COMMENTARY

WHERE IS THE DISCIPLINE IN HERITAGE STUDIES?
A VIEW FROM ENVIRONMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY

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Charlotte Andrews in the opening paragraph of her chapter in this volume states, quite rightly, that “.... Heritage studies does not yet offer a set of established methodologies to choose from, that researchers are challenged, but also free to employ novel lines of enquiry towards our aim of a more complex and satisfying understanding of heritage.” (Andrews, this volume). This is hardly surprising since heritage studies are the lovechild of a multitude of relationships between academics in many disciplines, and then nurtured by practitioners and institutions. There is no discipline as such as heritage; this is reinforced by the fact that we give it the catch-all term ‘heritage studies’. The fellow travellers we find on the way are geographers, sociologists, archaeologists, psychologists, historians and many others – many of these disciplines are represented in this book. What these researchers share in common is a fascination with the past, a yearning for a deeper understanding of it not least because although the past is elusive it has a critical effect on the present and the future. It sits somewhere ‘out there’, a tangible resource and source of inspiration, meaning and identity as well as commercial profit. It is a physical reality that is more than just the fabrication in our minds that Lowenthal (1998) suggests. But it is clearly ‘in here’ as well, in the minds of the observer; it is a social construction, an empty box, waiting to be filled with our values, beliefs, desires. It’s functional role, however, is more nuanced than simply suggesting it adds a repository and framework for meaning. The meaning of the heritage will vary over time and for different groups of people. It serves social, cultural and political functions. But the heritage during this process does not remain static and unchanged. It also becomes a piece of clay ready to be moulded into something we want it to be. We

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use the heritage in the creation of our own individual, group and national identities (Devine-Wright and Lyons, 1997; Anteric, 1998; McDonald, 2003). We construct meanings from the heritage and we construct ourselves from it as well.

This is not the place for an extended discussion of the nature of heritage and its function for individuals, groups and society (for this, see the collection of readings by Smith (2007) and Fairclough, Harrison et al (2008)). The opening paragraph of this contribution does, however, suggest that how we access the heritage is far from straightforward, an issue made more complicated by the fact that heritage is not the preserve of one discipline but many. We are all familiar with L.P. Hartley’s opening lines from The Go-Between (1953) ”The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there”. Indeed, the quotation is cited endlessly in studies of the heritage, and is the title of Lowenthal’s seminal book (1999). But a little more self reflection might lead researchers to see that no less foreign an experience are the academic disciplines into which all of us stray invariably as researchers of ‘the heritage’. The heritage is the meeting ground of many disciplines, and it is on that meeting ground that we are confronted with issues which as researchers we give scant regard. One of these issues is methodology.

The purpose of this brief paper is to discuss the importance of methodological awareness and the need for the imagination in the development of new methodologies and methods for understanding the heritage in the context of interdisciplinary collaboration. Heritage studies are, as a consequence of their mixed parentage, the archetypal interdisciplinary study area. Methodologies are important in heritage studies because they are the hand which guides us into the past from the present. They show us how to look and see. But they should also come with a health warning.

O’Brien (2008) recently conducted a small study examining the positive and negative aspects of interdisciplinary collaboration, questioning researchers from at least eight different natural and social science disciplines working on a three year ESRC/RELU (Rural Economy and Land Use) programme. There was a positive response to interdisciplinary working. It was seen to lead to: a better understanding of how other
scientists work enabling new areas of work to be developed and incorporated into a holistic project; different points of view; new insights, new angles and techniques brought to topics of common interest; learning from other perspectives and understanding different epistemologies; broader questions being addressed and other methods and approaches included; opening up of different literatures; the encouragement of applied and policy oriented research which may be more likely to address the problems under investigation and be more meaningful to the research client.

The negative features of interdisciplinary collaboration were: it is time consuming and sometimes frustrating; the approaches to and standards of evidence in some disciplines are sometimes questioned by those in other disciplines; the language differences (i.e., jargon) in different disciplines; publishing in single discipline journals can be difficult if it includes theories from other disciplines; the length of time taken to achieve certain outputs can be considerable due to time taken to accommodate different interests.

Although these findings are derived from a study assessing and communicating animal disease risk for countryside users, their significance is no less relevant for those working in heritage studies. It is noteworthy that most of the issues surrounding interdisciplinary working focussed on methodology, the subject of this book. In the remaining pages I would like to discuss further methodological issues which are not always so readily apparent and may be overlooked when disciplines come together.

**There are no methods without theory**

Whether the heritage is ‘out there’ or ‘in here’ there is a relationship between ‘it’ and ‘us’. There are various ways of thinking about and analysing our relationship with the physical world. Moscovici (1972) in the context of analysing different approaches in social psychology names these relationships as ‘taxonomic’, ‘differential’ and ‘systematic’. The relationships are sufficiently generic to be of relevance for researchers of the heritage as they all relate to the relationship between people and their physical world. The ‘taxonomic’ is concerned with investigating the nature of the variables which might account for the behaviour of an individual. Social stimuli are seen to affect the processes of judgement, perception and the formation of attitudes. The independent
variables are either people or groups of people or they are physical objects - the environment or the heritage (?) - which have social value. In practice this might be how the social value of the cultural heritage confers and sustains national identity. The environment is ascribed psychological characteristics and social phenomena are in turn treated as natural objects. The emphasis is on reaction to the social and environmental rather than the relationship with the environment.

The second set of relationships is the ‘differential’, in which the subject of research is classified and differentiated according to whatever social and psychological criteria we are interested in - for example, social categories such as curators versus the public, scientists versus lay people, landowners versus non-owners or according to the position they may take, e.g., possessing pro- or anti-environment attitudes. The properties of the environment are of little interest as the focus of attention is on the role the individual occupies and the consequent effect that the social role has on attitudes and behaviour in respect of the, e.g., heritage. The aim in this form of social psychology is to find out how different categories of people or positions respond when faced with a particular problem such as the destruction of heritage.

In the ‘systematic’, there is an interdependence of people/groups in relation to a common physical or social environment. The relationship of the individual to the heritage is mediated through the intervention of another person or group such as archaeologist or exhibition designers. This can lead to two types of studies. The focus of attention in the first is on changes in the behaviour of individuals participating in the interaction and the developing nature of the relationship. The second approach focuses on the effects of the relationship - on the individuals, their relationship with each other and their relationship with the heritage.

This classification, and the methodologies it suggests, might be a useful way for researchers to think about future heritage research.
Methodological assumptions and the model of the person

All methods have embedded within them sets of assumptions about the relationship between people and between people and their physical environment and their relationship to the past. The assumptions reflect different models of the person. The model of the person assumed (but not necessarily articulated) by those working in one discipline (e.g. architecture or archaeology) may be different from that assumed by those working within another discipline and with whom they are collaborating (e.g. psychology). In practical terms what this means is that one group may be working with a set of assumptions which are inherently individual and behaviourist, whereas another discipline may be working within a more social or relational model framework.

Israel (1972) suggests that three ‘models of the person’ have been assumed in social psychology - the behaviouristic, the role, and the relational. Behaviourist theories are oriented primarily to the individual, who invariably is in passive mode. For example, social learning theory explains the processes by which an individual acquires attitudes and behaviours through interacting with another individual. In exchange theory, the emphasis is on the rewards, costs, outcomes and comparison levels of the individuals involved in the exchange rather than the dyad as a social system. Cognitive theories are heavily oriented towards the individual, with little recognition of the social context in which individuals operate and the role and influence of the social group and collective thought and action. Behaviourist theories suggest that by controlling the environment, it is possible to control the individual. If we can understand the effect of environmental (and temporal?) events on people’s behaviour it may be possible, it is argued, to anticipate their influence, even plan for that influence and gain control over events. Such a view lies at the heart of environmental and architectural determinism (Lee 1976), a position which suggests that the environment is not only highly influential (and in some cases deterministic) of people’s behaviour, but it is possible to design the environment to achieve particular social outcomes.

Israel’s second model of the person that has been dominant in social psychology is the role model. Role theory has been described as follows:
Man has certain positions within the social system and related to these positions are normative expectations concerning the individual’s behaviour and concerning relevant attributes. Positions are independent of a specific occupant.

(Israel 1972:140)

In contrast to behaviourist/cognitive theories, role theory assumes that the individual will submit passively to the influence of social and political constructions. While it allows the individual to break rules and act out other roles, and although it has a strong social orientation it tends to minimise the individual’s own perceptions, preferences, norms and interests.

Israel’s third model is a relational model of the person which is represented by the work of George Herbert Mead and the symbolic interactionists. Mead wrote: ‘a self can arise only where there is a social process within which this self has its initiation. It arises within that process’ (Mead. 1956:42). Within this model, Stringer writes:

‘Man is not seen as a bundle of traits, or an individual simply responding to rewards and punishments, but as his social relations. Man is the sum of his social interactions through constant interactions with others, the self is constantly changing; interaction is fully reciprocal as neither the individual nor social processes are given priority.

(Stringer 1982:58)

The relational approach recognises that all action takes place within a social and historical context. Although acts may appear to be individual acts, at various levels, they inevitably implicate other members of the group or society; they also have a past or a history. Unlike both behaviouristic and role models, the relational model of the person assumes a more psychologically and socially aware person who plays an active role in their own development and in their relationship with the rest of society.

What is the relevance of this to heritage studies? We are aware that the way questions are asked will affect the kind of answers one receives. We typically think of this as a
problem in relation to biased questioning. But the implications of question-framing extend beyond issues of bias. The way we ask questions will influence if not determine the kinds of analysis of and the explanations we can infer from the data. Framing questions which assume a behaviourist position will invariable lead to individualistic and reductionist interpretations of people’s behaviour; a questions framed within a more relational model of the person will enable more socially contextual interpretations.

**Interdisciplinary research in an ethical context**

Each discipline develops its own ethical standards. Ethical standards are important as they provide a normative framework for professional courses of action and rules of conduct. Each profession’s ethical standards are developed over many years in the light of practical experience. Research methodologies in general and specific methods in particular have ethical implications and requirements. Very little attention is often paid to those situations where a methodology from one discipline is used in another. When a research method, even one so ubiquitous as interviewing is employed by those who are not taught such a skill as part of their own disciplinary repertoire, it is easy for those borrowing the technique to treat it mechanistically and ignore the ethical assumptions implications and requirements which accompany its use.

An example can be provided outside the area of heritage studies but which illustrates the problem well; indeed, it is not difficult to think of such a situation arising in research being conducted on heritage. This example involved two groups of architecture and psychology students working together on a collaborative field trip (Romice and Uzzell, 2005). The purpose of the field trip was to bring these two groups together so that they could learn from each other, see the world through the others’ eyes and share methodologies for the understanding of urban space and place.

Simple observation of each group revealed that the two groups perceived the public quite differently. While walking through residential areas, the architects were more willing to peer into people’s houses, call out to residents, ask passers-by questions and try and get invited into local’s houses or flats in order to see their internal layout and space provision. The psychologists were much less willing to engage in these types of
behaviours. The psychology students, having been inculcated into the mores of the psychology profession and the ethics of research, placed greater importance on the privacy of the residents. The psychologists felt that the residents had a 'right' to be left alone; the idea of shouting up to a resident several floors above violates most principles of anonymity of participants. For the psychology students anything that smacks of data collection automatically puts one in a researcher/respondent relationship. It may have been that the architecture students did not see themselves in a professional relationship with the residents; the architects justified their behaviour in terms of being casual enquiries to which the residents could have declined. The presence of large numbers of inquisitive students on the housing estate could have led to the residents feeling pressured to respond, or be made uncomfortable in their own homes and settings, which again raises ethical questions of how we treat members of the public who may neither have been asked nor consented to participation. The architecture students simply did not feel the same burden of an ethic of care towards the public as the environmental psychology students. This is not a criticism, but it does serve to illustrate quite graphically how the adoption of methodologies in an interdisciplinary context also requires the adoption of the ethical standards which are assumed to accompany their employment.

**Conclusion: Feeling the elephant**

Heritage studies is a rich and stimulating area of research precisely because it requires a multidisciplinary and even better, an interdisciplinary approach. This is its great strength but also its potential weakness. The problems of interdisciplinary work are often epitomized in books on methodology by reference to John Godfrey Saxe’s poem ‘The Blind Men and the Elephant’.

*It was six men of Indostan*

*To learning much inclined,*

*Who went to see the Elephant*

*(Though all of them were blind),*

*That each by observation*

*Might satisfy his mind.*
As Heat comments on the men from Indostan who each feel a different part of the elephant: “They seize, literally, on various features of the elephant, its legs, trunk, tail and so on, and then come to blows over what the elephant is ‘really’ like. Their investigations revealed many things about the elephant, but ‘elephantness’ eluded them.” (Heat 1974:182).

And so these men of Indostan
Disputed loud and long,
Each in his own opinion
Exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right,
And all were in the wrong!

This is supposed to illustrate how people from different perspectives will see only one aspect of a phenomenon. But of course, we are all blind when it comes to understanding the totality of what we research. We might like to think we understand the phenomenon under investigation but our understanding is always situated whether because of where we stand, how we observe, or how we interpret. Theorising the heritage is always a site of discursive struggle (Hall 1999). Notwithstanding this, one of the reasons why we undertake interdisciplinary research is to communicate and engage with others in order to develop and employ methodologies in an imaginative and informed way in order to understand the heritage, whether it is ‘out there’ or ‘in here’, and indeed, capture the quality of ‘elephantness’.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


\^ Israel, as was the practice of the time, refers to ‘models of man, as do subsequent commentators. This has been changed in the present paper to reflect current practice when possible (i.e. not within specific quotations).