

## Textbook Answers?

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This paper is written within a community critical psychology frame of reference, that is, one which is equally committed to exposing and problematising aspects of exploitative, oppressive, unjust and pathogenic societies and also exposing and problematising reactionary aspects of the discipline of psychology which construct, maintain or collude with oppressive societal arrangements.

This frame of reference involves a commitment to problematising ideologically reactionary aspects of mainstream psychological ‘knowledge’ and practice, including pedagogy; developing alternative ways to construct knowledges and promoting critical thinking about them; making visible and contesting processes of psychological oppression; and developing innovative socio-structural inter- and pre-ventions to reduce oppression through emancipatory social change which progressively redistributes power. Community critical psychology means: “engaging with the way societal hierarchies are set up and maintained through wealth, class, labour market position, ethnic dominance (majority/minority status), gender etc., and the way societal structures impact on people both objectively and through their subjective understanding of them” (Fryer, 2008, p. 242).

In this paper, we attempt to do community critical psychology by simultaneously addressing gendered societal oppression and the collusion of mainstream psychology with it. In this paper we use ‘discourses’ in the Foucauldian sense to refer to “historically and culturally located systems of power/knowledge” which “construct subjects and their worlds” and which are not only “bodies of ideas, ideologies, or other symbolic formulations” but “also working attitudes, modes of address, terms of reference, and courses of action suffused into social practices” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2005, p. 490).

We use the term ‘dominant discourses’ to refer to discourses which “privilege those versions of versions of social reality which legitimate existing power relations and social structures” (Willig, 2001, p. 107).

Introductory psychology textbooks are positioned within dominant discourses as essential reading for most undergraduate courses, providing ‘foundational knowledge’. For example, even two textbooks of community psychology likely to be familiar to readers of this journal, which are widely regarded as more critically oriented than most textbooks, reproduce this discourse on their covers. *Community Psychology: Theory, Method and Practice – South African and Other Perspectives* (Seedat, Duncan, & Lazarus, 2001) self-describes on its back cover as: “giving the reader a thorough introduction to the theory and methodology of the field . . . this is a vital text for social science and public health students and practitioners” and Nelson and Prillettensky’s (2005) *Community Psychology: In Pursuit of Liberation and Well-Being*, self-describes on its back cover as an “up-to-date and highly engaging text” which “provides students with an introduction to the history and foundations of community psychology”.

However, within subjugated, critical, counter discourses, the textbook is positioned as socially, economically, politically constituted and thus potentially ideologically problematic. This article is written from such a critical standpoint. In this paper we are not using the term “critical” as it is often used in everyday language as equivalent to ‘fault-finding’ nor as it is often used in mainstream psychology as evaluating claims against a set of narrow pre- and pro-scriptive, fundamentally positivist, naïve realist, criteria – ironically this is to use “critical” to mean “acritical” (see Fryer, Duckett & Pratt, 2004 for a development of

these ideas).

Rather we use “critical” as it is used in critical theory and particularly by Foucault (1981/2002) who asserted that being critical:

...does not consist in saying that things aren't good the way they are.

It consists in seeing what type of assumptions, of familiar notions, of established, unexamined ways of thinking the accepted practices are based”, in “showing that things are not as obvious as people believe, making it so that what is taken for granted is no longer taken for granted. To do criticism is to make harder those acts which are now too easy. (pp. 456-457)

More particularly, Foucault (1978/2007) wrote that: “critique finds its anchoring point in the problem of certainty in its confrontation with authority” (p. 46). According to Foucault, this involves “not accepting as true ... what an authority tells you is true, or at least not accepting it because an authority tells you that it is true” (p. 46). Whilst this resistance is, perhaps, easily understood in relation to textbook claims, for Foucault, resisting pedagogy is but one form of resistance to “all the arts of governing – the art of pedagogy, the art of politics, the art of economics . . . all the institutions of government, in the wider sense” (pp. 43-44).

Resistance to ‘governmentality’, in the Foucauldian sense, is not a matter of resisting all government, that is, of being anarchic but of resisting being “governed like that, by that, in the name of those principles, with such an objective in mind and by means of such procedures, not like that, not for that, not by them . . .” (Foucault, 1978/2007, p. 44). Resisting governmentality includes resisting being governed through our own ‘mentality’ through our internalisation of ways of understanding the social world and ourselves within it, internalisation which serve the interests of the status quo through our deployment of our own agency against

ourselves thus rendering ourselves compliant.

In this paper, we engage in community critical psychology by arguing that what is accomplished through psychology textbooks is not as obvious as some people believe, by undermining the authority of the textbook, by challenging a pedagogical means through which governmentality is accomplished in the interests of those benefiting from patriarchy and heterosexuality and, in particular by problematising the oppressive discursive construction of women and the complicity of the discipline of psychology in this via its pedagogy and its pedagogic tools such as textbooks.

In this paper, we analyse two textbooks and explore how women are constructed and de-powered in them within discourses of ‘moral development’. Our analysis draws on Queer Theory as a theoretical resource (for more on Queer Theory see Plummer, 2005) and deploys Foucauldian discourse analysis as a tool. Our paper raises issues about how women undergraduates can critically contest discourses which oppress them and are constructed and maintained through the discipline’s practices which they enact as students within its pedagogic practices.

### **The Politics of the Textbook**

“Little attention has actually been paid to that one artefact that plays such a major role in defining whose culture is taught – *the textbook*” (Apple & Christian-Smith, 1991, p. 1). The textbook is a widely used tool at many levels of education, and is often positioned, explicitly or implicitly, as reproducing ‘objective knowledge’ which is neutral to the nexus of forces within which it is produced. However, Apple (1990) argues, on the contrary, that the textbook is a socially constructed function of complex power-battles within society, and that knowledge is always produced in the context of political, economic, cultural conflicts in relation to power.

Critical discourse analysis has also revealed the politicised nature of knowledge (Derrin, 2004) and critical scholars have argued

that textbooks must be considered in terms of whose interests are served – not simply the interests of individuals benefiting from their production and sale but also from the wider ideologising and colonising in which they are implicated (Fryer & Laing, this issue). Apple (2001) demonstrates how gendered discourses are reproduced in educational institutions, practises and tools, in terms of (de)prioritising, and (de)valuing various knowledges. Previous research has found dominant oppressive discourses in biology textbooks in the form of underlying assumptions, omission of information and reluctance to engage in critical discussion (Snyder & Broadway, 2004).

#### *Queer Theory*

Queer theorists like Judith Butler (1990) seek to challenge and destabilise the taken-for-granted constructed categories to which people are assigned, particularly concerning sexuality and gender. Queer theory rejects any suggestion of an ‘essential’, stable, sexual or gender identity but sees these as constructs constituted and sustained through discursive and other social practices (Stein & Plummer, 1996). Queer theory draws from the work of Foucault (1978) which theorises of power not as a thing which is possessed but rather as fluid-like and enacted through being exercised. Queer theory does not presume the existence of the ‘subject’ and assumes there is no pre-existing, gendered, woman but that gender is ‘done’, or ‘performed’: “There is nothing behind the expression of gender, gender is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler, 1990, p. 25). Queer theory is, thus, a theoretical resource which provides a deconstructive methodology and also a conceptual framework through which wider issues can be problematised.

#### *Critical Discourse Analysis*

The analysis, through which a queer deconstruction of power relations and reproductions embedded in the text was achieved, was based on principles of critical discourse analysis put forward by Parker

(1992).

The research questions posed were: how are women positioned in discourses dominant within the moral development literature and what are the implications for women’s interests? A preliminary reading was then carried out, through the ‘queer lens’, to identify, select and group together pieces of text that concerned gender in moral development. The focus of the analysis looked at how women, men, morality, gender and sex were constructed as subjects or objects. This was done by detailed critical examination of the texts with attention, specifically, to how subjects and objects were constructed and positioned within the discourses which made them meaningful. Whatever was positioned as lacking agency and having things done to it was regarded as an object. Whatever was positioned as agentic and as doing things were regarded as subjects. How categories of sex and gender were deployed in the text was examined and the implications surfaced, for example, sex differences in a text would position the object or subject in a biological discourse whereas gender would position the object or subject in a social construction discourse. Morality was analysed as a socially constructed concept defining the terrain upon which power struggles take place. Constructions of subjects and objects were drawn together from the different extracts of text, themes for the drawing together made explicit, themes positioned in relation to one another, consistencies and inconsistencies exposed and contrasting ways in which objects were constructed identified. For example, the way in which women were constructed and positioned within different conceptualisations of morality by the two theorists were compared and contrasted and the ways in which the text legitimised and privileged certain theorists or ideas considered. Next, how various discourses sustained or subverted ideologies, how the texts reproduced power relations outside themselves, whose interests were at stake in any particular discourse and who benefited or lost from the reproduction of certain discourses were

examined from a queer theory perspective.

Although the above is presented as a series of steps, in line with the recommendations of Parker (1992), the process was neither sequential nor rigid but moved iteratively back and forth between the sub-processes as seemed appropriate.

The textbooks critiqued were *Psychology for A2 Level*, an introductory A-level text by Michael Eysenck (Eysenck, 2001), a prominent mainstream male British professor of psychology, and *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology* by Erica Burman (Burman, 2007), a prominent feminist female British professor of psychology. Both books were marketed as for beginners in psychology. The full analysis is too lengthy to include but below we include a summary of the findings drawing on the research process.

In terms of moral development, Eysenck's (2001) text, *Psychology for A2 Level*, supports the widely known Kohlbergian stage theory of moral development in which men are positioned as achieving higher levels of moral development than women. The text privileges this theory in a number of ways. The authority of Gilligan's work was undermined in the text by Eysenck, by being positioned along with Freud's but in contrast to Kohlberg's, as lacking good empirical support, that is, as being scientifically suspect. For example, when Gilligan's criticism of Kohlberg's theory is described, the text neutralises it by the addition of a comment that "It might be worth noting that the findings of Gilligan's original research study involved a relatively small number of women, and a rather unsystematic and potentially biased method of interviewing" (p. 406). Eysenck's text reproduces a discourse of 'sex differences' which are positioned as being undeniable manifestations of an essentialising biological 'reality' amenable to standardised, empirical measurements, which is consistent with Kohlberg's but not Gilligan's theory and within which discourse females are less morally developed than males as a matter of

biological fact.

This discourse is reproduced throughout the text through the way in which most major studies have an evaluation box which tokenistically states the 'sex' differences'. In this textbook, gender was positioned as irrelevant to the understanding of the topic because it could not be empirically quantified and was thus unrelated to the pure, 'objective' nature of psychology (as the dominant discourse would have it). From a queer theory standpoint this categorisation is extremely dangerous as it shackles in a way which is pre-determined and therefore unchangeable. Furthermore, this separates and dismisses the role of society in the construction of women, men and morality, rendering an individualistic, essentialistic explanation as the only option for explaining women's failure in development.

Tellingly, Erica Burman's textbook, *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology*, did not have a specific chapter or section on gender but unlike the Eysenck text but rather addressed throughout the whole text how gender is implicated and embedded in all psychological inventions and issues. In the chapter discussing moral development, the core assumption is of gender differences rather than sex differences. Burman's (2007) textbook strongly privileges the work of Gilligan, and quickly separates it from the other models: "Carol Gilligan (1982) points out that both Piaget and Kohlberg derived their norms from studying boys and men" (p. 289). These models are criticised on their methodological shortcomings, but this comment also illustrates how many prominent theories of moral development have been formed from a male perspective.

With respect to Kohlberg's theory of more development, Burman claims that Gilligan:

...argues that it subscribes to a model of morality based on individual rights and freedoms of the kind enshrined in Western legal systems, whereas, she i.e. Gilligan holds, women's moral development

is characterised by a much more contextualised morality concerned with conflicting responsibilities and care – that is, concerned with responsibilities and relationships rather than rights and rules. (p. 289)

This constructs the Western legal system as a male dominated institution from which our conceptualisation of morality is based. This is evident in the text as the Kohlbergian work tends to see justice and morality as one in the same, or at least as the most important component. Gilligan proposes a gender-based approach consisting of two separate moral orientations: the female orientation concerned with issues of care and responsibility; and the male orientation concerned with issues of rights and justice. Both orientations are positioned as equivalents in terms of development.

This powerful rejection of the sexist discourses embedded in the ‘sex differences’ based theories, and the critical awareness of the male dominated institutions such as the legal system, have enabled a groundbreaking re-conceptualisation of the field driven by critical thinkers such as Gilligan and Burman. In trying to move a little further forward, this paper attempts to be critical of the critical. Gender has been used successfully, as a deconstructive tool, but we must also consider how gender can be problematic.

The text does reflect on the potential problems with a gendered morality – “While there are problems with the idealisation of women’s qualities within this account (see Spelman 1990: Elam 1994) the value of the work lies in demonstrating the limited application to and far-reaching devaluation of women structured within the cognitive developmental model” (p. 290). Aside from this reflection, the text generally shows a strong privileging of gendered assumptions and Gilligan’s work. In Burman’s textbook (2007) gender was deployed to challenge ‘sex differences’ in re-conceptualising morality.

Sex differences were explained in terms of gendered moral orientations. This is highly problematic as gender ceases to be explored in terms of a complex process but is reduced to dualistic concept, each gender summed up with a simple set of attributes. The binding of men and women into these categories leads to moral development and gender becoming reflective of one another i.e. certain paths of moral development reflect on your ‘femaleness’ and vice versa. In society we are expected to live within a category of gender or sexuality (Epstein, 1996). The categorisations are highly stereotypical and there is a lack of serious concern about the idealisation of women’s virtues. In Gilligan’s theorising of morality (according to Burman), the categorisations function in the same manner. In moral development for boys and girls there is a distinct line of progression, certain attributes associated with the category and certain aspiration within the category. The categorisations position women as subjects on stereotypical and gender-biased terrain. The Burman analysis thus attempts to include women’s experience conceptualising gender, but instead functions to pigeon-hole. In this respect there was the potential for the dualistic gender category explanation to marginalise, exclude and be itself situated within a stereotypical and oppressive discourse. Tronto (1993) argued that the notion of ‘women’s morality’, which risks excluding many to privilege a few, has not worked in the past.

Our analysis highlights the need for feminist work to move toward a process through which the perspectives and experiences of women are valued whilst recognising and attending to the vast diversity within these contributions.

### **Conclusion**

Texts validate and reinforce their authority over readers. Through privileging dominant discourse by appealing to notions of objective science and valid measurements, both the academic and institutional practises involved are reinforced as well as the authors’

authority on the matters. Both texts use exactly the same mechanisms to de-legitimise and legitimise: through praise or criticism of the methodology used in empirical studies. Whilst this may be nothing new for the mainstream textbook, the Burman text is appealing to the very discipline that it is attempting to deconstruct. Furthermore, it is appealing to a form of objectivity. Whilst many readers of Burman's text will likely be used to reading more mainstream texts, which use these principles and whilst it could be argued that this text is 'using the master's tools' to subvert, this strategy has widely been considered problematic by feminists citing Audre Lorde's (1984/2007) dictum that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (p. 110). The analysis showed that when an oppressively constructed category was challenged, two more categories which were potentially as oppressive and biased as the original category and essentially produced the same discourses were presented as alternative by a critically oriented author. Dominant discourses, such as sexist discourses, are held in place in relation to one another in powerful ways, and are implicated and embedded in every social interaction and event. If we deconstruct a particular category, we must be alert to the potential for whatever replaces that category to be just as ideologically problematic.

The reader might ask herself why we have not here also problematised the discursive construction of men. Our aim is to find ways to move towards redressing the imbalance of power relations, not only between the authority of the institution and student learners but between women and men. The construction of the male is important, as constructions of the male and the female are interdependent, for example the same discourse which positions women as deficient as regards sense of justice, positions men as being well endowed with a sense of justice. The reproduction of oppressive constructions of women will not be

addressed without addressing the reproduction of privileged constructions of men. We are therefore in favour of further analysis of the construction of the male, but as a resource for addressing power relations which are oppressive to the female. This analysis could also be useful in providing a critical awareness of the micropolitics of gender relations in terms of how dominant discourses are constructed and reproduced. The privileged, that is, men have an important role to play and a responsibility in problematising these oppressive discourses.

However, we are committed to emancipatory process which tries to redress oppressive power imbalances by surfacing and contesting such oppression and working to promote the interests of the depowered group. In our view women are systematically discriminated against and depowered in neo-liberal societies and therefore the primary purpose of this paper is to conscientize the reader about the ways in which dominant discourses oppress women and privilege men and how they are deployed through the medium of the undergraduate mainstream, malestream, psychology textbook.

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