

## **Rethinking the psychology of childhood**

### **Book review**

Burman, E (1994) *Deconstructing developmental psychology*. London: Routledge.

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Burman's aim in this text is to offer a deconstructionist critique of developmental psychology. Within this she assesses the broad trends not only in academic research based on developmental theory but also on the practices and social policies that interpret and, sometimes, misinterpret these. This is a daunting challenge, firstly because the scope of developmental theory is so vast, both within its traditional academic boundaries, but even more so if one considers the range of practices in psychology, education, child-care and informal relationships which are characterised by a vision of the child based on principles of developmental psychology. Burman cautiously defines her discussion as introductory, but it nevertheless covers the mainstream research findings in social, emotional, cognitive, language and moral development as well as the common sense understandings which overlap with these. In each area she refers to mainstream findings, considers research which challenges these and supplements existing critiques with her own deconstructionist insights.

The second major challenge implied in this task relates to the conception of development itself within psychology. Almost nowhere else is nature so readily appealed to as a constitutive explanation than in understanding the differences between childhood and adulthood. Furthermore, few psychological explanations have been so readily integrated (albeit often in a cruder form) into common sense understanding through their apparent appeal to biological facts. "Childhood" too has a particularly intransigent form with its conception closely tied to symbolic representations of hope and change which are seen so clearly in our own country where slogans like "the children are the future" demonstrate the particular investment in this romanticised notion of childhood. The "biological fact" of development and the sacrosanctity of childhood as a symbol, mean that Burman has to confront, head on, one of the strongest bastions of the combined forces of realism and humanism.

Burman notes in her introduction that one of the major intentions of the book is to present her deconstruction in as accessible form as possible. She hopes to illustrate a way of thinking rather than a justification for her theoretical position. This means

that the book can be easily read both by those who share an understanding of post-structuralist theory as well as by those who simply know a little about developmental psychology either in its theoretical or practical forms. I was immensely relieved not to have to wade through a long justification of post-structuralist, non-unitary subjectivities which in Henriques et al's (1984) *Changing the subject*, somewhat ironically, emerged as a slightly sanctimonious, morally superior attack on "conventional" psychology. The style here is very different. It is accessible and the critique is woven so carefully through developmental ideas that it works well, as is Burman's intention, as a commentary on, rather than a replacement for, developmental psychology. It convincingly bends the careful frameworks of reality we have constructed around us and even for the staunch developmentalist, there is a somewhat uncomfortable sense that our theories are not as solid as we once believed. If the aim of this text to promote questioning, in this it is successful.

In terms of content the book begins appropriately with a review of the origins of developmental psychology, tracing the shifts and continuities between past practices and ideas and their present forms. She develops in this chapter the themes which are traced through and provide coherence to the remainder of the book. These include the hierarchical divisions which mark progress between childhood and adulthood (which in turn repeat themselves in conceptions of normality and abnormality, savagery and civilization); the biological bias in accounting for the process of development; the prioritisation of particular scientific conceptions of rationality both as end points for development as well as in the developmental methods themselves and the use of scientific ideas to justify moral pursuits. Of course none of these criticisms of developmental psychology is new, but somehow in setting them out in a single, easily digested chapter, the terrain is well marked for the more detailed discussion that follows.

The second section of the book fleshes out some of these basic themes into what is essentially an outline of the theoretical orientation. She covers in this, research priorities (and perhaps more importantly absences) in developmental psychology, the limited acknowledgement of the social in developmental work (this is delightfully headed: "Innate predisposition to being social: Born to party?") and finally, links developmental ideas to a general account of cultural narratives that define childhood.

In the following section she considers in more detail the particular developmental trends in work around social development paying particular attention to the ways in which families and particularly mothers have been constructed in relation the "developmental needs" of children. Particularly interesting here are some of the statistics around divorce, single parent families and working women suggesting that the conception of the nuclear family which underlies social organisation in Britain is based on a considerable fiction. I was a little disappointed about the relative lack of attention paid to psychoanalytic work around mother-infant relationships which she briefly acknowledges to contain greater possibilities for understanding relational complexity. Her acknowledgement here however is not pursued and sits rather uneasily against an earlier dismissal of Freud, who is lumped together with Piaget as being responsible for the dominance of biological, evolutionary based accounts of development.

Burman moves on to give considerable space to a discussion about language in development which she argues has been slightly more responsive to questions around culture and power than other areas of psychology. She includes in this section an interesting discussion of discourses in care-giving talk in which she attempts to show how the adult-child discourse defines the unequal power relationships between the two. Her discussion of cognitive development focuses primarily on Piaget and the particular interpretation of his theory into child-centred education. I was pleased to see that there was some acknowledgement of the disjunction between Piaget's own project and the particular way in which he has been taken up by child centred education (and sometimes also in undergraduate text-books). This provided her with greater scope for her own critique without resort to a trivialisation of Piaget's work.

The last chapter appropriately considers research on moral development which allows her to make links with her earlier claims about the underlying moral project of developmental psychology. Here she closes with the powerful claim that developmental psychology has functioned as an instrument of classification and evaluation, as a tool for "mental hygiene" and an instrument of social control. In this conclusion perhaps a weakness in the book is revealed, carrying with it a tone which cannot avoid notions of conspiracy which I am sure the author would be the first to denounce. But somehow in the baldness of this denunciation of developmental psychology there seems to be a surprising lack of recognition of the irrationality which guides rational thought and some temporary lack of understanding of the social processes she herself is engaged in deconstructing. This difficulty I think reflects something of the inherent contradictions of a relativist position which in the final analysis must still take a moral and political stand in relation to the problems raised and the necessity for change.

In general Burman treads this tightrope quite carefully but cannot avoid altogether its pitfalls. The book also struggles with a related consideration of structural constraints from a position that defines itself through its objection to structure. This emerges most strongly in the critiques around biologism in developmental psychology. Here there is a fine line between deconstruction and the absurdity of a complete denial of biological constraints and possibilities which seems to emerge clearly in her dismissal of the "construction" of the child's dependence which seems not to take into account the physical helplessness of the infant (and in some respects even of an older child). Perhaps there is a warning in this about not throwing out the baby with the discursive bath-water.

However, this book is a thought-provoking, nicely written and accessible complement to developmental psychology study. It is obviously geared primarily at the student, including useful activities that might be undertaken in a seminars and suggestions for further reading. Like all accessible books however, it must to some extent err on the side of generality at the expense of specificity and on clarity of argument at the expense of complexity. The questions it raises however are powerful ones which create a useful tension within the area of development psychology.