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SEEING THROUGH LANGUAGE

Tuffin, K (2005) **Understanding critical social psychology**. London: Sage.
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> "We see the world as much through our words as through our eyes."
> Shotter (1998), cited in Tuffin (2005:68)

Keith Tuffin's book comes as part of a recent wave of books designed as usable textbooks for courses in Critical Social Psychology. As an emerging area, there is still no final consensus on what exactly constitutes the core curriculum in this field, but there is an acknowledged need for student-friendly texts that are accessible to advanced undergraduates who are not quite ready for the more arcane primary publications in which the theories and debates of this sub-discipline have been thrashed out. It follows in the very recent tradition of Gough & McFadden's (2001) **Critical social psychology: An introduction**, and Hepburn's (2002) **Introduction to critical social psychology**, while providing a significantly different slant to either of these works.

The book is aimed at students who have some introductory knowledge of mainstream social psychology, and are ready to explore the critical alternatives that have developed over the last decade or two. The first two chapters of the book begin with the now ritual task of clearing the way for the possibility of an alternative social psychology by showing the limitations of mainstream social psychology's fetishization of experimental design as the proper research method. Tuffin shows how this has led social psychology research to be insensitive to both meaning and context - two areas so vital that the failure to deal with them is itself evidence of an inappropriate range of research methods.

Tuffin reveals the historical forces that allowed positivism, with its insistence on observable and measurable phenomena, to become the implicit philosophy of science behind social psychology, and shows how this, rather than any other assessment of suitability or relevance, came to define its methods of enquiry. He shows how this has led to a pervasive reductionism within the field: complex social issues are reduced to cognitive or behavioural formulas in the hope of operationalizing them into measurable experimental variables. This also leads to the problem of individualism: - human social life is reduced to the acts of individuals, who are taken as the basic unit of social

analysis. Social and political problems are then reduced to problems within individuals, and critical analysis is deflected away from the social dimension as individuals are pathologised as the source of social problems.

If mainstream social psychology is based on a positivist philosophy of experimental science, Tuffin argues for a critical social psychology that instead takes social constructionism as its organising epistemological framework. This involves a change of focus from the observation of phenomena to the study of language. Here the crucial difference is not simply the focus on language, but on a fundamentally different way of understanding the nature and function of language. For the traditional scientist, research is based on observation, perceptions are mental images of objects in the external world, and words are labels we use to communicate with each other about those objects. In contrast, the social constructionist argues that language structures perception, that we experience meanings rather than sensations, and that these meanings are organised by the categories provided by our socially learned language systems. This is a fundamental epistemological shift away from the traditional understanding of language as simply a means to communicate thought and experience, to the investigation of the way in which language structures that thought and experience. Thus in Tuffin's account, critical social psychology begins by taking language as the object of its enquiry.

Tuffin goes on to provide a framework for understanding the perplexing range of different activities that go under the name of "discourse analysis". He offers a broad distinction between the (macro/top down/dark) approaches that focus on social structure and relations of power, and those (micro/bottom up/light) that focus on the details of everyday conversation. The former, often associated with the work of Ian Parker (1992) and derived primarily from the writing of Michel Foucault, views discourses as broad networks of statements that structure thought, experience and identity, which are intimately related to the forms of social organisation and power relations that shape social worlds. The latter, associated with writers such as Potter and Wetherell (1987), is more closely linked to conversation analysis, and focuses on the specific utterances used by people to negotiate everyday interpersonal situations. The former emphasises what language does to people, how it shapes their sense of self, social relationships and experience of the world, and thus delimits what they can think or do. The latter explores what people do with language, showing how they manage their self presentation and interpersonal goals by examining the specific rhetorical devices they use in their everyday speech.

This latter approach is the one which Tuffin adopts. It is much more compatible with traditional psychology, as it continues the mainstream task of exploring people's intentions and the strategies they use for achieving their goals. Here I have a theoretical divergence with Tuffin, as it seems that this version of discourse analysis loses what is radical in social constructionism. It places the emphasis on how people construct discourses, rather than on how discourses construct people, and thus collapses back into the humanism it should have critiqued. It implicitly reasserts the traditional notions of agency, consciousness, rationality and intention and is thus in imminent danger of ignoring, naturalising, or even blaming people for social conditions in which they exist. This is not such a problem if you occupy a position of privilege, but is profoundly egregious if you happen to already be exploited or victimized in some way.

Notwithstanding this criticism, this approach to discourse analysis does have the striking advantage of providing a fine-grained analysis of utterances, showing in detail how accounts are assembled and given force through specific rhetorical tactics.

The last part of the book explores the application of discourse analysis to specific problems. Chapter 5 explores Prejudice, Discrimination and Racism, and shows how discourse analysis can go beyond the traditional social psychology approaches to these problems. It reveals the limitations of reducing them to either attitudes or cognitive processes, showing just how flexible contemporary racist discourse can be, especially in contexts where racism is not overtly socially acceptable and has to rely on more complex and self-concealing articulations in order to maintain itself. Here the analysis of the speakers' discourses is typically impressive and convincing, but I am left wondering about the extent to which it is possible to make sense of what is happening without a methodological model that comprehensively addresses questions of context, such as histories of colonialism, racial subjugation, the expropriation of land, labour and natural resources and the maintenance of historical privileges.

In chapter 6 Tuffin focuses on Emotion, Identity and Politics, challenging the way in which traditional psychology has conceptualized some of its key ideas. Here identity is not a stable internal quality, nor are emotions purely internal experiences, rather both are shown to be constructed and negotiated between people through the use of language. Here again, the emphasis is on how individuals use language to negotiate emotion and identity, rather than how these are structured by the delimited linguistic resources made available to people within their specific cultures and societies. This is a pity, as it lets psychology off the hook for one of its major conceptual offences: the assumption that the western notions of the individual and of emotions are human universals that can be used to understand people across cultures, without reference to historical context. Finally, Tuffin considers the issue of politics in discursive psychology. He shows how this approach rejects the positivist notion of value-free science, and how some researchers take up deliberately committed ethical positions, either in analysing contemporary political discourse, or in challenging situations of exploitation. While this is commendable, it seems symptomatic of Tuffin's "micro" approach to discourse analysis that the politics is something added on to the analytic project as an optional extra for the committed researcher. This is perhaps precisely why integration of the "macro" approach is indispensable for the critical psychologist - the analysis of power must be built into the research method, and remains at all times an integral and inescapable part of the work.

There is no doubt that Tuffin has produced an extremely useful book, and one that I would enthusiastically recommend as a introduction to discursive psychology, especially the varieties more influenced by conversation analysis. It provides a very clear introductory critique of traditional positivist social psychology, and an unusually lucid and accessible introduction to social constructionism and the radical rethinking of language that it entails. It offers a way of making sense of the bewildering variety of activities that operate under the name of discourse analysis, and gives a very good overview of one tendency within this field. This is certainly a book that will be a very useful teaching aid, and an excellent resource for students and others who are beginning to explore this field.

My main concern is that the book is called **Understanding critical social psychology**, and not **Understanding discursive social psychology**. While Tuffin is at pains to point out that his approach is only one of many possible critical social psychologies, it seems to me that his approach is ultimately in danger of losing precisely what is important for any alleged critical psychology to be critical in the ways which I believe to be important. Tuffin is certainly no banal neoconservative, as his sensitive explorations of colonialism, race, and gender clearly show, but it does seem that his critical stance is a fortunate addition to the discourse analytic approach that he adopts, rather than methodologically integral to it.

While this form of discourse analysis is no doubt an entertaining diversion for the suburban psychologists of the overdeveloped world, outside of those privileged spaces social life is not simply about the rhetorical management of the self in conversation, but the rather pressing business of everyday life, such as avoiding starving, being raped or getting shot. A critical social psychology needs to show how most people do not simply have the kind of agency, autonomy, and freedom to determine their lives which traditional psychology, and western humanism in general, imputes to them. A social constructionist approach can indeed be useful, if it is able to investigate the ways in which experience is structured by social forces and networks of power that precede and delimit social life, and manages to avoid collapsing back into precisely the individualism it was intended to critique.

A psychology that does not contain the conceptual and methodological tools for addressing the occupation of Iraq, the millions of AIDS deaths every year, the pervasive international violence against women, the starvation of a third of the human race, the foreseeable collapse of the global ecosystem, or the myriad other rather pressing problems that constitute everyday life for ordinary people outside the protected spaces first world academia, cannot credibly call itself a critical psychology. Not even if it presents a convincing critique of, and alternative to, the positivist nostalgia of USAmerican psychology. In stressing the forms of discourse analysis that take their cue from conversation analysis, at the expense of also integrating those that focus on issues of power and social structures, Tuffin blunts his critical edge. It is something of an intellectual disaster that these two poles of discourse analysis are currently so polarised (especially within the UK academy) and its seems to me that what would be valuable right now would be a more systematic integration of the strengths of each tendency. Only then would we be able to assume that discourse analysis functions as a form of critical psychology.

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