

Paradigm revolutions and discourse debates

[BOOK REVIEW]

Parker, Ian (2015) **Psychology after the crisis: Scientific paradigms and political debate.** London: Routledge. ISBN 978-1-84872-207-1 pbk. 126 pages

Parker, Ian (2015) **Psychology after deconstruction: Erasure and social reconstruction.** London: Routledge. ISBN 978-1-8487-209-5 pbk. 136 pages

Parker, Ian (2015) **Psychology after discourse analysis: Concepts, methods, critique.** London: Routledge. ISBN 978-1-84872-211-8 pbk. 126 pages

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Critical and discursive psychology have long been the sites to contest the roles of language, institutional knowledge and power structures in the maintenance of the discipline of psychology. For over 25 years, Ian Parker has been a key leading figure in the development of these debates. Until now, some of the central ideas of this critical work have remained disparate and scattered, this dispersion being further reinforced by the sheer vastness and diversity of approaches that consider themselves “critical”. In his Routledge-series, **Psychology after critique**, for the first time, Parker brings together a reworked range of his most important papers to present a focused and radical presentation of key debates that he argues emerge from an early

“paradigm crisis” in the psychological field. As a response to the general discontent with the laboratory experiment as the primary mode of framing, investigating and understanding the “psychological”, this crisis enabled the materialisation of qualitative research as a “paradigm revolution” that Parker argues paved the way for a critical and thus a political psychology, in both its conceptual and methodological forms.

This book review takes the first three volumes in the **Psychology after critique** series as its focus. Together, these three books call for a turn to more political and radical theories and methods that reflect on the way language, discourse and power are central to the nature of the psychological discipline and the institutional authority it carries. The texts weave political debates, often embedded in Marxism and feminism and drawing from social constructionism, to present the way the manufacturing of psychological knowledge has ensured that particular psychological theories are treated as “truths” whilst others are concealed. Different from other texts that take critical and discursive psychology as their focus, these texts insist that it is not enough to study *how* a discipline is manufactured. Rather, Parker argues that the investigation of the coercive and ideological functions of psychology call for social transformation through what he refers to as “collective practice”. By demonstrating how psychology is central to “the fabrication of subjectivity” (**Psychology after deconstruction**, p 78) and operates as a social and political apparatus, Parker presents “the personal as political without reducing one to the other” (**Psychology after deconstruction**, p 60); and so provides a foundation for resisting disciplinary psychological practices through collective action. These texts are thus invaluable for researchers, scholars, analysts and undergraduate and postgraduate students across the fields of psychology, sociology, anthropology and cultural studies that take critical and discursive work as their focus and aim to expose the political nature of the production and dissemination of psychological knowledge.

In volume one, **Psychology after the crisis: Scientific paradigms and political debate**, Parker tracks the aforementioned “paradigm crisis” and the history of critical psychology, particularly in the Global North, and more specifically, in the United Kingdom (UK). The key focus in this volume is how the “turn to language” enabled a “turn to discourse” such that psychology could be treated as a collection of discourses rather than as a universal truth about human nature. The central aim in the first volume is to present a picture of the power relations in psychology that reinforce oppressive capitalist and patriarchal structures of inequality and to call for the use of Marxist and feminist interventions that are capacitated to change these structures. Some of the most meaningful observations Parker makes in this volume is how the discipline of psychology has harmed people and, more importantly, the radical activism, critical practices and critical research in action processes through which critical psychology can alter these harms. Central to

these observations is Parker's sensitivity to cultural, social and political contexts that demand that critical psychology be comprised of various context-bound approaches. To this end Parker offers four key resources - Marxism, feminism, post-structuralism and psychoanalysis - that offer alternative frameworks to traditional psychology. Parker's unique contribution here is the bringing together of four vastly different approaches and then, rather than attempting to synthesise them, instead focuses on their tensions and critiques of one another to facilitate "debates across the spectrum of alternative frameworks that contest traditional psychology" (**Psychology after the crisis**, p 23). Once this tone is set, Parker demonstrates the applicability of critical psychology to topics such as psychotherapy, counselling and climate change. However, Parker simultaneously cautions us of "ideological recuperation" whereby our radical formulations are neutralised and "become part of the machinery that they attempted to challenge" (**Psychology after the crisis**, p 46). Parker thus challenges his readers to remain critical of critical psychology itself and by doing so he sets a reflexive framework for the next two volumes that reminds us to not only see critical psychology as a form of resistance, but also that critical psychology is itself a constituent of, and is contingent on, culture, history and context.

In volume two, **Psychology after deconstruction: Erasure and social reconstruction**, Parker presents deconstructionism as a more radical transdisciplinary alternative to social constructionist approaches in psychology. Deconstruction "is a way of destabilizing and uprooting those normal, given or common-sense notions that we typically rely upon to make sense of the world" (**Psychology after deconstruction**, p 79) and it works through a process of "erasure" to question fundamental assumptions about society, subjectivity and psychology. It is thus, a means to begin the "social reconstruction" of psychological knowledge. Such a reconstruction then responds to the first volume's call to turn critical psychology into critical action by paying particular attention to the way psychological accounts oppress some and privilege others. The approach moves beyond simply analysing discourse, to analysing how discourse and language are embedded in structures of power. Parker thus draws heavily on the work of Michel Foucault (1979; 1981) to establish a deconstruction process that emphasises the ideological nature of discourse and is "sensitive to forms of power" (**Psychology after deconstruction**, p 19) such that there is an appreciation for how subject positions are policed and regulated. More specifically, by presenting Foucault's (1981) descriptions of confessions as critically constitutive of subjectivities, Parker demonstrates how psychological theory and practice define, survey and regulate personal experience. For Parker this means that psychology, as a science, must be understood in light of the institutions and power structures in which it is embedded, and in turn, psychological knowledge must be treated as problematic so that research is reflexive of the ways psychology is both constituted and reified in theory and in practice. Unlike Foucault,

however, Parker draws on intersectional approaches so that gender, class and culture are demonstrated as key to the way psychological knowledge operates differently across contexts. Parker's main disciplinary innovations in this volume are his applications of "practical deconstruction" whereby "a place for reflection, resistance and agency to create a transformative therapeutic practice" (**Psychology after deconstruction**, p 56) ensures that power in therapy is overturned and replaced by (reconstructed as) a respectful and critical practice.

The third volume, **Psychology after discourse analysis: Concepts, methods, critique**, presents the development of the radical discourse analytic method and the various approaches that this method takes to present its impact on the discipline in the wake of the "paradigm crisis". More importantly though, Parker depicts limitations and flaws inherent in the theory and practice of discourse analysis so that these can be challenged and refined in pioneering ways by the next generation of critical psychologists, thus ensuring the future significance of the method for the discipline. Parker thus calls for a "link between method and discipline to a new, more fruitful connection between method and innovation" (**Psychology after discourse analysis**, p 1). Central to this volume then is the depiction of the science and practice of psychology as an ever-mutating social construction that, while an entrenched and powerful political and policing system of discourses, is also "a collection of texts susceptible to deconstruction" (**Psychology after discourse analysis**, p 6). In light of this, one of Parker's bolder moves in this volume is his connection of discourse analysis to psychoanalysis. Whilst most critical psychologists have traditionally argued that we should be suspicious of psychoanalytic reductionism, Parker shows us how psychoanalysis is a conceptual resource by treating it as a set of discourses that have been central to the production of dominant Western cultures. A second bold move in this volume is contained in Parker's reflections on the risks of discourse analysis becoming a "a form of academic imperialism" (**Psychology after discourse analysis**, p 85); as well as his agonizing over the method's "claims to interpretative authority" (**Psychology after discourse analysis**, p 91). Here Parker reminds us that while discourse analysis is a key resource for laying "bare the work of ideology and the plays of power...and the spaces of resistance" (**Psychology after discourse analysis**, p 74), we must be cognisant of its vulnerability to these ethical issues. Overall then this volume points to the political issues embedded within and across the various types of discourse analytic methods to call for alternative and novel ways of disrupting and innovating a critical psychology that both practices discursive methods and "is also, necessarily against discourse analysis in psychology today" (**Psychology after discourse analysis**, p 105).

The three volumes together attempt to tackle the transformation of the psychological discipline without restricting this attempt to a universal or singular paradigm or model.

Whilst this represents a much longer-term ambition, Parker certainly begins to grapple with this by drawing on various and sometimes opposing theoretical resources as a means to inform his debates. However, while these debates do reflect on some of the critical psychology developments in South Africa, India and Latin America, the series remains focused on the Global North, and particularly on the UK. Perhaps the next move is to consider the Global South work that has been instrumental in decolonizing psychology. In this way, Global South adaptations of critical psychology can more fully emerge and the traditional view of the UK being home to the discipline can begin to erode. This might be particularly interesting in the context of problematising psychological and counselling professional training in universities which Parker begins to think through in volume one. For example, this would bring to light issues relating to decolonizing curricula; the enduring middle-class nature of universities and in turn psychological practice; the Eurocentricity and thus applicability of psychological practice and psychotherapy; and the hierarchy of psychoanalysts, psychotherapy and counselling and what this means for non-European psychology students. We should thus emphasise an intersectional approach to critical psychology so that we move beyond singular approaches insensitive to the variety of context-bound identity politics. Parker pre-empts this by reminding us that culture “is always fractured at least by age, class, ethnicity, gender and sexuality” (**Psychology after deconstruction**, p 72). Parker’s series then reflects on the colonizing force inherent to the psychological discipline and offers a range of conceptual, practical and methodological resources to enable politically progressive and self-reflexive responses to critical thinking in the context of psychology.

References

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