

ESSAY REVIEW

Changing practices

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Erica Burman, Gill Aitken, Pam Alldred, Robin Allwood, Tom Billington, Brenda Goldberg, Angel Gordo-López, Colleen Heenan, Deborah Marks and Sam Warner (1996)

Psychology Discourse Practice: From Regulation to Resistance.
London: Taylor & Francis.

Social constructionism and discourse analysis perspectives are still considered by many as minority positions in the psychology apparatus. Even those who consider them as interesting, usually exhibit a certain ambiguity when they need to provide a perspective on psychological practice. This ambiguity is rooted in the frequent critics that attribute a paralyzing rather than a liberatory potential. This book is precisely a good example for the understanding how it is possible to be a psychologist and a practitioner without, inevitably, having to be a regulative agent as part of the psy complex.

Psychology Discourse Practice: From Regulation to Resistance is a co-authored text, the result of multiple discourses and subjectivities and, for that reason, with a great internal variability. This variability represents the complexities and multiple experiences of its authors, the result of a joint project, discussed and written by practitioner-researchers who 'enjoyed developing and sharing our transgressive positions on the fringes of psychology' (p. 201) with an objective not only reactive but also transformative. The authors assume that 'the non-homogeneity of this book is more, and more significant than, the mere accumulation of differences arising from particular institutional and professional positions. Our commonalities arose from our commitment to change and our critique of traditional psychological practices' (p. 200). The variability and complexity of this book arises also from the different theoretical resources of its authors. These main resources are essentially deconstruction, Foucaultian analyses, psychoanalysis as well as discussion about postmodernism.

As practical intervention but also as theoretical resource this book presents some examples of how to move the critic towards change, by the application of discourse perspectives to psychological practices. It is evident that there is a preoccupation with reaching beyond the determinism of structures and resignation in trying to elaborate strategies and to document activities which, from the theoretical, methodological and professional point of view, might offer the opportunity for movement and action. One of the great objectives is to help those who try to make practical interventions.

The authors start from the comprehension of the professional positions of the psychologists and the way they collaborate or resist the ruling patterns, to speak next, about certain groups that, by the fact of dealing with those professionals, see their stigmatization maintained. The book ends with the presentation of alternative positions that might be examples of practices for resistance.

The book, oriented for the practices, goes from regulation to resistance: 'the structure of this book therefore traces the development of perspective and argument rather than a compartmentalization according to arena. We have avoided the conventional divisions between theory and practice between clinical and educational arenas between method and application' (p. 4). Furthermore, 'in this book we do not provide the conventional (scientific and everyday) narrative of problem posed and then resolved; rather, our aim is to offer some

space for the production of new positions and subjectivities' (p. 7)

In Chapter 1 Erica Burman makes the presentation of this co-authored book, introducing the main concepts: 'This book is about the role psychological knowledge and practices play in shaping and governing our lives. We address how psychology functions within current institutionalized structures of inequality' (p. 1), this is, how psychology regulates on normality and then, with its 'expert' knowledge turns social marginalization into pathology. Therefore the book has practical objectives of intervention towards resistance and change. Erica Burman argues that the book is polemical but also pedagogical since, although engaged, it aims to persuade and inform: 'the purpose of this book is not only to pose questions about practices we inhabit and perform, but to identify ways of intervening in these so that we can change them' (p. 3). This introductory chapter is followed by three sections which correspond to phases of a process: 'Part I, Instituting agencies', 'Part II, Practising (at) the limits of representation', 'Part III, Dis/locating institutional boundaries' and finally postscripts.

Starting from the institutional positions of the psychologists and their practices ('Part I, Instituting agencies'), in three chapters the authors analyse the way practitioners, laypeople and theorists might collaborate, resist and oppose to the institutional positions that they occupy. The focus is on the role of institutional power relations in the construction of different forms of subjectivity. Although very different, these three chapters share the emphasis on political ambiguities of expertise and interpretation. In Chapter 2 '*I have depression don't I?: Discourses of help and self-help books*', Robin Allwood aims to show how the distinction between regulation and resistance might be difficult to attain. Since, in a Foucaultian perspective, the consequences of power produces resistance, the self-help texts on depression might be either liberatory or regulative; 'Still, in terms of personal resistance, it might help someone experiencing being depressed to know that the cause(s) of their distress is (are) not known, to choose from interpretations of 'depression' that acknowledge their contingency, and to be able to generate personal interpretation that will be heard rather than be subsumed by some particular instantiation of medical discourse' (p. 35).

In Chapter 3 '*Pathologizing children: psychology in education and acts of government*', Tom Billington focuses on how psychology contributes to the social regulation of children and particularly to the educational psychological assessments and interventions. The author argues that 'it is the meanings and values of the measures of pathologization in supporting particular acts of government, rather than specifically the act of measurement itself' (p. 54), that constitute regulatory patterns. The chapter draws attention to how psychological assessment can be used to challenge the parents and teachers perceptions of the students (in)abilities. In Chapter 4, '*Feminist therapy and its discontents*', Colleen Heenan approaches the contested and contradictory project of feminist therapy, as well as a reflection over the therapeutic practice that the discourse analytic approach enables. She explores the 'dynamic relationship between feminism, object relations therapy and post-structuralist theory' (p. 56), drawing attention to the idea that 'being resistive to the normalizing practices of conventional psychotherapy does not in itself mean feminist therapy can escape from being regulatory' (p. 56).

The process by which certain groups suffer discriminating processes by not conforming to normalized categories imposed by a given dominant culture with its practices of institutionalization and disempowerment is approached in 'Part II, Practising (at) the limits of representation', in three chapters. These chapters 'set out to challenge categories and constructions which are characteristically (re)produced within research and practice settings.' (p.73), and 'highlights how practitioner-experts of the 'psy complex' both work inside existing conceptual frameworks and also by their practice help to define and maintain those categories' entry into representation' (p. 74). In Chapter 5, '*The present absence/pathologized presence of black women in mental health services*', Gill Aitken is essentially concerned with the government's focus on black mental health issues. The

constructed categories of race, on one hand, and of gender, on the other hand, implied an invisibility of black women, and thus, 'one challenge for mental health services is to theorize the relations between 'race' and gender as intersecting rather than additive and to treat such categories as self-defined rather than imposing (and thus further institutionalizing) racialized and genderized identities' (p. 93).

Sam Warner, in Chapter 6 '*Special women, special places: women and high security mental hospitals*', looks at 'how 'woman' is constructed through discourses around madness, criminality and dangerousness and further interpolated through an emerging story of child sexual abuse' (p. 96). The author stresses the importance of being critical of gender categories, essentially the idea of 'woman' as a category, and to all the interventions that reified them. Finally, in Chapter 7, '*Constructing a narrative: moral discourse and young people's experiences*' Deb Marks, explores some of the meanings of being excluded from school, assuming exclusion as a discursive social construction, that is a lived experience.

In 'Part III. Dis/locating institutional boundaries' three chapters deal with the possibility of multiple positions and alternatives, that, by being contradictory with the ruling positions, might bring resistance to the definitions and categorizations institutionally defined: 'The particular contribution of the chapters in this section is to challenge the idea that these discourses operate as all-powerful or totalizing' and the authors 'highlight the resistance to dominant discourses in the form of counter positions, or locations in which their implications are not as might have been predicted' (p. 131). Pam Alldred in Chapter 8, '*Whose expertise? Conceptualizing resistance to advice about childrearing*', focuses her interest on psychological expertise on parent-child relations: 'over the last 40 years the shift has been from scientific advice to *mothers* to psychological knowledge for *parents*' (p. 140). After a brief historical background on advice to mothers, she also presents the feminist critiques to this advice made by experts and critics of the role of the experts. The author concentrates on parenting magazines and on the possibility of the discourses working in a non-fixed form as resources for resistance or regulation.

In Chapter 9, '*Come to the carnival: women's humor as transgression and resistance*', Brenda Goldberg, argues that 'one of the most immediate and frustrating concerns for a feminist researching humor is the relative lack of female humor (in the public sphere)' (p. 153). For that reason, the author refers to the importance of the spirit of carnival and carnival humour, as one possible form of feminist resistance. 'There is no more dangerous and powerful image than that of a woman who laughs, mocks and travesties the bonds that are designed to bind her...making a 'spectacle' of yourself can be powerful if you chose to do it when you are the 'subject' and creator of your own representation and visibility' (p. 169). In Chapter 10, '*The rhetorics of gender identity clinics: transsexuals and other boundary objects*', Angel Juan Gordo-López 'analyses the rhetoric of gender identity in the light of a discursive interpretation of the notion of 'boundary objects' (p. 170). After analyzing the regulatory practices within gender identity clinics, the author discusses 'how different groups of practitioners are coordinating through constituting their 'clients' as *boundary objects* and how the objects, informed by wider social discourses are regulated and constructed through stereotyped and binary sexual and gender divisions' (p. 170).

In the Postscripts, the authors draw attention to the disagreements and different perspectives that characterized the process of construction of this book, as well as the complexity of the co-authored 'we'. Essentially a reflection is made about the existing tensions on the frontier of what is considered regulation or resistance, modernity and post-modernity, relativism and materiality, process and effects, and the textual and technophilic body. One might say that richness of this book emerges from the diversity, variability as well as from the reflexive effort of their authors.

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Guessing And Checking

Is asking questions research?

No.

Is interviewing research?

No.

Is journalism research?

No.

Is curiosity research?

Is observation research?

No. No.

Is introspection research?

No.

Is counting research?

No.

Is statistics research?

No.

Is a computer research?

No.

Is guessing research?

Partly.

Is checking research?

Yes.

John Rowan