

## Reading the (not so) loose ends of multifarious stories

### Book review

Burman, E, Aitken, G, Alldred, P, Allwood, R, Billington, T, Goldberg, B, Gordo Lopez, A J, Heenan, C, Marks, D & Warner, S (1996) **Psychology discourse practice: From regulation to resistance**. London: Taylor & Francis. ISBN 0-7484-0504-6 pbk. 232 pages.

*Lindy Wilbraham*

*Department of Psychology  
Rhodes University  
Grahamstown*

**Psychology discourse practice** is about the role of psychology as social practices which shape and govern our lives, and deploys a (mostly) Foucauldian analysis of "the psy complex" in contemporary western societies, where a proliferation of psychological discourses construct "individuals" with enduring personalities, rights, responsibilities, sexualities, etc. (cf. Rose, 1985). In a critical frame, this is a reading of how psychology functions within current institutionalized structures of inequality (eg. gender, "race", class, age, sexuality, disability), to produce experienced conditions of oppression, exclusion, pathologization and normalization. While psychological professionals labour as gatekeepers who police ab/normality, more implicit regulation operates through seepage of psychological ideas into popular cultural forms, enabling us to experience our lives in these terms.

Thus, the authors examine a range sites, from professional expertise to activities in everyday lives, where psychological knowledges and techniques are used to legitimise particular actions. This is not a story with a "happy ending", but explicitly, it is not just another gloomy book about the determinism of structures and resignation to regulation. It seeks to elaborate strategies for resistance, and to document alternatives and activities that offer scope for movement and change in theoretical, methodological, professional and everyday arenas.

An example of such resistance (to traditional academic practice) is formulated in the organized co-authorship of the text. The arduous and so-familiar trawling process of publishers' reviews has produced, in this book, an account which, in its combination of individual and collective voices, poses important questions about the disciplinary practices we inhabit / perform, and embraces contradiction and confluence between multiple discourses and subjectivities. The authors are professionals engaged in psychological work in the Britain (eg. academics, therapists, etc), and research students at Manchester Metropolitan University's Discourse Unit. Each chapter presents individual research, a product of personal and professional commitment,

investment, and positioning. Collective spaces (eg. between sections and in a concluding "postscript") seek to actively engage with emergent issues and tensions.

Disrupting conventional division by "topic", the book is structurally organized into 3 sections according to theoretical progression of ideas - broadly from regulation to resistance. In the first section, *Instituting agencies*, the forms of subjectivity produced through institutional practices are examined through analysis of educational assessments of children "needing care" (Billington), the practice of "feminist therapy" (Heenan), and self-help texts on depression (Allwood). The focus of the second section, *Practising (at) the limits of representation*, is on how the experiences of those who lie outside "normal" limits are reproduced. Subordination / exclusion of certain groups is explored through analysis of "dangerous women" in psychiatric institutions (Warner), "black women" in mental health services (Aitken), and "naughty boys" excluded from schools (Marks). The third section, *Dislocating institutional boundaries*, explores how contradictory positionings form a resource for resisting institutional definitions and categories. Analysis explores resistance to expert mothering advice (Allred), the subversive uses of humour for women (Goldberg), and transgressive "performances" of gender (Gordo Lopez).

The diversity of these specific sites is linked by seemingly contradictory theoretical resources (outlined by Burman), used eclectically by individual authors. The most important of these resources is a Foucauldian analysis which examines the role of institutional power relations in creation of subjectivities. This formulation draws particular attention to the materiality of discursive practices and a model of power as productive of effects, namely, regulation and resistance. The determinism of Foucault's vision is augmented by other theoretical lenses which offer scope for dissidence: a (liberal) social constructionist valorisation of "transgressive agency"; psychoanalytic concepts of "contradiction" and "reflexivity"; and postmodernist notions of fluidity of positions, irony and excess. Theoretical tensions are strategic, Burman argues, for the dual objectives of the book, namely to explore the constitution of categories, and new ways of engaging with these categories (p8).

The diversity of sites and the analysis of more generalizing theoretical resources (above) leads to consideration of viable reading trajectories, and my first reservation about this book. A reader is able to dip into specific chapters, or, more stoically, wade through the whole text. For dippers, subjective deployment of theory and incisive analysis might produce moments of engagement and contestation. However, it is a little more disconcerting for waders. Repeated denials of "tidying up loose ends" seemed thwarted by the digested accounts proffered in authorial choruses. In the introductory chapter (by Burman), prefaces to sections and postscripts, every theme is extracted, every argument defended, every critique anticipated, every generalisation disclaimed, every conflict assimilated, every gap plugged with appropriate theory. This functions as relentless instruction on "how to read the book" (p3), and invites the passivity and closure of "nothing left to say". I reflected (rudely) on academic / discursive empires and new varieties of "the solipsistic pit" (Burman & Parker, 1993).

However, the text's critical engagement with the political ambiguities of regulation-resistance is ample reward for the stoic wader. Following Foucault's warnings about polarized dualisms of regulation as "bad" and resistance as "good", these analytic formulations examine disjunctions between institutional technologies and local

discursive positionings in various sites (eg. self-help literature on depression might resist professional expertise to regulate alternatives like self-as-expert and self-care). The analyses tackle issues neglected by Foucault, like the configuration of racialized and/or gendered forms of experience (eg. the material and subjective consequences for black women of their "absence" in mental health services).

A plethora of possibilities for resistance are also articulated. For example, in the site of experts's advice on mothering, Alldred argues that resistance might be formulated in the act of reading itself (eg. how a text is read); at the level of identity (eg. to be a mother, or not); at the level of identifications within discourses (eg. rejecting traditional familial forms through single parenting); through explicit reversal of expert discourses (eg. not having children inoculated); or through counter-positioning within competing discourses (eg. mothers's intuitive knowledges).

This book is riddled with such "strategies for resistance", "disruptive readings", "opportunities for new positions and subjectivities", "production of potential new alliances", etc. While I am strongly interpellated by the recalcitrance, I have reservations about the capacities for seemingly spontaneous forms of resistance, and vague, academic "spaces for contestation" (above), to make "a real difference" in people's lives via more grounded and participatory strategies of transformation. Burman articulates such concerns of the authorial collective, thus: "... (w)e would not want to read every reaction as a coherent resistance. And although perspectives vary at different points in the book, we strongly maintain the need for forms of resistance that are collective and organized, rather than individual and spontaneous" (p10).

Quite so; although it is still unclear what or who this mobilized resistance would involve (eg. participatory research, policy-advocacy, practical programmes of education or community resource development, etc.); and that this political appropriation should be negotiated within a particular context. No claims of generalisation are made within the book's careful engagement of tensions between "structure" and "textuality" (the material form of performance of discursive practices, p12). Hence, this is a book about (clearly non-homogeneous) psychological discourse practice, regulation and resistance, in the Britain. "The psy-complex" is, of moral-political necessity, reified in order to be resisted. This does not mean that there can be no resonance from the vigorous post-colonial discourses and contested subjectivities within South Africa, but that "the psy-complex's" conditions of possibility would more fruitfully be explored via localized textualities. Similarly focused discourse analytic work has been and is being produced in South Africa (eg. Levett, Kottler, Burman & Parker, 1997); as are "African" resistances to globalizing discursive regulation and resistance as postmodern-play (eg. Appiah, 1995).

Despite my concerns that the book does not get to the point of practical interventions (rather, it provides useful resources for resistance), this is an important polemical and pedagogical text which is aimed at an audience of readers who are engaged with the practice and theory of psychology. This would include psychologists of various persuasions, professionals who draw on psychological concepts and methods, and postgraduate students seeking a more reflexive and institutionally located analysis of the psychological discipline. It deserves no less than to be read, and talked about, and used, and resisted.

## REFERENCES.

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