Discursive resources in the Discourse Unit

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Abstract:

This paper outlines theoretical resources that have informed the work of the Discourse Unit in the last decade. The institutional location of the Discourse Unit - as a Centre for Qualitative and Theoretical Research on the Reproduction and Transformation of Language, Subjectivity and Practice - within the discipline of psychology and the political orientation of its researchers are guiding themes in this account, and a historical framing of the work of the Unit is elaborated. The four key resources - Marxism, Feminism, Post-structuralism and Psychoanalysis - demand an attention to the construction of subjectivity in discourse, and a reflexive focus on the subjectivity of a researcher attempting to explicate patterns of ideology and power. Researchers here are concerned with an analysis of psychology as ideology, and their work entails a refusal of any reduction to the level of the psychological. Participation in the activities of the radical network Psychology Politics Resistance, kept alive now by <u>Asylum</u> magazine is one expression of the political dimension of our work.

Keywords: **Politics, Resistance, Marxism, Feminism, Post-structuralism, Psychoanalysis**

1 Introduction

When we set up the Discourse Unit in Manchester we were aware that to do critical discursive work is to engage in debates across the spectrum of alternative frameworks that contest traditional psychology. The account I am giving here glosses over many theoretical and methodological differences between people working with us. This debate is reflected in the rather clumsy and panoramic subtitle for the Discourse Unit, 'Centre for Qualitative and Theoretical Research on the Reproduction and Transformation of Language, Subjectivity and Practice'. We also knew that it would be antipathetic to the qualitative tradition to try and pin down one distinct theoretical stance, and to interpret material from that single point. The multiplicity of meaning in discourse calls for a multiplicity of vantage points and theoretical frameworks, and a multiplicity of subject positions from which to challenge positivism and empiricism in the discipline. This meant that training, discussion and practice had to be of qualitative and theoretical research. As psychology has changed since the Unit was founded in 1990 (by Erica Burman and Ian Parker), so has the focus of our work, and now 'qualitative research' and 'action research' tend to operate as the overarching rubrics for interpretative studies of discourse, subjectivity and social order.

One way of specifying who 'we' are is to say a little about the different research projects that have appeared under the auspices of the Unit, and perhaps this is a better way of framing the narrative than simply producing a roll-call of the names of individuals who have been with the Unit over the years.

(1) Feminism: The emergence of discourse analysis in psychology at the end of the 1980s immediately posed a question about the political stakes of methodology, and a strand of research devoted to the role of feminist theory and the place of feminists in psychology was developed in the Unit which as continued to the present day (see: Burman, 1990; Burman, 1998; Burman et al. 1996a; Reavey and Warner, 2003). We have included PhD projects on women and therapy (Colleen Heenan), women and pornography (Karen Ciclitira), single parent action networks (Diane Burns), women and psychology training in South Africa (Jane Callaghan), HIV and sexual violence in South Africa (Judeline Clark), and women as refugees in southern Africa (Ingrid Palmary)

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(2) Education: Alongside this specifically feminist research, we were concerned to tackle different varieties of oppression perpetuated by mainstream psychology, and to connect with the activist critiques from, for example, the disability movement with respect to education. Projects on education case conferences and on the 'statementing' of children (specification of exclusion from school) were carried out with local services (Billington, 2000; Marks, 1999). We have included PhD projects on education case conferences (Deborah Marks), school exclusion (Tom Billington), and responses to Tourette's Syndrome (Rob Evans).

(3) Mental Health: The work in the Unit also connected with the activities of the 'anti-psychiatry' movement, and in particular with the activities of the 'Hearing Voices Network', and research projects in the sphere of 'mental health' were designed to make theoretical critique accessible and relevant to different groups that suffered and resisted the mental health system (e.g., Parker et al., 1995; Reavey and Warner, 2003). We have included PhD projects on the history of the Hearing Voices Network (Terence McLaughlin), personality disorder in special hospitals (Mark Stowell-Smith), psychotic discourse (Genie Georgaca), paranoia (David Harper), women in special hospitals (Sam Warner), gender and addiction (Ilana Mountian), and indeterminacy in addiction (Christian Yavorsky).

(4) Culture: At the same time, the theoretical challenge to the domination by psychology of forms of knowledge about 'subjectivity' brought us into ostensibly more esoteric studies of the impact of the internet and 'cyberpsychology', conceptual explorations of the role of humour in resistance and semiotic research on popular culture. In this respect the Discourse Unit operated as a space 'inside' psychology to open it out to the 'outside' in different forms of interdisciplinary research (e.g., Burman et al., 1996b; Gordo-López and Parker, 1999; Heggs, forthcoming). We have included PhD projects on humour (Brenda Goldberg), new technology and subjectivity (Angel Gordo-López), September 11th (Alex Bridger), Jews for Jesus (Elliot Cohen) migration and therapy (Pauline Mottram), and the Zapatistas (Makis Mentinis).

(5) Discourse: Intervention in the world of 'discourse analysis' and 'discursive psychology' was all this time concerned to bring methodological disputes into connection with political issues – the place of discourse analysis as an efficient part of the psy-complex and so as more part of the problem than part of the solution – and so questions of 'criteria' and what would count as 'good' research to psychologists need to be questioned at the same time as the scope of discursive research is broadened out (e.g., Burman and Parker, 1993; Gordo-López and Linaza, 1996; Parker, 2002). We have included PhD projects on Superhero comics (Dan Heggs), therapy as research (Ian Law), and Lacanian ethics (Calum Neill).

Despite the competing and overlapping shifts of perspective and various disagreements between us, it is possible to characterise some of the theoretical and political projects of the Unit, and it is useful to reflect upon the conceptual resources that have contributed to it as a distinct research community. It is by no means the only research group concerned with discourse in psychology, and we could not even claim that it was unique in blending discourse theory with an intervention into psychological practice. This history does throw some light upon how theoretical connections in our work have percolated through to wider qualitative debates though, and laying its history open in this way should also help us to reflect upon the subjective investments that a researcher might make in 'alternative' varieties of psychology. Given the importance we attach to interpretation and subjectivity in our current work, this history should also be a more honest way of telling a story about who we are, how you might interpret what we say, and how you might want to share with, or refuse some of the particular assumptions we make.

2   Interventions

One way of starting the story is with a theoretical intervention that was also designed to be a political practice, with the journal Ideology and Consciousness which first appeared in 1977, before any of us in the Discourse Unit were psychology undergraduates, and disappeared in 1981 as some of us embarked on our postgraduate work. The journal translated writing by Michel Foucault and other French theorists, and although we found it at the time to be fairly incomprehensible it was the only Marxist psychology journal around. It also attempted a serious engagement with feminism, and it provided a focus for critical work. There were reading groups in different parts of the UK, but the journal quickly degenerated into the excesses of French Marxist 'anti-humanism' (a refusal to take people's own experience seriously) and then, as the logical outcome of that journey, into anti-Marxist anti-humanism. Even the terms 'Ideology' and 'Consciousness' became, for the editors, suspiciously close to the humanist-Marxist readings they were trying to avoid, and the journal changed its name to I & C to try and prevent this happening before it folded up. It lasted until edition number nine (though my subscription was paid through to number eleven). It veered away from an engagement with psychology in the process, and a group of the early editors dropped out at around edition number four.

Something very important came out of that dissident editorial group, which was the 1984 book Changing the Subject (Henriques et al.).

Changing the Subject, which has recently been reissued (Henriques et al., 1998), elaborated a series of connections between a foucauldian account of discourse and psychoanalytic theories of language and subjectivity influenced by Jacques Lacan. The overall political slant of the book was still Marxist, but one affected by an engagement with feminism and anti-racism. We will return to the meaning and significance of these different theoretical strands later on. A day conference was set up in London to discuss themes in the book in March 1986, and around seventy people turned up. It should be said that there had been a flourishing radical psychology movement in the UK in the 1960s and 1970s around journals like Humpty Dumpty and pamphlets such as Rat, Myth and Magic. Humanism and therapy was more predominant in these publications, and some of the participants in the 1986 'Changing the Subject' day brought with them a variety of interests ranging from Social Representations theory to Tarot cards. Journals like Changes have continued to give expression to the more humanist and therapeutic strand of disciplinary dissidence, and have managed to keep an organization, the Psychology and Psychotherapy Association, alive too. However, Changing the Subject struck a chord at the time, and regional meetings were held. One, in Wolverhampton in June 1986, was called 'Psychology, Social Regulation and Subjectivity', which was also the subtitle of the book, and we also held one earlier that month in Manchester which attracted twenty five people, called 'Psychology, Subjectivity and Change: Critical Approaches in the Human Sciences'.

The first use of the name 'Psychology Politics Resistance' (PPR) dates from the follow-up national meeting in Manchester, which was held in October the same year. PPR is now a separate independent network of people who are challenging abuses of power in psychology, and while it is certainly challenging the social order its members have no particular commitment to discursive approaches. The description of the second 1986 event in the publicity, which captures well the theoretical basis of the group as it was then also makes it clear that we had a way to go before we could make the ideas accessible to psychologists from other critical traditions or to people on the sharp end of psychological practice: 'PPR takes its initial point of departure from the book "Changing the Subject" (J Henriques et al, London: Methuen, 1984) which attempted to criticise psychological practice from a position informed by post-structuralist theory, psychoanalysis, feminism and Marxism... The first goal of PPR is to provide a context in which the mystifications of liberal humanism may be dispensed with. PPR exists to facilitate a recognition of the political circumstances in which psychological knowledge is produced, disseminated and exercised. It is only when the specific effectivities of psychological practice are understood that adequate strategies for resisting, subverting, and overturning it may be implemented' (Leaflet for October 1986 meeting).

A follow-up meeting in Nottingham never materialised, and an attempt to relaunch the group in Manchester in February 1989 reformulated the aims of the group in a more open activist way: 'Psychology, Politics, Resistance will provide a radical forum for people committed to changing psychology as it is practised by workers in clinical, educational and academic settings. We aim to develop strategies for actively opposing the role of psychology in the maintenance and reproduction of power relations' (Leaflet for February 1989 meeting). We wanted to connect with 'real' politics, and we even had a break in the middle of that meeting to join a demonstration to protest against the recent forcible deportation of the Sri Lankan activist Viraj Mendis from the Church of the Ascension in Hulme, Manchester. Further follow-up meetings in 1989 experimented with more friendly names like 'Psychology and Social Responsibility' and, the worst yet I think, 'Psychologists for Social Justice and Equality'. But perhaps we should stop there for now and take stock of the theoretical resources that were being accumulated for our academic work.

3 Four critical theoretical strands

The focus of the 1986 'Psychology, Subjectivity and Change' Manchester meeting was very much on 'correct theory', and for all the problems this entails, the four strands of theory identified in that meeting, and then in the first PPR meeting later in the year, are still fairly influential on the way we understand our practice in psychology. The four main resources are still with us, but we could augment and modify the way we read each of them in the light of radical literary-theoretical debates, and in the light of recent (mistaken) arguments that they are out of date because Western culture has mutated into a postmodern condition (Parker, 1998, Parker, 2002). I will mention some of the contributions of those newer arguments as we go along. Now it is worth reviewing in a little detail what those main four frameworks offer to qualitative research now. I will deal with Marxism first, but you should not take the order of the list as an order of importance to researchers in the Unit.

3.1   Marxism

Caricatures of Marxism abound, and it is sometimes difficult to dispel these when the caricatures themselves have had such a thorough and brutal practical grounding in the bureaucracies of the post-capitalist states. With the collapse of the Soviet regime and its stalinized satellites, most erstwhile supporters and fellow-travellers have abandoned any formal adherence to Marxism, and their stake in reinforcing the old caricatures is all the higher. Marxism is the theory and practice of class struggle, and it is all the more important now to emphasize that the elaboration of a theoretical understanding of the social order for Marx always presupposed doubt, speculation and empirical examination. Marxism is a theory of the economic conditions which sustain particular competitive and destructive forms of social relationship, and its character as a 'theory' is designed to trace the real movement of internal contradiction by which the basis is laid within capitalism for socialism (and in that respect it anticipates 'prefigurative' arguments from within socialist feminism). It is an open heuristic system which tests and accumulates observations about the structure of capitalism in different cultures as part of an international interlinked economic network, and it moves from a general view of historical change formed by these observations to particular instances. Marxist theory has recently been wedded to a realist epistemology, which is to say that it looks to relatively enduring structures in the natural and social orders which permit and inhibit forms of action. To say that these are 'relatively enduring' is to treat them as susceptible to change, and to emphasise the way that any human activity affects structures of the social order in a two-fold manner. This is a notion that we capture, borrowing from Roy Bhaskar (1989), in the phrase 'reproduction and transformation'. Every activity reinforces or destabilizes, validates or disturbs existing systems of power.

Although some varieties Marxism have tended to treat language as part of the 'superstructure', we treat language as part of the machinery of class control. It is, in addition, of course, part of the machinery of sexism and racism, not a simple reflection of other supposedly more important processes. A notion from analytic philosophy which focusses on 'ordinary language' which is particular useful here is that of 'speech acts' (Austin, 1962). In this account, language does not simply represent the world, or float on top of it, but does things, brings about or changes states of affairs. We will have to use Foucault's work to take this further to look at how speech acts are structured into patterns of power, but for the moment I want to highlight the importance of the Marxist view of all action, including linguistic action as materially effective.

There is something in the Marxist account of the process of testing and observation which is of particular interest to critical psychologists, and which chimes in with preoccupations of qualitative researchers (cf. Parker and Spears, 1996). Marxism is not supposed to be an abstract theory which brings a true understanding of society to people otherwise incapable of understanding how the frustrations and possibilities of action are structured. Rather, the process of investigation is action research par excellence, for an understanding of the world is only obtained through an attempt to change it. Marxism itself is a function of a particular set of social relationships at a particular historical period, with a series of analyses of commodities, forces and relations of production, and the State that would not make sense to people living in a world untroubled by capitalism. The argument that the human being is not an enclosed entity independent of others, but is an 'ensemble of social relations' (Marx, 1845) means that every attempt to make sense of the world theoretically also entails the creation of new types of relationship and a challenge to traditional ones.

Subjectivity is theorised here, then, as both entirely conditioned by the social and as always necessarily agentic. It is one of the conditions of capitalism, for example, that people should actively participate in economic relationships that are socially and personally destructive. When someone sells their labour power, they do so because they would otherwise starve, but they do so in a creative act of production, the very thing that the buyer of their time finds so valuable and which yields a surplus value for further investment and employment. In the process, the worker is also turned into a commodity to be bought and sold along with the fruits of their labour, and a sense of things being separate and exchangeable accords with that social reality. Marxism, then, draws attention to the commodification of relationships as a characteristic of modern culture, and two further aspects of the work of culture are also highlighted. The first is that the dead weight of the past sets the boundaries for how for someone entangled in a culture can reflect upon their position, and the second is that the different relationships that are set up between workers and employers, and between workers and workers, reproduce contradictions in which critical reflection, a critical distance can be developed.

Marxism is very much concerned with this critical distance of course, and an analysis of language, of discourse is always an analysis with a suspicious eye. This is part of what can mark it off from simple humanist approaches which are content to describe the themes in accounts. Dominant discourses, and many of the subordinate ones that are constituted in relation to them too for that matter, ratify the existing order of things, make them seem natural and unquestionable, and they conceal patterns of power or render accounts of those patterns unreasonable or more dangerous still to those trapped within them. Thus to say that a

discourse or set of discourses is ideological is to draw attention to the way that it meshes in with exploitation and disempowers opposition to it. And to say that an individual or group enmeshed in ideology is suffering 'false consciousness' is simply to argue that under different material and discursive conditions they would themselves construct a narrative of suffering, isolation from others and loaded choices that prevented them from taking steps to free themselves (Eagleton, 1991).

The notions of ideology and false consciousness highlight the way Marxism operates as a partisan knowledge, one that takes its standpoint seriously in an argument among different positions rather than wanting to float among them as if nothing was at stake. There is a double dynamic in that standpoint which many critical psychologists would want to endorse at the very moment that they may deny that they are Marxists. The first is the celebration of change, and the continual transformation of social relationships and discursive positions, and the second is the move from individually-focused explanations and experience to relational and collective action. Power, for Marxists, is conceptualised as the sometimes deliberate and often unintentioned hindrance of change and as an attempt to block this double dynamic. There is thus a tension between immediate experience and what conditions it, between what is essentially human and what sabotages humanity. That tension is addressed in Marxist accounts of contradiction and dialectics. There is something in the attention to flux and discursivity of experience in qualitative research which also leads in this direction, but although Marxism should be able to theorise how and why such flux and discursivity is frustrated, it is feminism that has taken that understanding forward in social research.

3.2   Feminism

Traditional Marxist analyses of the State as an instrument of class power, as the coercive core and last point of resistance to attempts to create different forms of social relationship which break from the logic of exploitation and commodification, have often also drawn attention to another more diffuse structure of power, that resting on gender (Engels, 1884). Feminism, particularly socialist feminism, has extended the analysis of power to account for the interconnection between the State, the rights to private property that it sustains, and the family as a nucleus of subordination and control. More so than much traditional Marxism though, feminism has underlined the multiplicity of theoretical accounts of patriarchy, male power, and also the contradiction between different theoretical accounts as a source of strength. It has been argued that feminist politics must in some sense be 'prefigurative', that is, it should anticipate in the forms it takes now the types of relationship it would prefer for the future (Rowbotham et al., 1979). While Marxism also attempted to work in that direction, looking to alternative forms of organization as the places of resistance to the old, feminism has also been prefigurative in theory. That is, it plays out now in its multiple and contradictory acts of resistance the very pluralism it aims for as an alternative the idea that there is one 'truth'. Talking of feminism in the singular often obscures this diversity, and overlooks the role of lesbian and black critiques in the field of feminisms (see: Burman, 1990; Burman, 1998). To speak of feminisms in the plural and different constructionist approaches to sexuality also opens up productive connections with queer theory (Gordo-López and Cleminson, 1998).

Feminism also matches the Marxist view of subjectivity as an ensemble of social relations with an insistence that 'the personal is political', that is, that each most private activity is woven into shared collective relations of power that structure gender. In research, then, the supposedly neutral and objective activity of finding out 'facts' is itself saturated with subjective investments, and the fantasy that a correct view of the world can be obtained through the exercise of independent inquiry is an expression of masculine concerns with separation, order and control. Feminism in sociology (e.g., Stanley and Wise, 1983) and then in psychology (e.g., Wilkinson, 1988) has brought this issue to the fore in considerations of women's experience and through reflexive analysis in qualitative research, and feminist discourse analysis has tempered objectivist Marxism with a reminder that the most objective account is always from a particular position (Hollway, 1989).

It should be said that this matter is by no means settled, and one can find in feminist discussions of method appeals to empiricism which aims to reduce our understanding to brute 'facts' about women's oppression, postmodernist notions which revel in the play of different contradictory methods and accounts, and standpoint research which insists that the historically constituted position of women gives them identifiable interests and shared basis for the identification and pursuance of particular emancipatory research goals (Harding, 1991). There are, however, good reasons to be critical this position insofar as it collapses standpoint into personal intuition, and then it might be better to be 'against standpoint'. Both empiricism and postmodernism, in different ways, eschew theory, and we do not believe that there are psychological facts 'out there', or 'in there' that can be collected without it. Postmodernists all too often also slide into a liberal individualist variety of postfeminism which denies that there are any enduring characteristics of women's condition that could be the basis for shared resistance. One of the things that postmodern theory does offer, though, is a sense of risk in the subversion of gender categories. This manifests itself both in queer theory

and in cyborg debates, something some of us will play with in cyberpsychology (e.g., Gordo-López and Parker, 1999).

There is sometimes alarm at 'essentialism' in feminist approaches, with essentialism being the idea that some core of the real stands free of cultural and historical conditions and that it can be discovered or experienced directly given the right method, circumstances or aptitude. However, although essentialist rhetoric is often a powerful resource for women, feminism has been one of the most powerful analytic resources for displaying the way culture constructs categories and subject positions that we then assume to be pre-given, universal and unchanging. It has also, through debate over the political functions of essentialism, shown how the array of constructed categories in a culture expresses key contradictions and provides sites of resistance (Burman et al., 1996a). It is one of the conditions of women's experience, for example, that power is observed both from the inside, because of their compulsory participation in shared gendered discursive practices, and the outside, because of their exclusion from the centres of power. This is not to say that this position of the 'outsider within' (Harding, 1991) is essential and fixed any more than we would say that 'centres of power' have an independent observable identity. Rather, the fault lines of gender in culture open up the operation of power. When we are able to see gendered power running through the social fabric, this leads us into an unravelling of other powers in texts.

When we say in Discourse Unit publicity that we 'include inquiries influenced by feminism', we are actually understating what impact feminist research has had on our understanding of knowledge as situated, as always constructed from particular social locations. Sometimes this means that the research is effectively 'feminist standpoint' research and so there is a specific focus on the reproduction and transformation of gender relations, and sometimes the value base of feminism is assumed while other standpoints are adopted, of class or race, for example. Action research in the Unit has brought theoretical work on 'race' and class to bear on gender so that these intersecting axes of oppression can each be re-conceptualised without reducing one to the other (e.g., Batsleer et al., 2002; Chantler et al., 2001). Feminism highlights the place of contradictions between different 'progressive' positions in discourse as mapping a space for resistance and critical consciousness, and our understanding of discourse analysis is of an approach which is critical of whatever is said in a text but also attentive to points of conflict which reflect an awareness of power within the text itself.

Re-writing a text in qualitative or discourse-analytic research is still implicated in a practice of representation, and it leads us to privilege our accounts that are developed in the institution of psychology over others who speak outside the discipline. Feminism's emphasis on politics as personal, then, also makes the issue of power in interpretation in the research process central. There is an apparent paradox here, of course, which is that men are conducting some of research influenced by this tradition. The paradox is only apparent in the sense that systems of gender do not map directly onto sex differences, which is to say that men and women can both disrupt gender boundaries. However, we need to be clear about the distinction between an essentialist view of what is feminist about research, the argument that only women do it, and what is politically progressive about it, that it is actually women who do it. The contradiction between the two arguments is manifest in the relations of power which are reinforced when men claim to speak for women, and that power is subverted when women turn their gaze onto men. As a general rule we prefer, then, in our research to turn our gaze back on those who enjoy power. To comprehend the play of deliberate, unintentional, accidental and structured plays of power in this paradox, though, it is useful to turn to a third theoretical resource.

3.3 Foucault

A number of theorists are pushed together under the post-structuralist heading in literary theory, and among these we have found Jacques Derrida useful in deconstructing essentialist notions in psychological texts. In derridean deconstruction what appears to be fixed and privileged at one moment can be shown at the next, through a deconstructive reversal, to be dependent on other notions that it tries to dominate or exclude. Deconstruction sometimes works rather like a dialectical reading of texts, exploring contradictions and focussing upon subordinate terms. This sometimes makes it seem rather too much like traditional philosophical games, but it can be usefully connected, like dialectics, to an understanding of the way concepts operate in practice (Spivak, 1990). This then leads us to the most important figure for some of us in post-structuralism, to Foucault.

Not only does Foucault provide a theory of the social and its transformations over long historical periods, but he also provides a critical account of the effects of theory too as a form of discourse. There are, of course, tensions between these two aspects of his work, but both are helpful for a reflection on the practice of psychology as a form of knowledge that promises theoretical and empirical access to the mind. As a

theoretical framework, the corpus of Foucault's writing could not have developed without the Marxist intellectual culture in post-war France through to the end of the 1960s. The descriptions he provides of the intensification of practices of surveillance and regulation at the end of the Eighteenth Century are embedded in an account of the concentration of production, and so of human bodies in industrial centres that needed to be observed, counted and controlled. Social and psychological theory has gathered power since that time, and participates in the process of calibration and pacification of working individuals, and their pathologies (Parker et al., 1995). It also thoroughly pathologises those who do not work.

This psychological work has practical effects on the way 'docile bodies' are encouraged to fashion themselves as kinds of subject within this new disciplinary regime in Western culture. The accounts that Foucault provides in his histories of madness (Foucault, 1961) and prisons (Foucault, 1976) sometimes seem to call for spontaneous acts of resistance that presuppose an inner subject, or at least a body with some still remaining untamed 'pleasures'. However, together with the descriptions of discipline in what we would prefer still to think of as capitalist and heteropatriarchal modern society, Foucault's main contribution is in an account of the way subjects are incited to respond. He also invites us to reflect on what we become when we respond as we are bidden. Not only is the subject an ensemble of social relations, and not only does politics penetrate to the core of the subject's most personal habits, but this subject believes, as a condition of being human now, that it must confess its hidden secrets to improve itself (Foucault, 1979). Now, in response to the discipline of psychology perpetually turning the spotlight of the State on the individual subject, we have a theory which turns the spotlight back upon psychology.

Changes in culture are thus revealed to contain within them deep changes in human consciousness, and Foucault thus brings to the heart of Western culture a progressive twist to cross-cultural psychology. Now it is psychology too that is implicated in a way of seeing the world and individuals within it. Whereas past ways of seeing, or 'epistemes', structured our understanding of the world around a relationship to God and looked to the many different reflections of God's work in the resemblances between things in the world, or conceptualised the universe as a huge machine in which the different parts and individuals functioned as mere components, the Modern age plays the double trick of positioning the individual as source of knowledge and as subject of systems of inquiry that try to drag it out of them -- sometimes him, but often her.

Here, the work of discourse becomes paramount in the circulation of images of the self and others, and as a medium through which one tries to convey one's knowledge to others. Foucault's (1969) methodological reflections on discourse turn the traditional psychological endeavour around to look not at how discourse reflects internal mental states and proceses, but rather at how these states and processes are constituted in discourse, and this requires an analysis of systems of meaning broader than speaking and writing (Ian Parker and the Bolton Discourse Network, 1999). The difference between discourses opens the possibility for critical distance, reformulation and transformation of forms of knowledge, but the parameters are always still set by the discourses that are available to us. We do not create discourse in conditions of our own choosing, but have to create something from existing linguistic and theoretical resources.

It is worth mentioning an additional theoretical resource here in wider literary theory that is able to conceptualise the moment by moment struggle in discourse to invest words and phrases with meaning. Mikhail Bakhtin draws our attention to a dialogical process in speech and, by implication, in the mind in which a third term, the 'Other', always intervenes (Sampson, 1994). This third term is the order of language which carries to us cultural connotations and calls us into particular positions, and is necessarily present in a text between a speaker and listener, between writer and reader. The argument that language is not merely a channel of communication but is a form of action which forms subjects is augmented in Bakhtin's work with an account of the way language works as an additional actor in the most simple 'dialogue'. It is possible to read a theological message in this account of the 'Other' in our discourse as well as a psychoanalytic one, a psychoanalytic one derived from the Lacanian tradition at least. Nevertheless, Bakhtin addresses some issues of meaning and positioning in language at a micro-level which connect with some of the concerns we find in Foucault's work.

There is an injunction in both Bakhtin and Foucault's work, then, to take discourse seriously, and, in Foucault's writing to study the way it constitutes 'regimes of truth' that close off alternative accounts. Knowledge is bound up with power, and the responsibility that each individual takes for their actions and experience makes it seem as if that power is enclosed, as if in packets inside people, or as if people could wield bits of power over others at will. Just as the self is held in a web of discourses though, so the powers that are attributed to him or her are ordered and exercised independently, for the most part, of deliberate intention. Foucault highlights the role of the slave in reproducing master-slave relationships, and the capillary action of power as it circulates upward as well as downward holding oppressor and oppressed in its systematic, if not systemic, grip. That may also mean that something unconscious is going on of course.

3.4   *Psychoanalysis*

Psychoanalysis, as a fourth resource, certainly provides some theories of the unconscious, but the history of psychoanalysis is a fragmented and contradictory one in which the theories spin off in different directions. In Freud's work and in that of his followers there are various models of the relationship between consciousness and its 'other' -- with that other sometimes conceptualised as a hydraulic system, sometimes as a place, and sometimes as a collection of gaps in discourse whose appearance signals the voice of the true subject. We would, in any case be suspicious of one true account that pretended to give a correct interpretation of material. Even in a classical Freudian framework, interpretation of texts should also be of a speaking subject with a personal history. Since we are not engaged in psychoanalysis or psychotherapy of individuals here, and we are warned thoroughly enough against that by Foucault's work, some quite radical revisions of psychoanalytic theory are necessary. Some writers have broken completely from psychoanalysis, and moved through systemic debates to deconstructive and foucauldian narrative therapy (see Parker, 1999a), and I think it would be fair to say that they are standing politically pretty much where we want to arrive as we cut our way through the worst of Freudian and post-Freudian writing.

A starting point for the internal revisions to psychoanalytic theory, revisions which then start to systematically disrupt it, lies in the series of critiques of adaptationist trends in American 'ego-psychology' which assume, like the rest of laboratory-experimental positivist psychology, that the individual is a self-contained unit that can be studied and understood (Hartmann, 1939). The very notion of the ego as separate and 'conflict-free' is inimical to the whole project of discursive qualitative research, of course, and it is quite easy to find in Freud (1927) accounts of the unconscious which see the ego as intertwined with what is excluded, driven away, repressed. We do not have to presuppose that this 'unconscious' is shut away as if it were in a box, as if our task was simply to unlock it and find out what the real answer was. Rather, we take our cue from the Lacanian (Lacan, 1977) re-readings of Freud which see the unconscious as an 'Other' site of discourse. This 'other' is just as thoroughly social as the individual author or the operations in the text that make it 'other' in the first place.

One of the other advantages of Lacan's work is that it can be read as a theory of language and the subject which breaks completely from traditional psychoanalysis. This is not the way the Lacanians would want him to be used, of course, but the discursive dynamic in his work, which locates all fundamental unconscious processes in the Symbolic order, and which theorises the development of consciousness within a master-slave dialectic rooted more in phenomenology than in Freud, allows us to then reflect upon psychoanalysis as a symbolic form and the way psychoanalysis positions the subject in relation to 'others'. There are connections, again, with the work of Bakhtin here (e.g., Georgaca and Gordo-López, 1995), and with the way in which the 'Other' is formed as something separate, powerful and frightening to the individual in the Western world. Gender and race categories that are felt to be different from the self are then pushed out into the 'Other' (Sampson, 1994).

This is, of course, also a cultural re-reading of psychoanalysis which looks to linguistic processes in self-formation, and which locates what there is of the 'Oedipus complex' and so forth in Western nuclear family relationships and in the powerful talk about those relationships that surround the infant from her or his first moments in the world. There is an important debate here over the extent to which it is right to presuppose familial and Oedipal structures in research. This is linked to the wider debate about how far we take psychoanalysis seriously as a form of knowledge, even if it is one we loath, and whether we understand the responses of the researcher as varieties of 'counter-transference' because this notion 'works' now in Western culture (Parker, 1997). We know that it might be dangerous to take such forms of subjectivity for granted, because we then play our part in reproducing them.

The account of discourse that emerges from this is, at any rate, one in which the researcher is seen as thoroughly embedded in discourse, constituted by discourse which then gives meaning to the speech of an interviewee or author of a text. What one wishes to obtain from a reading of a text, or from any other qualitative material, is structured as much by patterns of relationship that are set up in the research process as it is by the 'unconscious' in the text or the prior 'unconscious' fantasies of the researcher. One of the difficult tasks that a researcher has to embark upon is to manage their intuitive engagement with the material in a way that also speaks of unconscious gaps in the text to other readers. Again, this is a matter of the collective activity of a research community in making sense, and opening contradictions in language, in discourse, not of revelations of secrets to gifted individuals. The Discourse Unit is a research community, and it has close relations with other qualitative research groups, relations that constitute a wider community, and this community here and internationally is something that is vital to this type of work (cf. Gordo-López and Linaza, 1996; Levett et al., 1997).

The power of the researcher is at issue here, and psychoanalysis does help attune us to investments that a researcher may have in bringing about particular discursive effects. There is also an issue, of course, which is to do with the way psychoanalytic practice is warranted by the use of the framework in academic work. Psychoanalysis has an ambivalent relationship with psychology, one that we wish to tease out, whatever our other attractions or otherwise to the theory. Psychoanalysis is, in some respects, 'the repressed other of psychology' (Burman, 1994), at least in Anglo-American varieties, and the continual attempts by so-called scientific psychology to shut away psychoanalytic attempts to bring subjectivity back into the picture make it so appealing. Psychoanalysis is a powerful narrative about the self, and too powerful in some contexts, most notoriously in therapeutic training institutions. Nevertheless, it works in a game of power against psychology, a discipline that finds subjectivity so threatening.

4 Contradictions in practice

The four strands of theoretical work that inform research in the Discourse Unit have a complicated and shifting internal relationship with one another. Focussing on the tensions between the different approaches is, in practice, more productive than an attempt to synthesise them into one agreed and shared position. This is partly because each strand is necessarily critical of the other three.

Let us briefly review some of those disagreements. Marxism attempts to place feminism only within a socialist feminist framework, finds in Foucault much abstract talk about power which ignores class privilege in capitalist society, and sees psychoanalysis as the reflection of and prison of individualised misery. Feminism in turn is concerned at the way Marxism conceals the oppression of women in its narrative of the history of classes, the way foucauldians sabotage the idea of gender solidarity and consciousness, and the way psychoanalysis keeps smuggling in normative accounts of sexual desire. Foucauldians meanwhile are indignant at Marxism's continued adherence to totalising grand theory, at feminism's identification of power only with male designs, and at the psychoanalytic spiral of oppressive and self-blaming confession. Psychoanalysis then responds by characterising Marxism as the infantile search for ideal conflict-free worlds, feminism as pathological denial of sexual difference, and foucauldian work as a warrant for perversity. Against all of these, literary theories and postmodern writers who have helped us to interpret these resources themselves take fright at Marxism's seeming certain belief in the stories it weaves, feminism's supposed lack of playful irony, Foucault's continual attempt to tie texts to practices, and the psychoanalytic obsession with real reasons for things below the surface.

We are happy to work with the conflicts this mixture of positions sets up. Different researchers in the Unit have different allegiances to aspects of the frameworks, and would want to select and layer them upon one another in various contradictory ways. We are contradictory people. This does not mean, however, that we follow postmodernists and do not care which theory is used. We do not think, with psychoanalysis, that things are so buried in the unconscious as to be always mysterious and irretrievable. We do not believe that only the exercise of the one powerful will over another, as Foucault seems to recommend, should determine which account we adopt. We do not want to respond by following some liberal varieties of feminist research into methodological pluralism in which all approaches are valid. And we will not want to wait, as some Marxists do, for the revolution to address these things.

We are making an intervention in psychology and the social order, sometimes in its theoretical apparatus, and sometimes more directly in the institutions of the discipline (see Burman et al., 1996b). New directions in critical discursive research may take the form of a more thorough grounding in semiotics and social practice (e.g., Parker and the Bolton Discourse Network, 1999) or practical intervention in service provision (e.g., Chantler et al., 2001), but the key question is how we make use of academic space for radical work not how we can best adapt to that space. In that sense, the 'future' of the Discourse Unit depends on the trajectories of those conducting quite disparate types of research whose overall shape cannot be determined in advance. We say in our publicity that members of the unit were involved in Psychology Politics Resistance, and now in Asylum magazine for example, but the political agendas of the researchers we have brought together are quite diverse. The paper frames what we do around 'discourse', and so the kinds of links that will be most relevant here can be followed from the Discourse Unit website. However, the word 'critical' here also connects us to political projects in and against the psy-complex, and this is sometimes, but not always, what is meant nowadays by 'critical psychology'. For radical resources in critical psychology follow the links in the Critical Psychology website (and for a review of theoretical resources in 'critical psychology' see Parker, 1999b). What the theoretical resources do is to lay open a field of debate, and we then try, in different ways to structure that debate for a research community suspicious of traditional psychology and wanting to produce something more critical, more useful.

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5 Note

This document, which reviews the theoretical and political resources that inform the Discourse Unit, has been through several revisions following discussion between us and now, of course, reviewers at Discourse Analysis Online. No one of us is completely happy with every formulation here, including me. The account presented here reifies a disparate collection of researchers who have some commitment to critique and radical work in psychology, and makes it appear as if 'we' share the same history and are of the same mind. When you read 'we' here, it may often mean 'most of us' or 'some of us' or even 'bits of each of us', and when you read this account time will have marched on, and 'we' will have adopted new theoretical resources, and imagined new histories.

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