

Review:

Bróna Nic Giolla Easpaig & David Fryer

Erica Burman (2008). Deconstructing Developmental Psychology (2nd ed.). East Sussex: Routledge, 368 pages, ISBN-10: 0415395623 (Paperback), \$38.95 / ISBN-13: 978-0415395625 (Hardcover) \$90.00

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Abstract: We here offer a review of Erica BURMAN's "Deconstructing Developmental Psychology" (2nd ed.) in the form of a critical reading of the book in so far as it relates to matters of knowledge and power, the truthing of particular claims, and to critical pedagogy. We express some concern about the vulnerability of students in mainstream higher psychology education contexts reading this textbook who might be penalised for resisting, as this book encourages them to do, the prescribed accounts of psychology which they are more generally required to digest and regurgitate. However we argue that the first two chapters alone provide the reader with a whole critical psychology education, which does more than touch on imperialism, colonisation and patriarchy and brilliantly links the inventions of psychology to the major issues of our time. We argue that one of the strongest features of the book is the way in which it addresses oppressive discourses which are reproduced in developmental psychology, particularly concerning gender, racism, disabling practices, and oppressive practices. This textbook is powerful in deconstructing oppressive discourses which masquerade as forms of *legitimate truth* and in equipping the reader to identify and critique research processes which privilege certain types of knowledge above others.

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1. Introduction

What is it to review a book, especially to review a critical psychology book in a qualitative journal and particularly if the review is written from a critical standpoint? Conventionally, reviewers are *experts*, or aspire to expertise, in the substantive field of the book, in this case developmental psychology. However, in the case of this review neither of the reviewers is expert in developmental psychology or seeks to become so. However, Erica BURMAN is one of the most impressive critical psychologists writing today and does so from Manchester Metropolitan University, which is increasingly (perhaps increasingly problematically) internationally pre-eminent amongst critical psychology groups.

We are interested in this book primarily in so far as it relates to matters of knowledge and power, the truthing of particular claims and to critical pedagogy. We offer a reading of the book from this standpoint. Throughout the process of reviewing this book, we asked ourselves: whose interests are served by the book and the knowledge it constructs; how is that knowledge constructed; and how is the book related to empowerment and disempowerment? We acknowledge that our reading is a product of our own location, at the intersection of many privileges and problematic constitutive contexts, for example, our being discursively immersed in Anglo-US psychology. [1]

Erica BURMAN is very explicit about her critical pedagogical ambitions in writing this book. In a fascinating section entitled "How to read this book", BURMAN writes: "This book ... concentrates less on 'facts' that developmental psychology has unearthed than on how particular topics arise as interesting areas of enquiry" (p.6) and states in classical critical Foucauldian tradition that her aim in this book "is to pose questions about what is all too often assumed to be given or obvious" (p.6). [2]

BURMAN is clear that this book—like all books—is a product of its time and place of construction and she justifies a second edition of the book (after 13 years) in terms of the different place the world has become since the first edition with: new wars; new racisms; new fundamentalisms; new forms of neo-liberal penetration; a new feminisation of poverty; new inequalities; new models of childhood. BURMAN argues that, consequently, new developmental psychologies are called for with new "analyses that connect economic and political models of development with psychological ones" (p.vii) making "more explicit connections between individual, national and international economic development policies" (p.viii). BURMAN explicitly links "the psychological project of describing individual development ... with processes and practices in international economic development" (p.5), and not only deploys a sound-bite quotation by VENN (2000, cited by BURMAN p.10) ("the West is not only a geographical region ... but also a form of knowledge practice") to great effect, but follows it through to develop the issues non-tokenistically. BURMAN has a refreshingly thorough approach to radical constructionism, refusing individualist identity moderated by context and insisting upon constitutive constructionism: "the starting point is that children and childhood are constructed; therefore we have to study not only the child but also the context (that is the interpersonal, cultural, historical and political situation) that produces her" (p.9). [3]

Often, particularly within academic institutions, the world is arbitrarily divided into separate topics such as economics, politics, psychology, etc., ignoring their inter-connectedness. In contrast, this text utilises an analytic framework that facilitates genuinely trans-disciplinary analyses. A good example is the way in which BURMAN deconstructs traditional historical and literature-based accounts of children and childhood, all the while tracing the emergence of more or less problematic discourses. Deconstructing assumed knowledge which constitutes the foundations upon which developmental psychology was built is particularly powerful as a starting point. [4]

2. The Text as a Critical Developmental Psychology Textbook

2.1 Overview of the text

The first two chapters constitute a fascinating introduction and explication of a version of what it is to be critical. BURMAN articulates this in relation to developmental psychology but it has much more general application. For example, BURMAN introduces the reader to notions of problematising, discourse and the psy-complex, the assemblage of professions, disciplines, practices, etc., including psychology, psychiatry, psychoanalysis and psychotherapy but also counselling, nursing, education and social work practices, which assume or deploy notions of the psychological and which is positioned by theorists such as ROSE (1985) as constructing and regulating subjectivity and thus contributing to governmentality in the sense of FOUCAULT (1991). BURMAN is explicit about using

"the term 'deconstruction' in the sense of laying bare, of bringing under scrutiny, the coherent moral-political themes that (developmental) psychology elaborates, and to look beyond current frameworks within which (developmental) psychology investigation has been formulated to take up the broader questions of where these themes fit into the social practices in which psychology functions" (p.1). [5]

In the preceding quotation the brackets were inserted by the reviewers to flag up the generalisability of BURMAN's argument from developmental to all psychology. The reader gets a whole critical education by reading this book, which does more than touch on imperialism, colonisation and patriarchy, and brilliantly links the inventions of developmental psychology to the major issues of our time. [6]

The organisation of the text covers many topic areas typically found in a mainstream (*mainstream*) developmental psychology texts such as moral development, attachment and language. This structure is useful in enabling students studying mainstream work to navigate the text in an accessible manner. The text starts with a concise introduction explicating the position the book takes, clarifying the author's agenda and tracing and then deconstructing the foundations of the discipline. The main text is composed of four parts. Part I: Constructing the subject; Part II: Social development and the structure of caring; Part III: Developing communication; and Part IV: Cognitive development: the making of rationality. Each part contains between three and five chapters. This structure enables areas typically construed as separate to be bridged in terms of conceptualisation and facilitates the reader in tracing the reproduction of certain themes and discourses more clearly. When chapters do focus on an area, they offer many more issues and discussions than is usual in textbooks and they move between specific and broader issues. For example, in Chapters 4 and 5 BURMAN focuses upon "current forms and functions of developmental psychology, and the social policy and professional practices it informs" (p.67). As might be expected BURMAN explores the positioning of development in developmental psychology discourse as "natural and inevitable" (p.69), its decontextualisation in terms of

class and culture and the problematisation of notions of need, dependency, schooling and childhood as a "domain to be colonised and "civilised" (p.77). Less expectedly, BURMAN is soon discussing "child labour in Third World countries" (p.93), "geopolitical relations of inequality" (p.93) and "current moves in social policy across liberal-left governments of the world to tie welfare entitlements increasingly to labour market participation" (p.94). The whole discussion leads to the conclusion that "if developmental psychology's earlier formulations fitted well with conceptions of the liberal subject of bourgeois capitalism, more contemporary conceptions can be said to coincide with neoliberalism" (p.99). [7]

Through the varying levels of analysis, the reader comes to understand how developmental research and theory are implicated in, and further to grasp the influence which they wield on, social policies and practices. For example, in Chapter 2 BURMAN describes and critiques what she describes as "an early classic infancy experiment", that of GIBSON and WALK (1960). As expected, BURMAN critiques the experiment theoretically and methodologically but, less expectedly, BURMAN also critiques it in terms of its role in the maintenance of ideologically problematic assumptions in generations of students through repeated reproduction in textbooks and pedagogic practices. [8]

The text explores the influences of many major (male) figures in psychology (for example, PIAGET, VYGOTSKY and FREUD) and the conceptualisations associated with them, to a more detailed and knowledgeable extent than many mainstream texts. The range covered is more than sufficient to provide a critical perspective on most developmental areas. In terms of research, the text offers critique in relation to most major studies and also provides the reader with examples of critical thinking and accounts of critical research. For example, BURMAN's discussion of the family in Chapter 6 starts with the problem that, at least until recently, "most developmental psychological research conformed to dominant familial assumptions of the nuclear family containing a male breadwinner and female childcarer" (p.111) but soon the reader is immersed in discussion of feminism, imperialism, white privilege and critique of the rationale for the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. The text is particularly strong in providing authoritative but not de-powering accounts of feminist work in many areas. Through thorough critique of research, the text problematises key critical methodology issues. For example, the text deconstructs KOHLBERG's work in relation to moral development in children (boys), utilising the feminist research and critiques of GILLIGAN to surface and contest the androcentric discourse involved (BURMAN, 2008, pp.285-292). The text also offers relief from the challenging nature of the conceptualisations, via injections of wit, sarcasm and anecdotes. Each chapter also suggests activities which promote critical thinking. [9]

2.2 Deconstructing oppressive discourses

There are a few issues which merit specific consideration. One of the strongest features of the book is the way in which it addresses oppressive discourses which are reproduced in developmental psychology, particularly concerning gender, racism, disabling and other forms of oppressive practice. The text convincingly

argues that our everyday lives and practices enact the construction and interconnection of these discourses in a manifestation of micro-politics. We appreciated BURMAN's refusal to relegate gender issues to a subsection of the book (for example a chapter) or in relation only to childhood but to address them throughout the text and in relation to almost all social life and to examine the role of psychology in relation to policing gender conservatism. This was refreshing as most mainstream texts use the terms "sex" and "gender" interchangeably, disregarding the constructed nature of feminine and masculine identities. Moreover, the text uses gender as a deconstructive tool in laying bare sexist discourse. [10]

The text explores the multiple ways in which race and cultural identity are implicated in a wide range of issues and convincingly deconstructs the geopolitical climate, the universalisation of the UN child, issues around immigration as well as the West's colonial intervention and wars across the globe, to mention but a few. Yet the text manages to do this without detracting from the importance of the complexity of cultural and community identity. [11]

2.3 Authority and institutional vulnerability

The text comprehensively undermines the legitimacy of research based entirely on reactionary acritical methodology. This is liberating especially as those concerned with positivist psychology have so often extended this very treatment to research grounded in non-positivist methodology or indeed any methodology that threatens the status quo. However, we do have concerns about the vulnerable position of students in relation to their institutions. Students are usually required to digest and regurgitate research based entirely on reactionary acritical methodology and, if they act upon the implications of BURMAN's text and resist the prescribed accounts of psychology they, unlike BURMAN, are likely to be penalised for so doing. [12]

3. Some Final Thoughts

This book is a powerful text in unearthing oppressive discourses, constructing knowledge in a way that promotes the interests of the oppressed whilst equipping the reader with not only a critical education, but also with new, less problematic, ways to engage with the world beyond the book. [13]

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Authors

Bróna NIC GIOLLA EASPAIG works from a community critical and feminist psychology standpoint at Charles Sturt University.

Contact:

Bróna Nic Giolla Easpaig

School of Social Sciences and Liberal Studies
Charles Sturt University, NSW
Bathurst Campus NSW 2640 Australia

Tel.: 61 (02)63384566

Fax: 61 (02) 6338 4401

E-mail: bnicgiollaeaspaig@csu.edu.au

David FRYER works from a community critical psychology standpoint at Charles Sturt University.

Contact:

David Fryer

School of Social Sciences and Liberal Studies
Charles Sturt University, NSW
Bathurst Campus NSW 2640 Australia

E-mail: dafryer@csu.edu.au

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