscape'. This has led feminist theorists such as Massey to address the limits of existing traditional mainstream research in geography. Massey (1984, cited in Women and Geography Study Group, WGSG, 1984: 13) has argued that, 'a feminist analysis in the broadest sense is one done from an anti-sexist perspective and can be concerned with any subject'. This is a particularly pertinent point because it means that all social spaces can be considered as gendered spaces. Moreover, the feminist critique of space should also involve a reflection of one's role in research and what sort of knowledge can be produced.

Similar masculinist and heterosexist criticisms have been levelled at psychogeographical work. Writers such as Sinclair (2003) have not adequately considered the extent to which their gendered subject positions shape how they make sense of places (Scalaway, 2002). Bassett (2004: 403) has discussed Sinclair's psychogeographical work and stated that 'The city appears as something feminine, passively there for the taking, a wilderness-like space of adventure to be conquered or possessed'. In the feminist psychogeographical approach outlined in this paper, I want to avoid repeating the same types of masculinist and heterosexist assumptions. To address the limits and problems outlined above, there should be a clear consideration of one's role in the research and an analysis of all social spaces as gendered spaces should be considered. I will therefore now go on to outline what a feminist psychogeographical methodology might look like. I present this methodology not as a prescriptive set of methods but as a range of strategies and tactics which feminist psychologists could use in developing their own approaches to psychogeographical research.

Developing a feminist psychogeographical methodology

I will now discuss how a feminist psychogeographical methodology could be conceptualised. Rather than attempting to make situationist theory fit into existing qualitative and critical psychology methodological frameworks, I aim to outline the new kinds of research questions, experience and alternative data that could emerge through a process of seeing and thinking about the world from a situationist standpoint.

Principles and values of a feminist psychogeographical methodology

Situationist thinkers were critical of moves to recuperate and appropriate their beliefs and arguments for other purposes (Plant, 1992). However, I believe it is important to conduct research in psychology that is political, and explicitly so, and this is consistent with the situationist position. My aim in this paper is to make the ideas of situationism and psychogeography accessible to the feminist psychology community through an account of what a feminist psychogeographical

methodology could look like and how others could use this work in developing their own research.

The theoretical concepts of embodied subjectivity and heteronormativity discussed above underpin a feminist psychogeographical methodology. It involves taking on an explicitly gendered focus to analyse men's and women's experiences of social spaces. It also involves drawing upon critical research in its attention to reflexivity and subject positions (about which I say more below), from feminist psychology (Hollway, 2007), feminist geography (Rose, 1993), critical psychology (Burnett et al., 2004; Grup de Lesbianes Feministes, 2005; Precarias a la Deriva, 2005) and radical political theory and practice (Debord, 1958); feminist psychogeographical work means taking on a dual role in the research as both participant and researcher.

One of the initial challenges in attempting to set out a feminist psychogeographical methodology is the lack of literature in explaining how to do this kind of research. The situationists never made claims as to how to do psychogeographical work; they did not wish to take expert roles because this would then reflect the hierarchical assumptions of capitalism. The situationists envisioned that the future would herald self-managed societies without experts and leaders and that people would be masters of their own lives. These views should have a direct relevance to conceptualising feminist psychogeographical methods in terms of considering the power relations between those who participate in *dérives*, whether they be academics, artists, activists or those who are simply curious.

Doing *dérive* research in urban and rural environments and outside of a confined academic space is quite different to the generally sedentary nature of qualitative and critical psychology research, which would usually be conducted in places such as people's homes, the workplace or educational settings. However, Brown and Durrheim (2009: 916) argue that knowledge is 'constructed in and through mobile interactivity' (Brown and Durrheim, 2009: 916) and that researchers should conduct 'mobile ethnography' (Sheller and Urry, 2006: 217). The implication of these arguments in relation to doing *dérive* research, is to begin to conduct studies with people in their everyday environments, capturing peoples' lived experiences in the places that they inhabit on a day-to-day basis. These sorts of studies could include for example, interviewing people on their way to work or school. One study by Hodgetts et al. (2012) involved conducting mobile interviews and using photo-voice methods with homeless people in order to study social psychology themes of identity, relationships, public space and peoples' resilience to challenging circumstances. In their work, they found that participants engaged in much greater reflection and discussion with the researchers than would have probably been evidenced through just doing static interviews. The aim of psychogeographical research should be to consider peoples' lived relations to places and to use methods of investigation that reveal their immediate, lived experiences of environments.

As with any good research or exploratory, artistic and political work, it is important to begin with questions and aims that provide a rationale for the

research. Therefore, I will now go on to consider the types of research aims and questions might underpin feminist psychogeographical work.

Research aims and questions

The aim of a feminist psychogeographical methodology is to enable people to reflect on how their experiences of environments are shaped by gendered subject positions, and reciprocally, how we come to shape those environments. It aims to consider the extent to which environments reflect hetero-normative assumptions and to tackle gendered inequalities (Binnie and Valentine, 1999; Brown et al., 2007; Johnston and Longhurst, 2010; Knopp, 2004; Leyshon, 2008) but also to consider what non-sexist societies could potentially look like. Elsewhere, (Bridger, forthcoming) I have drawn on the work of Khatib (1958) in applying situationist theory to generating research questions about and subsequently exploring one particular urban environment. Extending this thinking to incorporate a feminist approach, the following represent the kinds of research questions that a feminist psychogeographical methodology might generate:

- What are my gendered experiences of specific environments? Are these places that I would ordinarily visit? Why/Why not?
- What are the emotional and behavioural effects of familiar and unfamiliar environments?
- How do men and women enter and exit environments?
- Are there any noticeable behavioural or emotional differences when moving between different environments?
- What changes need to occur within environments to facilitate possible social change?

The process of doing feminist psychogeographical research: Seeing, walking, writing and thinking

Dérive methods are quite different to the standard repertoire of qualitative and critical psychology methods such as semi-structured interviews and observations. Debord (1958) argued that dérives could either be general disorientating walks with no particular destination or purpose, or site-specific investigations of particular locations. In this section, I will first of all discuss site-specific investigations which will then be followed with examples of dérives with no specific location or location. One of the first dérives that I conducted was a site-specific investigation of Ground Zero in New York (see Bridger, 2009, 2011). That research was conducted over several days in order to study the ambiances and how the space was used. I wrote a narrative account of the work and took photographs of the site. However, I found it to be quite difficult to do a dérive at that site due to all the restrictions as to where one was allowed and not allowed to walk. Moreover, there was a high level of security at that site although no one seemed to mind that I was taking photographs. It was quite a shocking and distressing place to visit and that raised

challenges for me in terms of how to document the research. Nonetheless, following the *dérive*, I wrote a narrative account that was interspersed with photographs and I created an artistic map of the site (Bridger, 2009, 2011). That work formed the basis for the conceptualisation of my psychogeographical approach in psychology and how walking can be used as a qualitative methodology. That study also resolved questions for me as to how to bring together different forms of documentation such as photographs, reflective notes and theory to write narrative accounts of *dérives*. This type of work is important as it enables one to make sense of experiences of walking in relation to places.

Dérives may also be conducted with no particular location or fixed purpose. In a recent psychogeography seminar with second-year undergraduate students in psychology at my university, I gave students maps of other towns and cities such as Paris and Budapest and then asked them to use these maps to walk around the University campus. At first, many students looked at me in a very confused and surprised manner. I explained to the students that they could start by choosing a location on the maps where they would like to begin and then choosing a destination on the maps where they would like to go to. I then explained that they would need to imagine that the location that they had chosen to start from on their maps would be the actual location in which they were at that moment. So, for example, if they had chosen the Eiffel Tower as the starting point then this could be related to standing at the Central Services Building on the University of Huddersfield campus (which also is the tallest building on campus). I then explained to students that the purpose of the activity was to create a sense of disorientation in an environment with which they were familiar. The aim of creating this sense of disorientation was to explore the emotional effects of the environment, disrupt the usual relations of movement across campus and to open up possible new ways of making sense of the University campus environment.

Furthermore, an important theme of power in groups has emerged through doing group *dérives*. This has an important relation to those studying social psychology as psychologists such as Haslam and Reicher (2006) have discussed processes such as tyranny, resistance and power with groups. Debord (1958) observed that the most useful *dérives* were conducted in small groups in order to reach collective findings about social environments. Group *dérives* can be compared to 'go-along' methods (Colls, 2004; Kusenbach, 2003), where academics, activists, artists and the public participate. Phil Smith (2009, 2010) argues that one of the purposes of *dérives* should be to decentralise power so that no one acts as the leader. Arguably, this enables one to reflect upon and theorise how power is used and enacted within groups. For example, one can observe how particular men and women take up leadership roles and how that may impact on the other members of the group who choose to enact a more decentralised form of power within the group. *Dérives* can therefore be useful methods through which to interpret and critique power relations within groups. Brown and Durrheim (2009) note that power relations between researchers and participants can be subverted by doing mobile methods research. However, it is debateable whether power can be evenly distributed in groups where academics may write up *dérive* research for publication

in peer reviewed journals. A wider discussion of power relations in such work is called for in this respect. Other ethical and moral issues relating to psychogeographical research include some level of responsibility by the walk organisers to ensure the safety of the group, as well as to ask for any permission to take photographs of those who participate.

However, *dérives* do not need to be conducted in groups and in one *dérive* that recently took place in Huddersfield, I carried this out alone. *Dérives* conducted by individuals can be particularly useful in autoethnographic research (see work by Bridger, 2010, 2011, forthcoming), where the aims are to consider the researcher as the subject of research and to draw on documentation methods such as photography and poetry (see work by Ellis, 2000, on autoethnography). On one *dérive* that I recently carried out in Huddersfield, I wanted to experiment with using a die as a navigational method. I replaced the numbers on a die with directional markers such as 'turn left' and 'go straight on'. I tossed it at every intersection; this effectively led me to different parts of the town which I did not usually go to; in some cases, it led me to what are considered by many of the inhabitants of Huddersfield to be the less safe parts of town and to consider the safety of men and women using these areas. Other techniques used in psychogeographical research is to take everyday items such as cards, dice and global positioning systems (GPS) devices and use these items not for playing cards, board games or for navigation, but for the purpose of 'playful' and experimental disorientation. *Dérive* methods are therefore quite different to the standard repertoire of qualitative and critical psychology methods such as semi-structured interviews and observations.

As with any good qualitative research, it is important to document one's work properly. My preference is for an unstructured method of data collection where the aims would be to explore relevant themes in the research that could include surveillance, consumerism and safety in relation to men and women. Although it is important to bear in mind the questions and aims underpinning the research whilst out on a *dérive*, the way in which data are collected should remain quite unstructured, since the participant/s would be using broadly free associative techniques to explore environments and their experiences of these. A simple notepad or a digital recorder can be used to document any thoughts and ideas which may be relevant to the questions and aims of the research, and to write down any other thoughts and feelings that arise in the process of such work. A camera or camera phone would be helpful in remembering the places that were encountered as well as to document any features relating to the research aims. Photographs can also be used to remember one's experiences of being in particular places and to consider how individuals create meanings within the places in which they are located (Waitt et al., 2009). Another key way to document the process of research is to create 'subverted' maps of the places investigated. Indeed, many psychogeographers have created artistic maps based on their *dérive* investigations (see, for example Bridger, 2011). The Naked City map by Debord and Jorn (1957) is a map with large black arrows that point towards and away from various working class districts of Paris. The map is meant to represent the movement of working

class people across the city and is not intended to be an objective representation of that space. I would suggest here that feminist psychogeographical maps could be developed by taking into consideration the following issues to underpin the design of such maps: representing which areas of urban environments that men and women use; whether men and women feel safe or vulnerable in particular places; reflecting upon men and women's political experience of places; how men and women navigate through public and private environments; and how men and women think about and experience social environments.

The next stage of psychogeographical research is to write up the work. This part of a *dérive* report could be considered as an analysis section of a paper, though how this would be structured is quite different to ordinary qualitative discursive, thematic or psychoanalytical analyses. My preference is to create a narrative account of the *dérive*, which may be enriched by additional material. For example, Burnett et al. (2004) and Bridger (2011) give a written account of the *dérive* as a narrative interspersed with photographs, encounters with people and places, discussing this with respect to situationist theory.

Reflexivity and subject positions. An important part of a feminist psychogeographical methodology would be to consider one's role in the research in relation to embodiment and 'gendered subjectivity' (Gill, 2008: 40). My position as a male feminist locates me in a slightly awkward position in a feminist psychology paradigm. Some feminists would argue that men can never become feminists and should not write about women's experiences. However, I do not aim claim to speak for women's experiences, nor for that matter for men's experiences. I do not believe that I can speak for anyone's experiences. Indeed, Brown (2007: 218) argues for the need for 'male femininities', whereby men would aim to challenge gendered inequalities and would willingly draw on masculine and feminine traits in their attitudes and behaviours. What I would argue is that feminism provides me with incredibly useful and important reflective and political resources through which to reflect on my position in the research as well as everyday life. I adhere to the argument of the personal as political, but extend this argument to all aspects of everyday life. I agree with Kimmel (1998: 60–61) that 'feminism provides both men and women with an extra-ordinary powerful analytical prism through which to understand their lives and a political and moral imperative to transform the unequal conditions of those relationships'. This then makes it important to consider one's gendered, reflexively situated position in the research. So making notes of one's reflexive ideas and thoughts in a diary during the research process, and then discussing this in the research report, seems crucial.

Conclusions

This paper makes the case for the development of feminist psychogeographical methods, drawing on the concepts of embodied subjectivity and heteronormativity used in diverse disciplines including critical psychology, feminist geography, queer theory and gay/lesbian theory. Psychogeographical walking does not change social

environments, nor does it change the world. But it can shape and change the ways in which we think about ourselves, our relations with others, and environments, which can help facilitate change. Taking a situationist standpoint in research may enable us to produce new ways of seeing and thinking about the physical world. It is my hope that a feminist psychogeographical method can be used to question and challenge-for-granted assumptions about gender by exploring how men and women experience and use environments.

Feminist theory is useful as a means to develop psychogeographical methods in psychology. Moreover, there is a need to develop anti-sexist political methods of research in psychology and to challenge gendered inequalities in society. As Lavery (2009: 55) argues, the aim 'is not to deny men the ability to walk the city, but rather to transform patriarchal attitudes to women so that cities become truly democratic spaces'. So although we live in what 'our' politicians refer to as democratised, free and civilised societies, there are still serious gendered, racial, class and ethnic inequalities, which must be challenged and reconceptualised. However, the extent to which academic arguments can change the world is certainly an issue that needs consideration, as simply writing about social change does not equal change. Indeed, Plant (1992: 76) argued that 'radical academics' have attempted to provide 'the appearance of revolutionary critique while similarly reproducing the specialisation of knowledge and the lucrative elitism of their roles'. Debord may turn in his grave if he knew that academics were beginning to use situationist theory and psychogeography in their research. However, I believe that it is important to explain what my feminist psychogeographical methodology can offer to psychologists who wish to do this type of research. I also think it is important to attempt to do political research in psychology as, despite some excellent examples (e.g., Burman et al., 1996) there is a dearth of such work in the discipline overall. I also see it as a necessary role of psychology to address and challenge contemporary social issues such as sexism, prejudice and racism.

I conclude by arguing for the need for researchers interested in using a feminist psychogeographical methodology to consider the extent to which research can be and should be political, what political changes that research can facilitate and those who research could and should benefit. One of the great strengths of psychogeography is that it draws together a wide range of people from different walks of life, including academics, journalists, artists, activists and the general public to consider their lived everyday experiences of towns, cities and the countryside.

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