

Book Review

Understanding Critical Social Psychology

Keith Tuffin (2005)

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Reviewed by Ann Weatherall

Critical psychology refers to a new array of approaches for studying social life which has blossomed in the last decade or so. An important thread of critical work in psychology is that it critiques the discipline for playing handmaiden to an unjust and undesirable social order. Another key feature of critical psychology is that it has spearheaded the development of new, largely qualitative, analytic tools for exploring the rich complexity of social worlds. A feature that distinguishes critical psychology from psychology-as-usual is its explicitly positioned perspective. Typically, psychological research celebrates objectivity as one of its scientific hallmarks. However, the supposed neutrality of psychological facts has been repeatedly exposed as value-laden. Inglorious examples from the discipline's history include declarations of women's inferior intelligence relative to men's and homosexuals' supposed innate mental deviance (see Weatherall, 1992). A characteristic particular to some strands of critical psychology is an acknowledgement and analysis of subjectivity and power in knowledge production.

Researchers and teachers in critical psychology have met considerable challenges in their work. One barrier has been dissemination, with many mainstream journals refusing to publish critical work. Another problem has been isolation, not only because of the relatively small number of critical researchers but also due to their relatively marginalised status

vis-à-vis their traditional psychology colleagues. Currently those obstacles have largely been overcome with the establishment of international associations and conferences in critical psychology (although institutionalisation has led to other problems). Additional challenges for teaching have been student perceptions of the complexity and negativity of the critical literature as well as the lack of resources for students. Tuffin's primary aim for this book is as a text to make critical psychology accessible and exciting for students.

The book is comprised of a prologue, an epilogue and six substantive chapters. The first chapter considers three research topics that typically appear in chapters on social psychology in introductory textbooks. These topics are Asch's studies on trait descriptions and impression formation; Milgram's work on obedience and bystander intervention research inspired by the Kitty Genovese case. Tuffin uses these well-known studies to illustrate the dominance of experimentation in social psychology and to introduce the kinds of critical objections raised about them. The artificiality and potential irrelevance of experimental studies on complex forms of social behaviour is highlighted. In particular, Tuffin insightfully describes the paradox of the laboratory as an assumed social vacuum that is actually a particular social context that shapes both researchers' and participants' behaviours. Some level of deception is typically involved in all experimental studies and Tuffin describes some

original and less well-known studies on social psychology to encourage critical reflection on the necessity of deception and the ethical problems that produces.

The second chapter explores the reasons why experimentation has dominated research in social psychology. One possible explanation is the need for psychology to make itself distinctive from its disciplinary origins in philosophy. Another influential idea is that the goal of psychology should be to discover *general* laws about human behaviour, which suggests people should be studied without regard to the specifics of their lives. Regardless of actual cause, an understanding of the philosophy of science is helpful to a thorough understanding of the profound implications that an over-reliance on experimental work has had on psychological knowledge about human behaviour. In this chapter Tuffin provides a clear description of the characteristics of scientific methods negotiating complex ideas regarding epistemology, ontology, reductionism and so on. A strength of this chapter is the links that are drawn between ideas about science and the ways those ideas, when applied to psychology, can limit rather than enable understandings of human behaviour.

Chapter 3 introduces social constructionism as an alternative to science as a philosophy that could productively shape the theories and methods of psychology. The importance of language and discourse for human thought and behaviour is at the heart of social constructionism and Tuffin leads the reader through the ideas that tie language and understanding about the social world closely together. An important aspect of this chapter is that it aligns critical psychology with social constructionist ideas. This chapter is also a turning point for the book

because it leaves behind the critique of traditional social psychology and moves forwards to exploring the potential of constructionist ideas for social psychology.

The author's research and teaching expertise as well as his affable style comes to the fore in Chapter 4, which includes an introduction to the new social psychology, a 'fly on the wall tutorial' and some sample data and analysis. The introduction to this chapter covers a broad range of analytic orientations, with various theoretical and methodological origins, that fall under the general umbrella of discursive work in psychology. However, the most detail is given to work that follows Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell's (1987) book, *Discourse and Social Psychology*. In the middle part of the chapter readers are provided with a transcript of a tutorial discussion about 'discourse analysis'. The final section of the chapter walks the reader through an analysis of data that should appeal to students – interviews with young people in a study of youth subculture.

Chapter 5 focuses on central topics for social psychology, that of prejudice, discrimination and racism. Traditional approaches to the study of prejudice are described in some detail. Tuffin emphasises an important critical point about psychological work, which is that it has not always supported the cause of anti-racism. For example, an implication of the social-cognitive perspective is that the kinds of categorisation process that underlie stereotyping are necessary for processing the vast array of information that is presented to us. Put most simply prejudice, in a social cognitive approach, is an inevitable result of fundamental mental processes.

For critical approaches, an analysis of everyday language and talk is the key to understanding the production and reproduction of prejudice and racism. Tuffin provides brief overviews of discursive work on gender and inequality, and of sexual orientation and discrimination. However, it is the topic of racism is given the most substantial coverage, which is appropriate because much of Tuffin's own research is in the area of racism and the Australasian contribution to the international literature on discourses of racism is significant.

This chapter, in particular, should form part of a required reading list for students of social psychology.

The final substantive chapter of the book has been written to illustrate the breadth and applicability of critical work to social psychological topics by considering in some depth the topics of emotion and identity. A characteristic of a social constructionist approach to emotions is that it focuses on how they references to emotions do interactional business. Thus there is a shift away from the study of emotion as a kind of psychological state to the significance of emotions in a social context. A critical approach to identity is also interested in talk and interaction. A focus of discursive approaches to identity includes the ways that people use category descriptions, such as 'goth' or 'gun owner', for example, to accomplish things in talk like credibility or accountability. In contrast to a traditional approaches that treat identity as something internal to the individual, discursive approaches understand identity is an accomplishment, something that is done in interaction.

Tuffin covers a lot of territory in this book. With such a broad coverage some glossing over detail is inevitable. One distinction that was lost was that between social constructionist approaches that just challenge the methodologies of traditional psychology and those that are additionally critical of the power/knowledge nexus of psychological knowledge. Also, not all discursive work in psychology is social constructionist. For example, conversation analytic work takes an agnostic epistemological position. However, the inclusion of such nuanced distinctions may not be useful for the students who are the target audience.

It is assumed that readers of this book will have an introductory knowledge of social psychology but will be encountering critical ideas for the first time. It reviews the kinds of material that most students of psychology have some familiarity with and then introduces the kinds of concerns that critical social psychologist have. Each chapter begins with an overview of its content and ends with a summary of the main points and suggestions for further readings. Tuffin's writing uses a clear and accessible

writing style with quirky anecdotes and examples that should engage students' interest. It is a quality contribution to a quickly expanding international market for textbook introductions to critical social psychology. It is a must-have, particularly for Australasian teachers and researchers in social psychology.

Reference

- Weatherall, A. (2002). *Gender, language and discourse*. London: Routledge.
- Potter, J. and Wetherell, M. (1987). *Discourse and social psychology*. London: Sage.

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