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Walking the radical talk

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An introduction to psychogeographical psychology  
by Dr Alexander J Bridger, Senior Lecturer in Psychology

Introduction

The majority of the general public and indeed many psychologists would probably not associate walking and getting lost as ‘research’. However, many artists, poets, activists and more recently academics in disciplines such as psychology, geography and architecture have used the practice of what is called ‘psychogeographical walking’ to reflectively and politically make sense of our relations to environments as well as to consider what future non-capitalist towns and cities could look like. Some readers may be familiar with the following work by: Engels (1845) and his accounts of the poverty encountered by the working classes in cities such as Manchester and London; Chetchevlov’s (1958) reflections on Paris and how working class districts were effectively dismantled to make way for shopping arcades in the late 1950s and de Quincey’s (1822) writings about his walks around Paris and London in an opium haze. Such work has informed and inspired the types of readings of environments conducted by psychogeographers both past and present. In more recent years in television programmes such as *The Perfect Home* presented by architectural theorist Alain de Botton and *Grand Designs* presented by Kevin McCloud we are encouraged to think about how built environments make us feel and to consider what ideal living spaces could look like. Whilst such programmes are useful to get audiences to consider the emotional effects of environments and to provide ideas for how our living and working environments can be changed, such attempts for change stop at the point of only getting us to consider immediate physical changes rather than considering alternatives to the capitalist order of things. This indeed is a point raised by various environmental psychologists such as Uzzell and Rätzl (2009), that I argue needs to be considered seriously in considering the implications of the types of psychological knowledge that we produce and what such knowledge manages to change in the discipline and also in society.

Psychogeography and its relationship with psychology

Some readers may be familiar with the term psychogeography via the pages of environmental psychology journals from the 1980s where the term was coined to describe the interface of psychology with geography research and with connecting

such work with political practice (Wood, 1987). Those ideas have resonance with the type of approach advocated in this work. I'd like to begin by considering two definitions of environmental psychology. The first definition by Moser and Uzzell (2003) is where they define environmental psychology as being about a 'psychology of space' and the second definition is where Gifford (2014) explains that the study of environmental psychology is about the relations between individuals, social and societal processes. I'd like to consider those two definitions in terms of arguing for an inter and cross disciplinary political study of environments that considers the interface between individuals, social processes and society. I agree with Uzzell and Rätzl (2009) that it is important to do work that does not create binaries between individuals and society as that would not be helpful to consider how we create societies and are created by societies. There has been much discussion in recent years outside of environmental psychology amongst critical psychologists, cultural theorists and performance artists in terms of defining what psychogeography means, both on social networking sites such as Facebook and in a Richardson's (2015) *Walking Inside Out: Contemporary British Psychogeography* (<http://www.rowmaninternational.com/books/walking-inside-out>). I think there is scope here for dialogue between various approaches in psychology (i.e environmental, social and critical) in relation to the type of work produced by non-academic groups such as the situationists and other artists and activist individuals and groups. Guy Debord, one of the leading members of the Situationist International (<http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/>) came up with the following definition of psychogeography as 'the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behaviours of individuals' (Debord, 1958; n.p). At first glance, one may think that this definition fits quite easily with the main premise of environmental psychology in assuming that environments causally affect peoples' behaviours and cognitions. However, community psychologists such as Hodgetts et al. (2010: 287) have argued that environments should not simply be viewed as 'backdrops to social processes'. Whilst there is arguably clear merit to environmental psychology explanations of environments, what is argued for here is that any focus on environments needs to be connected with a political and historically located analysis of such spaces and places.

Moreover, it also needs to be acknowledged that there is also a limit to mainstream Euro-American psychological arguments that can be said to reinforce and reflect neoliberal ideas about individualism and human experience (Corral-Verdugo and Pinheiro, 2009). What should be argued for here is an analysis of peoples' 'lived, everyday involvement in the world' (Ingold, 1993; 152) and how those experiences are positioned in and through particular discourses. Moreover it can be argued then that peoples' experiences of places are suffused with discourses of 'capitalism, rationalism, modernization, the Puritan work ethic and spectacle' (Sadler, 1998; 96). Indeed with respect to recent public occupations of space such as Tahrir Square, Wall Street and Zuccotti Park and the British riots in 2011, many people have challenged the foundations of capitalism, democracy and the consumerisation of modern life (Zizek, 2011). This then leads us to considering the importance of studying the 'social organization of place' (Pinder, 1996; 414), what places mean to people, how we make sense of our everyday environments and to consider what alternatives there could be to consumer capitalist environments.

To address such questions, community psychologists such as Darrin Hodgetts et al. (2010) have argued that in order to study places that we should try to consider how approaches such as walking practices could facilitate such work. Indeed, if we then consider places as discursive texts, we can then connect such ideas to the work of de Certeau (1974; 97) who stated that 'the act of walking ... is to the urban system what the speech act is to language'. The problem here is that much psychological research in psychology is arguably, quite 'sedentary' (Sheller and Urry, 2000). Moreover, there is scant research that documents peoples' experiences of walking (Sheller and Urry, 2006). Taking this 'turn to place' in psychology involves drawing on ideas and practice from other disciplines such as geography (Pinder, 1996); urban theory (Sadler, 1998) and critical psychology (Burnett, Cudworth & Tamboukou 2004). With regards to mobile methods research, this would include 'go-along' methods (Kusenbach, 2003), bimbling (Anderson, 2004), go-along interviews, walking, cycling and driving (Kusenbach, 2003) photo-voice methods of elicitation (Hodgetts et al. 2010) and the 'psychogeographical' approach to walking which is briefly laid out in this paper (see work by Bridger, 2010-2015).

In psychological research it is important to consider how we collect data and what sorts of methods are best suited for research. Community and qualitative psychologists such as Hodgetts, Chamberlain and Radley (2007) have argued for the

development of visual methods of research and to draw on work from other social science disciplines (Lykes, Blanche, & Hamber 2003; Pink 2004, 2007). In recent years in the humanities and social sciences, there has been much debate about the 'new mobilities paradigm' (Sheller and Urry, 2006). Therefore, mobility should be viewed as a key aspect of how everyday life takes place (Binnie et al. 2007). It is through this process of moving through places, that individuals construct lived-in stories of experience of being in particular places (Radley et al. 2010). Edensor (2008; 136-137) states, walking 'is suffused with a kaleidoscope of intermingling thoughts, experiences and sensations, so that the character of the walk is constantly shifting'. Sotelo (2010; 61) also explains that:

Through the lens of "participation cartography," I modify Michel de Certeau's (1984) idea that by walking, space is being practised. Instead I suggest, that by walking, subjectivity-in-action-in space is being practised . . . Rather than seeing walking as a spatial practice, I see it as a subjective, environmental and unfolding practice or as a performance of self in spatio-temporal terms.

### The Situationist International, anti-capitalism and revolution

Whilst I draw on the work of the situationists in my psychological research, they were in fact, not actually academics. However, their work can be used to inform a critique of environments and to consider the question of social change in societies. The situationists were a group of radical artists, activists and intellectuals whom were disillusioned and angered by the capitalist gentrification and consumerisation of towns and cities. What they aimed to do was to create 'new situationist ambiances' which could potentially lead to 'permanent change' (Khatib, 1958: n.p).

The situationists used specific strategies to conceptualise their critique of urbanism that include the *dérive* and *detournement*. I refer here to strategies rather than to methods as this was not research as such that they were doing. Rather what they aimed to do was to use politically strategic tactics to initiate social changes. I think here it is important to consider the idea of connecting our research as psychologists with political practice and strategy and I will explain possible steps that can be taken. The first strategy, known as *detournement*, refers to the sabotage and re-appropriation of signs and symbols of capitalism. This involved subverting and

changing the meanings of mass media such as newspapers, films, posters and comics. The second strategy was the *dérive*, which was used in relation to the psychogeographical practice of walking. Often people reduce the practice of psychogeography to just being a randomized walk in a town or city but it should actually mean much more than that. The underpinning concerns of psychogeography are meant to be radical and political and involve a critique of urbanism and an envisioning of what non-capitalist built environments could look like. Hence the core aims of psychogeographical activities would be to call into question the 'dominant' ways that we see and make sense of environments and to question the 'natural' linkages of consumerism with environments. Miles (2010; 8) argues that consumerism is now a 'thoroughly cultural phenomenon that serves to legitimate capitalism on an everyday basis'. It is this assumption that can be said to underpin psychogeographical research. These activities can easily attract the attention of security guards and police officers because one is not typically engaging in window-shopping or buying products. Debord (1958) defined the process of psychogeographical walking with a term that he called the *dérive*:

Dérives involve playful constructive behaviour and awareness of psychogeographical effects, and are thus quite different from the classic notions of journey 140 or stroll. In a *dérive*, one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities and all other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there. An important factor in this activity is play. To think: from a *dérive* point of view, cities have psychogeographical contours, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes that strongly encourage and deflect the movement of people from certain zones.

Hence the aims of *dérives* are not to just walk from a to b but to make playful sense of what effects the environment has on people and to reflectively interpret how one may be drawn or repelled from certain places (Debord, 1958). The role of play in the work of the situationists is of importance and should be considered in relation to the work that we do in psychology where we use particular methods and approaches in our research. Khatib (1958), a leading situationist, argued that the ultimate aims of *dérives*

should be to create 'direct, effective intervention' in order to build 'new situationist ambiances' that would create 'permanent change'. This question of radical social change is of central importance to critical psychologists, political theorists and activists such as Parker (2007), Barbrook (2014) and the Neue Slowenische Kunst collective (<http://www.nskstate.com>), all of whom draw on radical left wing, autonomous, anarchist theory and practice in their work.

### Doing psychogeographical 'research' in psychology

At this point in this paper, you may be wondering what a psychogeographical approach in psychology could look like and whether there are any examples of such work in the discipline. Whilst it may not be a core area in psychology at present it is a new and emerging area of research, where many individuals and groups are working with ideas such as mobile methods research (as discussed previously), as well as the question of how to use psychogeographical ideas in psychology (see Bridger, 2010-2015). In the rest of this paper I will explain my approach to drawing on psychogeographical ideas.

In many previous dérives that I have conducted, I have often drawn on key papers such as Khatib's (1958) account of wandering around the Les Halles district in Paris. Some of the questions raised in his work can be usefully applied to psychogeographical psychological research, which includes asking things such as: what are your experiences of particular places and would you usually visit such places, how do you feel in particular environments and finally what needs to be changed in the environment/s. I have conducted numerous psychogeographical projects in locations such as Ground Zero, New York, the Arndale Centre in Manchester, United Kingdom and Huddersfield (Bridger, 2014).

In such work I like to take quite an unstructured approach to doing psychogeographical work. The reason for that is to understand one's affective responses to environments requires techniques akin to the psychoanalytic approach of free association. In order to achieve an unstructured approach to doing such work, one can use strategies to create spontaneous and unplanned movement by tactics such as map swap and dice walk activities. In relation to dice walking, one may code the

numbers on a dice such as 1=walk straight on, 2=turn right, etc. The map swap activity could involve using a map of another city to orientate oneself in the place in which one is located. So potentially, one could attempt to get from a to b by using similar landmarks in a different map or via the dice method with the outcome being that one would get lost and hopefully experience environments in new ways. Those readers more accustomed to empirical methods of psychological study may be horrified by reading about such methods as it certainly doesn't fit with the standard representation of what psychological research usually looks like. However, the point here is to turn 'research' into a kind of ludic, playful game and arguably presents us with a different kind of 'experimental' approach where one experiments with how one sees and makes sense of the social world. Indeed, Debord explains how the playful practice of the Game of War board game can provide an important critique of social and personal relations in capitalist times

I have studied the logic of war. Moreover, I succeeded, a long time ago, in presenting the basics of its movements as a board game: the forces of contention and the contradictory necessities imposed on the operations of each of the two parties. I have played The Game of War and, in the often difficult conduct of my life, I have utilized lessons from it – I have also set myself the rules of the game for this life, and I have followed them. On the question of whether I have made good use of such lessons, I will leave to others to decide (Debord, 1989; n.p).

More recently, Barbrook and the Class War-games collective have re-engaged with Debord's Game of War and other war-games in order to explore how gaming can be used a metaphor to explore social relations in contemporary capitalism; to reenact past political struggles and also to consider alternatives to the capitalist order of things. Such work I think raises interesting questions for us as psychologists to consider the usefulness of strategy and tactics in our work and such work can be connected with political practice. One example of psychogeographical ludic work that I recently undertook was a dice walk in Huddersfield (Bridger, 2013). My starting point was the main entrance to the Kingsgate shopping centre. I used a large dice made out of foam and I also had a piece of paper, which indicated how to interpret the numbers on the dice (as indicated previously with 1= walk straight on, etc). The



particular outcome of that walk was that it led me to parts of Huddersfield which I would not ordinarily go to and led me to areas of the town that I was less familiar with and which I perceived to be 'less safe'. After that particular walk I decided to write a paper where I drew on a psychogeographical approach to read towns and cities as gendered spaces (Bridger, 2013). I could discuss here many more examples of previous research though for those readers that are interested in following up that work, I would suggest to check out some of my recent papers in that area (see Bridger, 2010-2015).

This then brings us to the question of how one would go about documenting psychogeographical research in psychology journals. It might be worth reassuring readers here that it is possible to go 'off-piste' and to produce work in peer reviewed academic journals where psychogeographical methods and practices are represented! In my research, I like to produce reports of walks, which combine a range of first person reflection, photographs of key contexts, situations and people (ethics permitting), creating artistic maps as well as reference to previous theory and studies.



Figure 1: A psychogeographical map of Huddersfield, by Dr. AJ Bridger.

I've also found previous psychogeographical work by the Situationist International, other psychogeography groups such as Manchester Area Psychogeographic and critical psychology writings by groups such as Burnett et al. (2004) to be hugely inspiring in terms of formulating my written approach to documenting psychogeographical walks.

## Conclusions and implications

I hope that I have provided some ideas here for how the work of the situationists can be of relevance within areas of psychology such as environmental psychology, social psychology and critical psychology. I think that such work can enable us as psychologists to think differently about the type of work that we do and in terms of connecting our work with political practice and with addressing the question of social change. The following core questions and aims of a psychogeographical approach in psychology could include: how environments make us feel, what we need to do in order to change environments, what environments of the future could look like and finally, what psychogeographical research can change. I don't think that there can be clear and fixed answers to these aims and questions though that does not necessarily have to be a problem. The central argument here, and I draw reference to points raised by the Situationist International, is that revolutionary social change is not something that can really be designed and planned out but is actually something that is realized by individuals and groups.

At this point some readers may question whether this sort of research is actually radical and that is certainly an important point to address. Sadie Plant has previously pointed out that 'radical academics produce the appearance of revolutionary critique while similarly reproducing the specialisations of knowledge and the lucrative elitism of their roles' (1992: 76). To address that point I think that it's important to do psychogeographical work that cuts across boundaries of academia, art and activism and in much previous work by myself and others, we engage with local community groups, organise festivals, walks and various other psychogeographical events and talks. Indeed, within West Yorkshire and Greater Manchester there are a variety of different psychogeographical groups such as the Leeds Psychogeography Group, the Loiterers Resistance Movement and the Huddersfield Psychogeography Network, not to mention other individuals past and present that have drawn on psychogeographical techniques and practices. Parker (2007) has indicated that in order to change society that it is important to work in and against social systems, institutions and structures. This is a theme that has been taken up in most recent edition of the *International Review of Critical Psychology* on Marxism and

Psychology. So it can be argued that the sorts of questions and issues that the situationists were grappling with in the late 1950s and 1960s are still of relevance in psychology and society. There are clearly a wide range of questions and points that need to be taken into account in terms of doing political analyses of environments, what psychology research could look like and to begin to consider possible alternatives to the capitalist order of things.

### Questions

What is psychogeography and why is it relevant to psychologists?

Can walking be considered as a research method?

What is the relationship between walking, the psychological study of environments and politics?

### Resources

- \* Situationist International Online <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/>
- \* Leeds Psychogeography Group <http://www.schizocartography.co.uk/leeds-psychogeography-group/>
- \* Huddersfield Psychogeography Network on Facebook
- \* Loiterers Resistance Movement <http://nowhere-fest.blogspot.co.uk>
- \* Not Another Psychogeography Blog  
<https://notanotherpsychogeographyblog.wordpress.com>
- \* Class War-games Collective  
<http://www.classwargames.net>

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