

Critical Psychology: What It Is and What It Is Not

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Abstract¹

Critical psychology alerts us to the limitations of mainstream research in the discipline, and it promises to put ‘social’ issues on the agenda in the whole of psychology. A starting point of the stance of critical psychological research is that the claims that psychologists make about human beings often seem to vanish almost as quickly as they are discovered. People, a group or culture do not behave or think like the model would predict, and, more importantly, we find that our awareness, our reflection on a process described by a psychologist *changes* that process. It is in the nature of human nature to change, to change as different linguistic resources, social practices, and representations of the self become available, and for human nature to change itself as people reflect on who they are and who they may become. That means that any attempt to fix us in place must fail. But it will only fail in such a way that something productive emerges from it if we do something different, and one place to do something different is in psychology. We need to step back and look at the images of the self, mind and behaviour that psychologists have produced, the types of practices they engage in, and the power those practices, those ‘technologies of the self ’ have to set *limits* on change. When we appreciate this, we can start to look at what psychologists might do instead as part of a genuinely critical approach.

¹ This paper was originally given at the Psychology and Society Conference at Panteion University in Athens in May 2005. It has since been taken in one direction, with additional work by Erica Burman, to appear as Parker, I. and Burman, E. (2007) ‘Critical psychology: Four theses and seven misconceptions’, *Hellenic Journal of Psychology*, 4. I have now taken it in another direction, and am grateful to the reviewers who helped me to work on it further, for this version in *Social Psychology and Personality Compass*.

Elements of Critical Psychology

I will set out what critical psychology should be and the way it puts the ‘social’ into the rest of psychology, before turning to some accusations that are levelled against it by mainstream psychologists (for a fuller elaboration of the background to these elements, see Parker, 1999).

First, critical psychology turns the gaze of the psychologist back on the discipline. Psychologists usually study people outside who they treat as the non-psychologists. We now study the psychologists. We ask, for example, how evolutionary psychology confirms differences between men and women and make them seem biologically unchangeable, how psychoanalytic psychology pathologises lesbians and gay men in the name of normal stages of development, how intelligence testing reinforces essential underlying difference between ethnic groups, and how study of organizations to make them run more smoothly also makes them better able to crush or smother dissent (see, for example, Burman, 2008; Kamin, 1974; Richards, 1996). These past errors and crimes of psychology often appear to presentday psychologists merely to be historical matters, but the everyday practice of therapeutic, personnel and organisational psychology is still too often informed by those assumptions. Critiques of those crimes and errors in psychology are thus part of the new critical impulse we hope to bring alive inside the discipline as part of critical psychology (e.g. Parker, 2007; Sloan, 2000; Walkerdine, 2002). We can sum this up by saying that ‘critical psychology is the systematic examination of how some varieties of psychological action and experience are privileged over others, how dominant accounts of “psychology” operate ideologically and in the service of power.’ Second, critical psychologists often assume that where there is power there is resistance, and that in every dominant practice there are contradictions and spaces for us to work to challenge and change the existing state of affairs. Mainstream psychology is incoherent, and competing domains of study aim to supplant their rivals, and advocates of different methodological paradigms bitterly dispute the procedures adopted by colleagues who may well be working in the same department. That incoherence is one of the sources of our strength. For example, a psychological test that is used to stigmatise failing children may also be used to rescue a child from a ‘special’ school. An attention to the structure of the nuclear family and an emphasis on systemic forces in the appearance of distress in the ‘identified patient’ may also be a lever against biological psychiatric diagnosis. Humanist images of the person that may often individualise explanations may also be used to contradict experimental studies. But while we look for resistance in these ideas, we do not really deep down believe any of them. What is most important in this dialectical activity for us is to look for political tactics,

not underlying truth (see, for example, Billington, 2000; Goodley & Lawthom, 2004; House, 2002). Hence, ‘critical psychology is the study of the ways in which all varieties of psychology are culturally historically constructed, and how alternative varieties of psychology may confirm or resist ideological assumptions in mainstream models.’

Third, psychology is not only at work in the universities and the clinics. It is not only the body of men and women armed with instruments for testing and enforcement in the training institutions and the hospitals. We need to go beyond that academic and professional psychology to study the way in which psychology has recruited thousands upon thousands of academics and professionals who use its ideas and appeal to its theories to back up their own programmes of normalisation and pathologisation. The problem here not only concerns the particular images of the human being that are purveyed in the media (in which maladaptive behaviours are explained with reference to neurological factors, for example), but also the invitation for people to believe that the sources of the problem are hidden inside themselves and must be released as they are spoken about to others (as in radio and television shows that demand the individuals own up to their emotional shortcomings and aim to change themselves for the better). And, hence, we need to study the way in which psychology recruits all of the people who read and believe its theories of individual personality differences and happy healthy behaviour. This critical research would focus on the way it recruits all of us in psychological culture (see, for example, Blackman & Walkerdine, 2001; Gordo López & Cleminson, 2004; Rose, 1996). In summary, ‘critical psychology is the study of forms of surveillance and self-regulation in everyday life and in the ways in which psychological culture operates beyond the boundaries of academic and professional practice.’

Fourth, the discipline of psychology pretends that it is a science, but it draws its images of the human being from culture and from everyday life to construct its object. And part of the de-construction of psychology is the study of the way ideology in society is the ‘condition of possibility’ for psychology to exist. Psychological theories do not come out of nowhere. They do not fall from the sky. And we can draw upon the variety of different theories about our own different psychologies to interrupt and subvert the dominant stories that are told by the academics and the professional psychologists, whether those are clinical, educational, forensic or organisational personnel (see, for example, Hansen, McHoul,

& Rapley, 2003; Hook, 2007; Parker, Georgaca, Harper, McLaughlin, & Stowell-Smith, 1995). This means that ‘critical psychology is the exploration of the way everyday “ordinary psychology” structures academic and professional work in psychology and how everyday activities might provide the basis for resistance to contemporary disciplinary practices.’

Critical psychology takes many different forms, and across the world there are new perspectives developing that augment and refine these four elements (see, for example, the collection of papers devoted to critical psychology around the world in Dafermos, Marvakis, & Triliva, 2006). These four elements of critical psychology are often re-

butted by psychologists who have been trained in the old reductionist and positivist programmes, and the old-style psychologists react to critical psychology in a number of different ways that we need to tackle.

Misrepresentations of Critical Psychology

Different accusations that are commonly made against critical psychologists by mainstream positivist psychologists reveal serious misrepresentations of what critical psychologists are doing. These misrepresentations then circulate and make it difficult to do our work; the work of unravelling and refusing the assumptions made in professional and popular psychology guided by the four elements I outlined above. I will deal with the most powerful and pernicious of these accusations made by mainstream psychology against critical psychology here; hence, we have some resources to defend ourselves.

1: 'Critical psychology is only concerned with social psychology'

No. Some of the most innovative critical work has been in social psychology and there are good introductions to critical perspectives in the area (e.g. Gough & McFadden, 2001), and an analysis of the 'crisis' in social psychology is necessary to critical work (e.g. Parker, 1989). In Europe, this crisis was identified by those who optimistically believed that a 'paradigm crisis' in the discipline would be followed by a 'scientific revolution' in which qualitative research would triumph as the overall guiding methodology for a newly renovated psychology (e.g. Harré & Secord, 1972). In the USA, the crisis was the ground from which claims were made that social psychological research was the reporting of historically specific forms of behaviour that would change and would require psychological methodologies to change (e.g. Gergen, 1973, 1999). It is too easy for mainstream psychologists to pretend that this crisis is over, for however strong the grip of experimental research is in some departments, the complaints and alternatives are proliferating in the discipline in different parts of the world. There are now equally important developments in cognitive psychology, for example. Research on discourse, to take a case in point, has been useful to show how reasoning and remembering are 'storied' and how they are carried out collectively (Edwards & Potter, 1992). Activity theory, a tradition of work that flowered in the Soviet Union focusing on the material practices in which 'mental' processes develop, has connected this cognition talk with forms of practice (e.g. Hepburn, 2003; Tuffin, 2004). While cognitive psychologists have been producing diagrams and flow charts showing short-term memory, long-term memory and elaborate pictures of the inside of the head as, like a filing cabinet or a computer, discourse analysts have been able to give even more persuasive accounts of what we do when we think. Thinking happens between people, in the ways they use language. Mainstream psychology assumes that there must be a

hidden cognitive mechanism doing the work and, hence, it searches for what is inside. Critical psychology, in contrast, encourages us to reflect on underlying assumptions in the discipline, and would point out in this case that we need to reframe the problem. The question is not ‘what is inside the mind?’ but ‘what is the mind inside?’ Our ‘cognitive’ activity takes place in the network of relationships, discourse and practices we learn, narrate and reconstruct as human beings, and this network enables us to think the way we do (Lave, 1988).

One problem for critical work is that in academic psychology the discourse we use to speak, write and learn about thinking is part of a certain powerful practice of learning. When you study psychology you will always be led to think of thinking as isolated separate activity, and when you are assessed you will often be physically separated; in examinations, for example, you are made to spill out what you have crammed inside your head and your ability will be judged from measures of what you have been able to write. But, like laboratory experiments, this is surely quite unlike thinking in the real world. Thinking and remembering are to do with how you piece together solutions and memories with others and how you negotiate that, how you rehearse what you might say to an imaginary audience, and how you replay what you said before (Middleton & Edwards, 1990). Cognition is as much to do with relational things as what is whizzing around in private.

This does not mean that critical psychologists necessarily reject the study of cognition (Wilson, 1999), but they do emphasise that when you think, someone else is always involved. You can only think because of your place in networks of relationships with other people and because of patterns of discourse that give shape to your image of the world and yourself (Parker, 2002).

2: ‘Critical psychology makes everything into a political issue’

No. The problem is not that we make psychology political but that is *already* political, and this is something mainstream psychology does not like to acknowledge. Politics is not only about voting in elections; the way we form relationships and live our lives at the most intimate level is also already political. An attention to ‘personal politics’, then, needs to include critical work on sexuality, psychology and power. Research on sexuality reveals in a condensed form the way psychological science operates as *rhetoric*, selectively drawing on cultural prejudices and designed to bring about certain effects. For example, research on lesbianism from a critical social constructionist’s perspective has been able to counter this rhetoric by exposing its bogus claims about objectivity and the political purposes it actually serves (Kitzinger, 1987). The history of lesbian and gay psychology also makes it clear how alternative forms of rhetoric that value varieties of sexual orientation had to be accompanied by action to change things.

Homosexuality was included as a disease category in the American Psychiatric Association *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* until 1973, but was removed following repeated demonstrations by gay activists in American Psychiatric Association meetings that eventually forced a vote by psychiatrists. Although it some-

times seems as if neutral disinterested research brings about changes in our understanding of psychology, these events show that our images of ourselves are profoundly affected by political forces. However, we should note that the very success of lesbian and gay psychology in the USA, with its own conferences, courses and journals raises doubts about what has been achieved (Brown,

1989); and, hence, critical psychologists will also examine the way in which alternative lifestyles have also become psychologised as they try to gain respectability and speak the language of the powerful.

The question is *on whose terms* lesbians and gay men now speak about themselves in psychology. Liberal humanist psychological rhetoric of ‘identity’ and ‘self-esteem’, for example, makes it seem as if any problems lesbians and gay men have should be dealt with at an individual psychological level, and when they have done that successfully they will be healthy and happy, just like heterosexuals. Critical researchers working in this field have argued that one strategy is to turn the tables, and ask in what ways ‘heterosexuality’ may be a ‘problem’ (e.g. Kitzinger, Wilkinson,

& Perkins, 1992), and this strategy challenges at a deep ‘personal’ level the assumptions we all make about ourselves. We are also reminded that it is politically important to defend the specific work lesbian and gay psychologists do in terms of the pragmatics of working in a hostile discipline (Kitzinger, 1999).

The general lesson we draw from this is that we should attend to the political agendas of those who use psychology to tell us how we can and cannot behave, those who define our capacities to change ourselves with reference to ‘psychological models’. Those political agendas sometimes operate despite the honest intentions of psychological researchers, but those researchers are themselves having to work within methodological and theoretical frameworks that have an implicit political agenda. Every attempt to specify our real underlying human psychology functions as a constraint on the capacity of human beings to change; if they refuse what psychologists tell them they will be able to change society and in the process that will bring about changes in the way they behave and experience their behaviour. This is also why we do not want to develop ‘alternative psychologies’ that promise to tell us the truth because we know that every claim to truth about human psychology tends to operate as a political programme that is rooted in the limited political horizons of the present day (Parker, 2003a).

3: ‘Critical psychology is only concerned with theory and has nothing to say about methodology’

No. It takes methodology very seriously, and it does that because ‘method’ is often the only thing that holds psychology together (Rose, 1985). Raising questions about ‘method’ is a way of raising questions about psychology (Parker, 2005). This is one reason some of those doing critical work have been interested in discourse analysis, because it is a quite different methodology that focuses on how forms of language structure experience and behaviour (e.g. Parker, 2002). One way of tackling the problem of the role of psychology is to treat psychological jargon as one powerful discourse that circulates in Western culture, and discourse research can enable us to step back

from psychology and treat the accounts given by psychologists as discourses rather than facts about behaviour and experience that normalise things that are acceptable and pathologise people who do not fit in (Burman et al., 1996). Discourse analysis may then be turned into a form of action research when it encourages people to make links between language, power and resistance. However, we need to engage in methodological reflection on the problems with this approach, noticing, for example, how the focus on language may sidetrack people from the more pressing material aspects of oppression and political action (Parker, 2003b).

Among other methodological options, narrative approaches make a more direct connection between language and experience than many discourse-analytic studies have done because when people speak they intuitively organise their words along the string of a narrative (rather than simply producing chunks of the ‘repertoires’ or ‘discourses’ that discourse analysts like to describe). There is already a political movement inspired by theoretical discussions of the performance of identity in narrative, and here there is an opportunity to focus on how the stories we tell about ourselves are personal histories that need not reflect ‘psychological’ peculiarities (see, for example, Frosh, 2002). As we construct a different narrative about who we are we are able to open new spaces for challenging the categories that are used by those with power to put us in our place; queer theory and queer politics, for example, have shown how the heterosexually oriented narratives we tell about ourselves can be turned into action so that a person need not be trapped in categories of ‘straight’ or ‘gay’ that serve to divide people and groups from each other in contemporary society.

Even then, we do not take the claims made for this methodology for granted, and the claim that identity is simply an effect of a narrative may make it more difficult for those who want to insist that they really have discovered their ‘real’ identity as a member of a particular community. It is necessary in critical psychology to work with the potentials of each new approach, but then to reflect on the limits that such an approach may put in place as it becomes popular in the discipline. In much the same way, we could turn to ethnography as a good corrective to mainstream psychology and narrative psychology, for ethnography has the potential to enable members of a community to question the ways in which they are coerced into adopting a certain identity and saying that they really like it. Ethnographic research that focuses on processes of inclusion, exclusion and power can then become a form of action research, research that deliberately and explicitly aims to change the world in the process of study. Action research breaks from the attempt to be ‘neutral’ and ‘objective’, and it aims to transform social relationships and encourage people to reflect critically on the knowledge that experts produce about them (e.g. Goodley & Parker, 2000). But then again, to take this critical reflexive logic further, an ethnography that does not directly involve people in the work as co-researchers still gives the point of view of an ‘outsider’ who observes and comments on others. Hence, then some critical psychologists may turn to interviewing as a methodology, and this has been a way of gathering

accounts and connecting more directly with experience (see, for further discussion of these approaches, Parker, 2005).

Yet again, this approach, like the other methodologies, is still framed by the imperative to produce an academic product, and only a political critique of the discipline of psychology as part of an apparatus of control and individualisation under capitalism will enable us to step back, to step outside the frame of academic work and to do something more effective. Above all, many of us are interested in action research, but we do not treat action research as a ‘method’. All research is action that works for or against power (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002), and people may have good reason not to participate in any ‘empowerment’ projects that threaten to weaken them further while only the academics benefit (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). The problem with most mainstream psychology is that it either deliberately leaves things as they are – it explicitly reproduces existing power relations – or it pretends that scientific inquiry or interpretation is neutral, and, hence, it gives tacit support to those in power. In critical psychological research, we aim to open the possibility for working ‘prefiguratively’ – anticipating a better form of society in the very process of struggling for it (Fals Borda & Rahman, 1991; Freire, 1972). An emphasis on the prefigurative aspect of research draws attention to the way that all aspects of our everyday interaction and internal life world are embedded in social structures, and what happens in the ‘personal’ sphere is intimately connected with wider patterns of power and resistance.

4: ‘Critical psychology is only interested in qualitative research’

No. It is true that critical work in the discipline in the last few years has tended to be very suspicious about any reduction of research to numerical form, and quantification as such has sometimes been seen as a problem that can only be overcome by avoiding statistics, anything that looks like ‘hard science’. Qualitative research that gathers accounts from people or draws together themes from interviews about experience or interprets actions in everyday settings has, understandably, been preferred as a methodological strategy by many critical psychologists. However, we will always need to know how widespread a certain kind of pattern of behaviour is in order to arrive at a picture of the overall structure of action and experience, and we may well need to represent that with the help of statistics. Work by the Radical Statistics Group, for example, develops ways of using quantitative analysis that do not turn people into things (something that psychology all too often does do) and, instead, to help us interpret statistics so that we can connect these strange things with the real world (Dorling & Simpson, 1999).

If we are interested in experiences of inequalities in the classroom for girls being taught science, for example, we will also need to know how many boys and girls actually ‘succeed’ in science subjects and how many men and women actually become scientists. There have been some very complex analyses within critical psychology of the way girls are taught in class that they cannot learn mathematics, and this analysis of teachers discourse makes sense because we also really know something about how few women mathematicians there are in the world (Walkerdine & the Girls and Mathematics Unit,

1989). Then, it is possible to give a contextually embedded account of the relationship between quantification, cognition and the reproduction of stereotypical masculinity (Walkerdine, 1988).

Quantification is important to critical work then, and this kind of analysis can be used to reveal things about the world that critical psychologists make use of in their research. What we must keep in mind, though, is that numbers are themselves interpretations of the world, and that they are elements in explanations we give about action and experience (Parker, 2005).

5: *'Critical psychology has nothing to offer to people in distress'*

No. One striking example of effective action research in relation to psychiatry in Italy in the 1970s poses important questions for how we sometimes need to do something with knowledge other than research. In Trieste, the old mental hospital San Giovanni was closed and replaced with community mental health centres as part of the mass movement *Psichiatria Democratica*. These events inspired the publication of the 'magazine for democratic psychiatry' *Asylum* in Britain www.asylumonline.net and the emergence of a new wave of mental health resistance movements during the 1990s around the 'Hearing Voices Network', groups of people who experience what psychiatrists call 'auditory hallucinations' (Romme & Escher, 1993). The network shows that the experience of hearing voices is not a necessary indication of 'schizophrenia', and that the label is a misleading medical category that overlooks the fact that many people – those who are deeply religious, for example – hear voices and are then able to refuse to 'adapt' to a sick society as they find new ways to live outside the frame of pathological labelling (Blackman 2001; James, 2001).

This network was not based in an academic institution, and the Hearing Voices Network newsletter and *Asylum* magazine always include fiction and poetry, but the links with universities did become a resource for developing new methodologies and new ways of thinking about what 'theory' was. A conference held at Manchester Metropolitan University in 1995, for example, brought together users of psychiatric services, psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, shamans and spiritualists to present and discuss theories about the phenomenon of hearing voices (Parker et al., 1995). Such an event demanded a rethinking of what the role of research should be and how psychological ideas could be adapted and utilised as a form of therapeutic action research. It is in this process that people engage in activities that bring about 'psychological' change. There are better things psychologists could be doing than implementing 'psychology'. In Trieste, for example, the psychologists became the workers in the café and gardeners. One development since has been the formation of a 'paranoia network' in 2003. Two disciplines, psychology and psychiatry, have tried to keep a tight grip on knowledge over the last century, and together with their colleagues these disciplines have kept control at the centre of that dense web of theories and practices that comprise the 'psy-complex' (Ingleby, 1985; Rose, 1985). The psy-complex is contradictory and conflict ridden, with psychologists of different stripes arguing against psychiatrists and psychotherapists, and in this way the psy-complex repeats the incoherence of the dis-

cipline of psychology. The different competing components of the psy-complex each serve to observe and regulate behaviour in specific domains of work, and as an individual comes under the authority of each component that individual will also feel torn by the competing demands that each ‘expert’ on mental life makes.

The paradox is that while those in the psy-complex observe and regulate thinking and behaviour – they are part of the very enterprise that makes it so people do feel they are being watched – at the same time the professionals feel fearful and suspicious about what people who are ‘abnormally’ paranoid might do next. In 2004, then, we reworked and extended our experiment of an academic conference, and opened up the space of our university for the Paranoia Network to enable challenges to the authority of ‘experts’ on other people’s lives.

One of the lessons of this movement, which is doing research as part of its political action against many abusive and demeaning practices of psychiatry and psychology, is that old-paradigm psychological notions of ‘testable hypotheses’ and ‘control groups’ will not work in the real world. The movement is mutating so fast, learning from its own experience, so that it only some of the newer critical approaches are in any way relevant (Burman et al., 2006).

6: *‘Critical psychology is European’*

No. Some of the most trenchant critiques of mainstream US American psychology have come from inside North America, and they still provide resources for bringing alive a history of alternatives to positivism (e.g. Brown, 1973; Fox & Prilleltensky, 1997; Newman, 1991). The new ‘European’ wave of critical psychology drew on continental European theoretical resources (e.g. Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn, & Walkerdine, 1998), and some of us have made connections with the German ‘critical psychology’ tradition (see, for example, Tolman & Maiers, 1991).

This particular account of ‘critical psychology’ is written from within the UK, and, of course, it is marked by a certain historical trajectory. What we have learnt from the failure of fake scientific ‘objectivity’ in the discipline of psychology, however, is that every account, every critique, will carry with it assumptions of a certain time and place. To attempt to smooth over the contradictions between different forms of ‘critical psychology’ from different parts of the world would only serve to homogenise this diverse new wave of radical activity (see, for example, Dafermos et al., 2006). Hence, we do two things in the development of a critical ‘standpoint’, and here we owe a great deal to feminist debates (e.g. Harding, 1987). First, we own up to our own position, and develop an argument. It is crucial to the development of critical work in psychology now that we not only accumulate resources to show that mainstream psychology is mistaken, abusive and oppressive, but we also maintain our particular political stance in a comradely but intense debate with our fellow ‘critical psychologists’. In that debate, it would be as limiting and reductionist as the discipline of psychology has ever been to tie political positions to ‘identities’ or to geographical regions of the world. Our struggle – voiced here in this article from Europe – is designed to build alliances with those working inside psychology departments and services in all parts

of the world. Second, learn from the places where struggle against psychology has had to connect with political struggle.

Far from being 'European', the most striking advances in thinking methodologically against colonialism have come from New Zealand (e.g. Tuhiwai Smith, 1999), the most radical developments in action research have come from Latin America (e.g. Montero & Fernández Christlieb, 2003), and by far the best 'introductions' to critical psychology have come from South Africa (Hook, 2004).

Conclusions

The key lesson that we learn from this activity is also applicable to all of our work in critical psychology. Radical accounts that challenge mainstream psychology can only be elaborated in new networks with new forms of institutional support. Traditional psychologists all too often tell us that this is the way the world is, this is the way people are, this is what can and cannot be done, as if they knew. But they do not. And many of the people they do things to know they do not. Rather than try to solve this problem as if it were merely an internal matter, psychologists should do something to rearrange the boundaries between the inside and the outside of the discipline.

Counselling and psychotherapy can therefore be seen as part of the same disciplinary apparatus, for they encourage people to talk to the experts. Science is only one of the discourses of the psy-complex, and it reinforces the power of professionals to persuade individuals to speak and reflect on themselves and to believe that this is part of progress. Foucault's (1981) description of psychoanalysis as a discursive practice that condenses all that feels dangerous into sexuality and then makes the patient speak about it to 'release' it, as if it were inside them, is another powerful metaphor for the way in which we now think about the interior of ourselves. This is a historical process of individualisation of distress and confession that has intensified. It is a process that runs along side the increase in surveillance and 'discipline' in society (Foucault, 1977).

Forty years ago, for example, agony advice columns in Britain would contain prescriptions like 'if that is your emotion stamp on it hard'. Now, we are invited, incited to talk about emotions that lie hidden inside as a prerequisite for helping ourselves (Furedi, 2003). This is the therapeutic side of the psy-complex that often appears to be a progressive humanist alternative to positivist approaches in the discipline. It is certainly true that humanist quasi-therapeutic perspectives get little hearing in the discipline, but they are always there as the underside of so-called 'scientific' psychology. The contradictoriness of the psy-complex is evident again, but here it is a necessary contradictoriness; the psy-complex is mechanistic in the way it categorises people and, at the same time, it includes humanistic elements so that people are tempted to speak about themselves in a way that other non-mechanistic psychologists will understand. It is tempting to turn to therapeutic versions of psychology as if they were alternatives but they are really of a piece with the overall architecture of the psycomplex. And here psychoanalysis, assumed by some psychologists to be a dead horse, still has some life in it. One should not underestimate the ability of the psychoanalytic practitioners to bounce back, and there are signs that psychoanalytic arguments are making a comeback in social psychological research (e.g. Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). The reason

Foucault's work is so valuable is that it provides quite different arguments against psychoanalysis than those offered by positivist psychologists (who mistakenly believe that there is empirical evidence for or against the existence of the phenomena Freud described and that then it can be quickly dispensed with). This is why we should not try and construct an 'alternative psychology' for this will merely serve to smuggle into radical politics reductionist and essentialist ideas, and will serve to turn the radicals back into psychologists again (Parker, 2007).

Psychology is constructed within the horizons of capitalist society to enable that society to run more efficiently, and it constructs within that society its own images of pathology. Part of the political activity of challenging the construction of psychology is the unravelling of what we have made to be. The process of critique is also a process of deconstruction.

It must include a practical political alliance with all those who suffer psychology and who are starting to refuse the way they have been constructed as pathological. It is a political question that calls for practical deconstruction of the theories and apparatus of the discipline of psychology. I pointed out at the beginning of this paper that our starting point for critical psychological research is the ability of human beings to change. Traditional approaches in psychology studied human beings in such a way as to try and fix them and hold them in place. When psychologists interpreted what people did, they fixed things in such a way as to block change. Critical psychology is a way of connecting with the process of change and, hence, being part of changing the world. It is only one way of developing alternatives in and against psychology as part of a revolution in subjectivity that we need if we are to take that process forward.

Short Biography

Ian Parker trained as a psychologist and then psychoanalyst, and knows that these practices must be understood as part of a political-historical context that will be transformed by the collective agency of working people to render those practices one day unnecessary. His work is devoted to facilitating that transformative process, and details of academic interventions directed to that end are collected at www.discourseunit.com.

Endnotes

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