Critical psychology: critical links

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Abstract. To arrive at even the barest elements of a definition of `critical psychology` we need to develop a cultural-historical account of the emergence of different `critical` tendencies, and we have to make `critical links` between the many activities that define themselves as critical. Our conception of `boundaries` then needs to be questioned if we are to be able to collect these tendencies and activities together; boundaries which divide those who are inside from those outside the discipline, which divide academics, professionals and users of services, and divide those who are properly and improperly critical. With a broadest most generous vision of what constitutes the foundations of critical psychology, I will review developments `inside` psychology, then move on to give an account of critical work `outside` before turning to activities operating `in and against` the discipline. Then we arrive, in the final section, at four characteristics which might define the contradictory field of `critical psychology`.

Keywords: critique, politics, resistance

`Critical psychology` has emerged in academic arenas very fast in recent years, and it stretches to the limit the self-critical reflexive activity that should characterise any good mainstream psychological research. It should be noted at the outset that there is nothing particularly special about academic psychology that makes it a more worthwhile target of critical work than other disciplines. It is just as important to develop a radical critique of sociological theory, for example, and it is important to bear that in mind when we draw upon resources in other disciplines. We have to beware of mistakenly believing that work in other disciplines is necessarily more radical than our own. There is something peculiarly powerful about psychology, but we should still be careful to keep in mind that our critical work here should go alongside a critical perspective on other oppressive practices.

There have been a number of theoretical and methodological developments inside psychology in the last twenty years that give the appearance, to some, of profound and radical changes in the discipline. The shape of this review of those developments reflects the overall dominance of US America in the development of psychology and my position in the UK. I attempt to review the way challenges from around the globe have emerged to the dominant traditions in Anglo-American psychology, but it would be foolish to pretend that we can escape the division between centre and periphery that marks our theory and practice up to now.

Radical debates

There has been long-standing disagreement in the United States between the behaviourist mainstream -- which was augmented in the 1950s by information-processing, computational and `cognitive science` approaches -- and a small but vocal phenomenological opposition. Phenomenology was to be one of the important resources for the humanist critiques of psychology that emerged in the 1960s. Debates over the value of laboratory-experimentation in social psychology during the late 1960s and early 1970s `crisis` were often still underpinned by the opposition between behaviourism and phenomenology, and the `self` thus became one arena for the conflict between the two traditions to be played out. In Britain, to take a case example, one of the alternatives in the wide array of US `personality theories`, Kelly`s personal construct theory, was radicalised, and thus given a phenomenological and social character far beyond that seen to this day in the US. Despite some occasional harsh criticism from within the British radical psychology movement (Skelton-Robinson, 1970s n.d.), it became one important point of focus for critical clinical psychologists working in the National Health Service. The Kellyan tradition has lived on in groupings like the `Psychology and Psychotherapy Association` and the journal Changes.

Humanism, Kelly and phenomenology lay in the background in versions of `new paradigm` social psychology Armstead, 1974; Reason and Rowan, 1981). Phenomenology combined with Marxism also led to some useful accounts of psychology as a form of refilication (Ingleby, 1972). These conceptual strands also underlay the more activist currents in the student movement in the 1970s, such as at, Myth and Magic (1970s n.d.). There were connections with similar `social` concerns in developmental psychology, and in some cases critiques from a Marxist standpoint (Riley, 1978). For some, such as those in the UK involved in the magazinesHumpty Dumpty and Red Rat, this led to an engagement with more humanist Object Relations psychoanalytic theory, a line of interest which connected with the emerging Women`s Therapy Centre movement (Eichenbaum and Orbach, 1982; Ernst and Maguire, 1987).

There has been a seepage of ex-psychology radicals into psychodynamic psychotherapy since the 1970s in both the UK and the US, and at an even more alarming rate in the French and Spanish-speaking cultures influenced by Lacan`s work. In some cases the discovery of psychoanalysis has also been the `discovery` that radicals are too optimistic about social change (Craib, 1988; Richards, 1988). A number of short-lived US radical psychology journals either moved very quickly from general critique of the discipline into the
psychoanalytic embrace, which was the case with *Psychology and Social Theory* (Parker and Jones, 1981; Parker et al., 1981), or, just a few years later, started from the premise that psychoanalysis was the basis for an adequate critique of psychology, which was the case with *PsychCritique* (Bassin et al., 1985) and now still seems to be the case with its successor *PsychCulture*.

Social psychology in the US was also the source, during the so-called ‘crisis’, of reflections on the character of social psychology as thoroughly tied to history (Gergen, 1973), and the elaborations of this argument now inspire the ‘social constructionist’ trend of critique that has widened its scope to psychology as a whole. The versions of ‘new paradigm’ social psychology that drew upon structuralism and ‘ordinary language’ theories (Harré and Secord, 1972; Harré, 1979) have also become more ambitious, leading to claims that a ‘second cognitive revolution’ - succeeding the one that displaced strict behaviourism in the 1950s - is now taking place in the discipline (Harré and Gillett, 1994). The successors to the phenomenological and social constructionist strand of the radical psychology movement and the structuralist and linguistic strand have converged now to an extent in the discourse analytic critiques of psychology, in the uses of post-structuralist ideas (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Parker and Shotter, 1990), and in the attempts to make psychology ‘postmodern’ (Kvale, 1992). ‘Post-structuralist’ writing and serious discussion of the work of Lacan and Foucault was imported into psychology in the UK in the late 1970s through the journal *Ideology & Consciousness* (Adam et al., 1977). The book *Changing the Subject* (Henriques et al., 1984) that emerged from that project, after the journal itself had folded, was a powerful inspiration for those who wanted to rebuild something of the 1970s radical psychology movement in the 1980s.

Some of these writers would and some would not call themselves ‘critical psychologists’. Some simply have a concern with developing a better description of language and the self, and have no direct stake in the struggle to understand and change structures of power that hold existing forms of language and selfhood in place. Although feminism, for example, was belatedly acknowledged as an important source of critical ideas in the new paradigm debates (Reason and Rowan, 1981), and there have been attempts to link feminist work with discourse analysis (Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1995), this radical social movement that was so prominent in parallel debates in sociology and politics has so far been marginalized or silenced. Feminist work, which had appeared in the 1970s radical psychology and psychotherapy movement (Brown, 1973; Radical Therapist Collective, 1974), emerged in academic debates first in social psychology (Wilkinson, 1986) and then broadened its focus to psychological practice generally (Burman, 1990). Lesbian and gay activism, which was quite quickly recuperated by mainstream US work as ‘Lesbian and Gay Psychology’ has also for the last decade, in the US and particularly in Britain, been a resource and arena for the development of ideological and practical assaults on the discipline (Brown, Kitzinger, 1987). There is, however, still a radical reflexive impulse in these strands of work, and critical psychology must draw connections between different analyses of how psychological knowledge is constructed and how that knowledge functions politically.

Critical psychology which is already sensitive to the historical production of concepts and approaches in the discipline must also be alert to the ways in which ‘alternatives’ only operate as alternatives in certain contexts. As a general overarching point, questions of ‘relativism’ and ‘realism’ in psychology function very differently in different contexts, and there is nothing to mark one position as necessarily ‘radical’ and the other as ‘conservative’. Critical psychology should not be defined as always ‘relativist’ (although it may well treat all the discipline’s facts as social constructions) or as ‘realist’ (although it may want to give an account of the underlying social conditions that give rise to certain ideas in the discipline) (Parker, 1998). Critical psychology does not prescribe one epistemological position over the other, but draws together the wide variety of radical perspectives on the discipline. This includes reflection on the way that relativism may sometimes be used to undercut radical arguments and the way that realism may be used to bolster the truth claims of the discipline against its critics. Nevertheless, an assessment of the political advantages and disadvantages of the different positions does require some kind of realist stance.

With respect to specific ‘critical’ approaches, we will find occasions when contenders turn out, in other contexts, to be complicit with the more conservative practices of the discipline. Kelly’s work, for example, is still a mainstream personality theory in the US, and the more radical British phenomenological Kellyan writers cannot publish in their journals. Another example is the ‘British dialect’ of Q-Methodology which, in the hands of ‘Beryl Curt’, has provided a tool for radical work which is very different from the methodology in the US, and which has been an inspiration for a generation of what we might now call ‘critical psychologists’ (Curt, 1994; Stainton Rogers et al., 1995).

Phenomenology in particular has a lamentable history of collusion with apartheid in South Africa, and laboratory-experimental approaches to group conflict in social psychology have been one of the radical resources there. Psychoanalysis has enjoyed prestige and power in mainstream psychology in parts of Scandinavia, as ‘ego psychology’, and South America, as Lacanian theory, and radical alternatives have had to turn elsewhere for theoretical support. Activity theory has been one of the important resources for radical work, in France for example (Sève, 1978), and even for a current called ‘Critical Psychology’ (Tolman, 1994) in Germany and, to an extent, in Denmark, but it still functioned as a mainstream psychology in the bureaucratized states of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe until the 1990s. The Berlin-based *Kritische Psychologie* aimed to construct a ‘science of the subject’, but it is clear that although this work often did encourage its adherents to link with practice it still also invited scientistic and purely academic work that need not connect with users of psychology services (Tolman and Maires, 1991). And a refusal of science does not necessarily solve the problem either. Even the apparently most radical ‘postmodern’ approaches have been used, in India for example, to warrant oppressive cultural practices; what is ostensibly most critical inside an academic discipline found that it could not bring itself, as a matter of principle, to be critical of the oppression of women in the outside world (Mitter, 1994).

The radical edge

At the radical edge of the ‘inside’ are those who have exposed the ideological assumptions and plays of power in the discipline. The development of a ‘disciplinary reflexivity’ in psychology (Wilkinson, 1988) has drawn upon debates and forms of organization that had been developed in the other human sciences and feminist politics, and institutional forums, such as the journal *Feminism & Psychology*, have provided an arena for academic and practical initiatives to address sexism, hetero-sexism, racism and class oppression in the discipline (Kitzinger et al., 1992; Bhavnani and Phoenix, 1994; Walkerdine, 1996). Critical psychology, in so far as it is possible for a
Some of the latest versions of critical reflection on the morality and politics of psychology (Prillertensky, 1994), self-styled ‘Critical Psychology’ (Fox and Prillertensky, 1997) and ‘Critical Social Psychology’ (Ibáñez and Iñiguez, 1997) now include feminist perspectives, and feminist perspectives in the discipline themselves have been subjected to critical self-reflection, progressive deconstruction and connections to practice (Burman, 1998; Burman et al., 1995). One of the particular struggles feminist psychologists have had to engage in has been around the right to organize separately as women. In some contexts, such as the UK, it has been necessary to argue that there is a specific intellectual domain that needs a distinct academic organization. In other contexts, such as Scandinavia, women’s organization in psychology has been under cover of union activity, and it is then also possible to connect with wider questions of oppression and practice beyond the discipline.

Outside psychology

Meanwhile, a number of radical critiques ‘outside’ psychology have led to new models of the mind and new practices to understand and reconfigure social relationships. This ‘outside’ is not, of course, completely outside the psy-complex; the network of theories and institutions to do with the mind and behaviour that comprise the psy-complex in Western culture (and through the rest of the world now penetrated and organized by Western culture) includes the most diverse ‘alternative’ accounts (Inglesby, 1985; Rose, 1985). It would be better to say that the ‘outsiders’ are, rather, on the margins of the psy-complex. Sometimes, rarely, they escape its assumptions, but they must also adopt and adapt ideas that circulate around it. Critical psychology works with these outliers as allies who have a sometimes idiosyncratic and for that reason alone, an often more sophisticated understanding of what psychology does.

Different disciplines

Some of the most vibrant theoretical resources for internal critiques of psychology, ranging from humanism through Critical Theory to post-structuralism, have been hosted by neighbouring disciplines. Accounts of the ‘psy-complex’ which drew on the work of Foucault, for example had been developed in the journal Ideology & Consciousness (Rose, 1979) and then in psychology (Inglesby, 1985), but the main source of critical reflection on the emergence of the psy-complex has been from within sociology (Rose, 1985, 1989). This should not lead us to idealize developments in those disciplines, and a critical psychology would include critical sociology and traditions sceptical of the mainstream in other disciplines that bear on action and experience. The division between psychology and sociology is one good example of an academic division of labour that encourages people to think that what they do as individuals and what they do in society should be in separate compartments.

The ‘new paradigm’ arguments of the 1970s and the ‘turn to discourse’ in the 1980s shamelessly plundered philosophy and sociology for ‘ordinary language’ theories of mind and the ‘social construction’ of reality, and while these ideas really did seem ‘new’ to many psychologists, the fact that there was an already existing corpus of writing in another place did help the radicals. The discussions in the US journal PsychCritique or the UK’s Ideology & Consciousness, for example, drew upon a tradition of work in, variously, Frankfurt School Critical Theory or French post-structuralism. Present-day debates over racism in psychology have included concrete examples of analysis of journals and textbooks (Billig, 1979; Howitt and Owusu-Bempah, 1994) and research exposing fascist movements (Billig, 1978), but the conceptual and theoretical explorations of Orientalism and ‘otherness’ that pervade psychology’s images of race have still only been adequately developed in postcolonial literary theory and cultural studies (Said, 1978; Spivak, 1990). It is still rare to find analyses of psychology’s place in the exploitative networks of relationships between the over-industrialized and ‘third’ world (Sloan, 1990).

Outside discipline

Recent innovators have read a little wider and gone a little further afield to import deconstructive ideas about textuality from literary theory and postmodern accounts of science from geography. Critical psychologists want to travel with them occasionally, but would also want to visit places away from the academic institutions, and look at the theoretical contributions of some of those doing progressive work in the real world. Three domains can be cited here as examples.

Education. First, in education, radical approaches have tended to develop outside US America and Europe. In the US and the UK the largely private ‘free school’ movement was inspiration for those who believed there could be better ways of encouraging development, but this tended to peter out in the Reaganite 1980s. The project of ‘scientization’ as part of research in Latin America has provided alternative models of what child development could be, the ways in which processes of development continue through life rather than being restricted to ‘the child’, and the ways these processes are always linked to the suppression or development of political awareness. The work of Paulo Freire in Brazil and Orlando Fals-Borda in Colombia have borrowed from the best traditions of action research, but have also given a radical edge to US American ideas, forging a close connection between research, action and the empowerment (Freire, 1972; Fals Borda and Rahman, 1991). The general approach of Participant Action Research that has been fought through in Latin America has also been developed in Indonesia.

There are important methodological contributions in this work, for participant action research has been part of a new way of producing and reflecting upon knowledge which breaks from traditional psychological notions and ‘grounds’ the practice of the researcher in social reality rather than, as in liberal US American sociological ‘grounded theory’, simply in their close reading of texts. The politicization of educational and social psychology in Latin America owes much to this participatory research practice, and where ideas have been imported from Europe, they have been integrated, recuperated we might say, into this progressive perspective (Montero, 1987). The work of the social psychologist Ignacio Martín-Baró in El Salvador, who was murdered by the military regime in 1989, has been a particular inspiration (Aron and Corne, 1994; Pacheco y Jiménez, 1990). Critical psychologists there and here are now indebted to his work.

Britain, as a case in point, identifying Neuro-Linguistic Programming as quintessential charlatanry. For critical psychologists, the question of who and how psychology should be practiced is more pressing than ever. The tightening of registration criteria in Australia was a response to the threat posed by Scientologists, and professional psychologists did not work so much as psychologists as part of a broader movement of resistance and social support (Nicholas, 1994). Radical research exposing police torture was able to use social scientific rhetoric to frame the statistics and accounts of victims (Foster, 1987), and the journal *Psychology in Society* served as a point of resistance for a range of activists in psychology and social work generally (and after apartheid fell there were proposals from some of those involved to set up a ‘critical psychology’ division of the new Psychological Society of South Africa).

*Therapy.* A third example is the range of developments in therapy. The demand for therapy as an alternative to drug treatments has been a radical humanist demand from the 1950s, and the link between a concern with a particular type of service provision and a necessary reflection on the institutional conditions that frustrate it has created a context in which more radical empowering varieties of therapy have flourished. In both the US and the UK the radical psychology movement included both advocates and critics of therapy (Brown, 1973; *Radical Therapist Collective*, 1974). There is a paradox here, which is that the most thorough critiques of psychiatry and psychotherapy have come from the libertarian right - in which camp we have, unfortunately, to include Szasz (1961) - in the US rather than the left in the UK, who rallied around the more liberal *Laing* (1965) and then followed him into therapy (Sedwick, 1982). This tendency, resisted by some (around *Asylum*, for example), has taken a number of different forms, with different groups and ideological currents, including the personal growth movement reflected in the journal *Self & Society* and the psychodynamic and feminist currents that found a voice in *Humphry Dumpty* and then in the Women’s Therapy Centres. The UK *Radical Science Collective* (1984) which founded the journal *Free Associations*, in part on the premise that British psychoanalysis was ‘left-of-centre’, has similarly modified its political ambitions over the decade (Cooper and Treacher, 1995). A version of psychoanalysis has tended to be preferred even by those who are most scathing about therapy’s individualist humanism (Jacoby, 1977).

Radical psychoanalysis, in the work of Marie Langer (1989) in Uruguay, Argentina, Mexico and Nicaragua for example, has tended to develop outside psychology and only later be picked up by psychologists, and in some cases psychoanalysis combined with political resistance, as in Slavoj Zizek’s (1989) writing in Slovenia, has been debated in cultural studies and philosophy, and only then in psychology. Part of the difficulty here is that radical tendencies have often been effectively silenced by the conservative psychoanalytic establishment (Jacoby, 1983), and then it is all the more understandable that radicals should identify psychoanalysis with repression, and conclude that the project of therapy itself is oppressive (Rush, 1977; Masson, 1990). Again, we have to take care not to imagine that other disciplines offer ready-made progressive alternatives to psychology, and we have to search for allies who are working as part of the radical opposition in different academic domains and professional practices.

Some currents in family therapy, often led by those who have a first training in social work, have drawn upon deconstructive and discursive ideas to develop systemic therapy into something much more liberating. Deconstructive ideas can be taken, as they often are in US literary theory, as a warrant for playful and relentlessly relativistic refusal of political engagement; What, they would say, is ‘politics’ but merely another text (e.g., *de Shazer*, 1991)? However, these ideas have also been used, starting in Australia and New Zealand, to build demystifying and empowering forms of therapy (White and Epston, 1990). Like the debates between relativism and realism or between qualitative and quantitative research methods in psychology, we need to bring the radical impulse in this family therapy to the fore, and critical psychology embraces the political project of the narrative therapists when they connect with questions of power, professional abuse and social justice (Waldegrave, 1990; Epston, 1993). At this point there is a radical break from family therapy as such because the family is not seen as the locus of pathology. Systems of discourse which trap people in families and in familialist ideology become seen as part of the problem (Parker, 1999).

**In and against psychology**

Critical psychology stretches across the boundary marking the inside and outside of the discipline. It is not only ‘interdisciplinary’, in the sense that it must draw upon arguments raging across the academic and professional landscape, but ‘transdisciplinary’ in the sense that it both questions the ways in which the borders were set up and policed by the colleges and training institutes and it stretches from the furthest edges of the psyche to the centres of psychology. Critical psychology must be mobile and tactical in its journey across this terrain, and its map of ‘the edges’ and ‘the centre’ is a little different from that drawn by the professional cartographers of the mind.

**The edges**

Leaving aside for the moment the sustained neglect of developments in different cultures, it is possible to identify two interlinked tendencies in traditional psychology that help it police the boundary between what is usually considered inside and what is consigned to the outside of a proper ‘scientific’ understanding. One tendency is the drive to professionalization of psychology as a discipline and the ‘Chartering’ and eventual state regulation of psychological qualifications and treatment, and the other is the exclusion of groups that are deemed to be unable to say anything rational about psychological processes because they themselves suffer from pathological ‘cult’ psychology. The tightening of registration criteria in Australia was a response to the threat posed by Scientologists, and professional psychological associations in other countries have been eager to follow the Australian example, with the British Psychological Society in Britain, as a case in point, identifying Neuro-Linguistic Programming as quintessential charlatanry. For critical psychologists, the question
Even those who have been marked by the FBI as a ‘cult’ may still be a source of useful radical theory and practice. Like a weed, a cult is something that is growing in the wrong place. We would want to ask ‘wrong’ for who, and whether it might sometimes be right for us. We have no desire to line up with the psychological establishment to rule out of the debate those who offer something valuable to anti-racist, feminist or working-class practice (Newman and Holzman, 1993, 1997). At the same time, we take care to be critical of each alternative, and to include a range of appraisals of their work from radicals (Harris, 1995; Parker, 1995). It is worth noting here that ‘critical psychology’ does not, as a point of principle, exclude ‘pop-psychology’, but asks what political functions it serves in different contexts. The work of Freire and Fals-Borda in Latin America, for example, is a variety of ‘popular psychology’, and so it should be. Rather than being the ‘edges’ of our universe, these debates should be at the centre, and we should then look at the activity of ‘mainstream’ psychology as if it were a strange marginal enterprise that needs to be comprehended, analysed as if it were itself a kind of ‘cult’ practice.

The centres

The centres of the critical psychologists’ world are not really the abstract debates that happen in mainstream journals, but the forms of self-organization that work with psychological theory and practices. The various self-help groupings that spring up around different topics, for example, have to develop forms of psychology that will maintain and help them. Mainstream academic and professional psychology is not particularly helpful, and the attempts to tie self-help movements back into traditional psychological frameworks also effectively disempower them, as is the case, for example, with the ‘schizophrenia’ support groups that are controlled by psychiatrists and, then, by the pharmaceutical industry (Breggin, 1991).

One of the myths about self-help groups is that they are parochial and limited in their thinking to the local particular context of their problem. This myth is reinforced by the traditional opposition between the discipline of psychology as the ‘centre’ and those outside as if they are living in the provinces. In fact, the debates in the self-help movements have much to teach critical psychologists. The radical psychiatry movement in the UK, for example, was re-founded as the result of intense debates over the reforms in Italy, and the experiment in Trieste where, under Basaglia (1987), the mental hospital was closed down and replaced by a series of community mental health centres governed by staff and users. The first issues of the ‘democratic psychiatry’ magazine Asylum were full of material about Trieste (e.g., Jenner, 1986), and then discussions about radical movements in Germany, Greece and so on. The work of Romme and Escher (1993) on ‘hearing voices’ in The Netherlands has been an inspiration to a new wave of politicized anti-psychiatry activism (Coleman, 1998). The Support Coalition in US America is another example which, through the newspaper Dendron, has mobilised self-help movements across North America and is now, through the Internet, linking with groups overseas. These are models of campaigning activity and critical reflection on the practice of psychiatry that critical psychologists should participate in as they dismantle mysterious medical expertise, as they engage in a ‘practical deconstruction’ of psychological knowledge (Parker et al., 1995).

Here we encounter a question often asked of critical psychologists, and which deserves answer. How can this critical reflection be a contribution to knowledge? We must look again at our map, for this question reveals something about the map traditional psychologists use, and the ways in which they assume that they are at the centre. Psychologists imagine that they are starting their journeys from dry land, and they return to their institutions after exploring strange uncharted waters to make sense of what they have found. Traditional psychology likes to think that it is the one centre for theories of the mind. Debate about psychology outside traditional frameworks, or scepticism about any psychological framework would not, then, be seen as a contribution to knowledge. Critical psychologists disagree, on two counts. First of all there are always multiple centres for meaning if there are ‘centres’ at all, and it is always possible to take apart an intellectual system and trace its component parts to different ideological representations or to the interests of certain social groups. This is the case for all ‘psychologies’, even the ostensibly most radical, and every careful analysis adds to our critical psychological knowledge about the interrelationship between culture and theory, and the interrelationship between theory and practice.

Secondly, there are always different centres for intellectual life in a culture, and more so when we link alternative cultures across the globe and produce new forms of knowledge from those links. Our map shows the discipline of psychology as existing on the terrain of a particular group of intellectuals who have been charged with the difficult task of describing and managing a particular social system. It is understandable that they should feel that psychology happens inside the head, and that they often feel that it happens most efficiently inside the heads of civilized white men. Intellectual activity is often, in these cases, rather abstract, and psychologists often do not even draw connections between their theories and their own experience, let alone that of other people. In contrast, critical psychologists stand on the same ground as, what the Italian writer Gramsci (1971) writing from prison in the 1930s termed, ‘organic intellectuals’. Only they can elaborate a different set of analyses and theoretical concepts that are part of the lives of those who live psychology. This also means forging some different relationship between the inside and the outside of the academic institutions (Mandel, 1972).

This different relationship is crucial if we are to prevent ‘critical psychology’ from simply operating as a series of esoteric debates which are no use to people in their encounters with the discipline. We are not interested in recruiting people to psychology, even to its most radical varieties, but we do want to involve many people from ‘outside’ to build networks and resources for understanding what psychology does. Critical psychology does not pretend to end the fragmentation of the discipline, but tries to understand how the discipline functions in different places in contradictory theories and practices.

Linking elements to define critical psychology

Critical psychology should span academic research, professional practice and the self-organization of users of psychology services, and it needs to link theory and practice in each of those domains and against the divisions between different forms of knowledge inside and
outside colleges and clinics. We need elements of a definition that can link good work and construct a field of debate where the tensions between different positions can be debated. Just as we make links through avoiding the many ways that psychology lures us into its way of thinking about people, so the elements of a definition can be constructed as we negotiate the various traps the discipline sets us.

**Limits**

It is tempting to fall for origin myths that fix knowledge and closes it off to sceptical inquiry. The argument that `psychology` only began in the 1870s in Leipzig or that `Critical Psychology` only began in the 1960s in Berlin, for example, are traps that fix and limit us. This is why critical approaches need to keep insisting that the realm of psychology is wider and more deeply historically embedded than this. We do not discover psychology but live it and produce it. What we critical psychologists want to include in psychology are the various ways in which men and women of different cultures and classes construct and reflect upon action and experience. All of these ways in the past and present should be in our compass. Critical psychology here is therefore, first of all,

*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.*

Despite the queasiness of some critical psychologists - those using Foucault’s (1980) work for example - over the term `ideology` lest it lure them into a search for a `truth` that is counterposed to falsehood, we do need some notion of ideology here to refer to the way ideas work in the service of power and how they operate to mislead or mystify those who might suspect that something dubious was happening (Eagleton, 1991). Psychology’s claim to have discovered something in the nineteenth century certainly misleads and mystifies people about `facts` about the mind which are independent of them, and so it functions ideologically.

**Resistance**

There is another trap, however, that we need to be equally careful to avoid. This is the idea that psychology goes all the way back to the Greeks and other even more far-away exotic intellectual places, and that psychological insights should be gathered from the four corners of the world or from long ago. Here, it is often thought, all the little bits of knowledge and insight will eventually fit into the big picture, a true one, or all the little bits already contain, as if they were hologram fragments, the big picture in miniature. When psychology tries to include all of the times and places that people have ever spoken about themselves, we are surely witnessing a grandiose and colonising impulse in the discipline, one which tries to draw different types of behaviour and mentality into the same system of so-called scientific observation, prediction and control. Critical approaches should then emphasise the particular ways in which the discipline of psychology constructs its objects of study, and the ways in which everyday life always surpasses limited psychological models. Critical psychology is secondly, then,

*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.*

Although critical psychologists will debate the advantages and disadvantages of the term `ideology` then, they do always adhere to the notion that there is the possibility and potential for resistance. There is always some space inside or outside for critical work, and that critical work is always tied in some way to the interests of those who are affected by psychology, those who become aware of what psychology has been doing to them.

**Psychological culture**

Each of these traps that the discipline sets - ignoring everything else outside as if it were unimportant, or incorporating everything on its own terms to make it fit - is encircled by another set of traps that await those fleeing from them. When radicals in psychology look to what is going on outside the disciplinary boundaries, to the things that psychology shuts out because it is too different or to the things that psychology draws in as if they were the same, they then risk falling into the arms of psychological culture. Commonsense in psychological culture contains all the things we `know` most deeply about ourselves, and the things we feel to be unquestionably true. It is all the more misleading for that, however, and it is suffused with ideological representations of the self and others that structure our own seemingly spontaneous psychology. Ideology works not because it simply offers an account that can be willingly adopted or easily refused, but precisely because it saturates commonsense. Gender differences, racial peculiarities, anxieties about our bodies and other peoples’ sexualities each inform our psychology in ways that reproduce patterns of exclusion, pathology and power, and each is carried to us and through us by commonsense.

We need, then, to illuminate the ways in which psychology as a discipline now penetrates commonsense, the ways in which the ideological assumptions about the mind, behaviour and human nature which are so condensed in the discipline riddle culture, and the ways in which people think about themselves in everyday life and struggle to solve the problems it throws up. The power of psychological experts and institutions in contemporary culture now often outstrips even the most compelling ideological legitimation that commonsense provides it, and so sometimes the disciplinary side of psychology becomes more apparent. Coercion and abuse may reveal the bitter fruits of psychological knowledge in extremis, but we have to also attend to the discipline in everyday sweet reason. Critical psychology is, thirdly, then,

*the study of forms of surveillance and self-regulation in everyday life and the ways in which psychological culture operates beyond the boundaries of academic and professional practice.*

What critical psychologists focus on here is the way that power structures how people participate in oppressive relationships and institutions, and actively produce, from the base up, what they feel to be `alternative` practices, practices that bind them all the more into a power that they think is only flowing from the top down (Foucault, 1980).
Everyday psychology as a resource

On the other hand, psychology all too often tries to read back its descriptions of behaviour into commonsense and into the activities of every other culture, and it is tempting then to respond by drawing the boundaries of the discipline all the more carefully, and to show its utter irrelevance to life outside the laboratory. We may urge colleagues doing psychological research to be a little less oppressive and so to carry out their experiments, for example, in strictly circumscribed settings and to claim nothing of relevance for them beyond the subject group on which they were carried out. This might work in the interim as a damage limitation strategy, but it fails to tackle the reasons why psychology is so eminently ‘applicable’ in modern society. Here, commonsense might appear to be protected from psychology, but the effect is also, unfortunately, to protect ‘psychology’ as well, as if it could be a distinct scientific or intellectual domain separate from commonsense.

Psychology is nourished by ordinary explanations of mental goings on, and it digests commonsense before regurgitating it as something pretending to be extraordinary. What people know is taken from them and fed back to them, and one of the ways this academic food chain can be broken is through people becoming self-sufficient producers who refuse to privilege psychological knowledge as if it were manna from the skies. Critical psychology is then, fourthly, 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.

The engagement with forms of everyday explanation that people use to make sense of themselves risks mirroring us in the worse of relativism, but we must take that risk if we are to open up political contradictions that lie at the heart of personal life. We are interested in developing an historically-situated self-reflexive critique of psychology that is also able to reveal the ways in which pedagogical practices of academic psychology either separate useful knowledge from commonsense and turn it into ‘expertise’ which people feel is alien to their experience, or relegate useful knowledge to the domain of commonsense so that people feel that it is worthless.

To be aware of traps that await psychologists and their allies who want to go critical is not enough, and simple exposés of the rackets that individual psychologists get up to will fail to address the ways in which particular social and historical conditions permit and encourage them. Theory need be no more mysterious than psychology, and those involved in critical psychology will need a good deal of theory to make sense of what is going on around them. The theory we need, however, has to be rooted in the experience of those who suffer psychology and has to be linked to action to change it.

Conclusion

We must take seriously any and every critique of psychology, any and every challenge to ideology and power, for it is only on that basis that we will be able to link the variety of radical activities inside and outside, in and against the discipline and to construct a field of debate where different theoretical positions and practical initiatives can be developed, discussed and elaborated. Critical activity cannot be carried out by individuals working independently, and that is why critical psychologists need their own institutions. These will include journals like Asylum, Nordiske Udkast, Psychology in Society and Annual Review of Critical Psychology, and organizations like Psychology Politics Resistance. The identity of the ‘critical psychologist’ here, however, is an identity that is given by the attempt to understand what psychology does rather than membership of a club that thinks it already knows. In that sense critical psychology should be a more theoretically intense, as well as being a more thoroughly practical endeavour.

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