

Book Review

Qualitative Psychology: Introducing Radical Research

Ian Parker

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This stimulating little book communicates a radically subversive vision of the dominant contemporary (per)version of the discipline of psychology, a distillation of a vast amount of relevant critical scholarship from diverse sources and a sense of how to put such vision and scholarship to work in the nitty-gritty of fieldwork in order to contribute to the construction of a psychology which is other than "part of an apparatus of control and individualisation under capitalism" (Parker, 2005: 132).

Whilst the book is a devastating critique of the quantitatively dominated discipline of psychology, Parker does not refrain from critique also of qualitative methods or, at least, of the uncritical assumptions and claims of many qualitative researchers, though he points out that many of the thorny issues raised in the book in relation to qualitative methods (individualism, psychologism, essentialism, reflexivity, etc.) actually apply to any research method in psychology, qualitative or quantitative.

This book is not an introductory level methods textbook. It is more a book to promote critical reflection upon psychology as a set of problematic social practices (and upon their theoretical, methodological and ideological legitimisation) than it is one to introduce novice researchers to qualitative methods in psychology. The book could, perhaps, have been less misleadingly entitled: An introduction to radical research via consideration of some issues in qualitative research.

Parker is "positive about the possibilities that different methods in qualitative psychology

open up" (Parker, 2005: Preface) but he is not, here, referring to being positive about possible ways being opened up to understand the social world through fieldwork but about possible ways being opened up to de-power psychology (and thus the psy-complex) as a set of social practices. For Parker critique of methodology is key to critique of the discipline. His argument goes as follows: 1) contemporary mainstream psychology functions oppressively in the interests of the status quo; 2) what seems initially to be a monolith is actually built of sub-disciplinary bricks held together by the mortar of common methodology; 3) radical methodological critique can chip away that mortar; 4) to remove the mortar of common method would be to 'disintegrate' the discipline and thus depower it in its capacity to oppress.

Parker's discussion of particular methods is an extension and deepening of his critique of the discipline. Ethnography is discussed, fundamentally, as a way of constructing "an image of the conflicts and contradictions that structure relationship networks" (Parker, 2005: 47); an interview is fundamentally of radical interest because it "invariably carries the traces of patterns of power that hold things in place and it reveals an interviewee's, a co-researcher's, creative abilities to refuse and resist what a researcher wants to happen an encounter that reveals patterns of power and creative refusal of a set research agenda" (Parker, 2005: 53); narrative research is valued from a radical perspective because it "can help us explore how the self is made out of cultural resources and how it feels as if our lives must have a certain shape with

personal identity lying at the core" (Parker, 2005: 71); discourse analysis because it "provides an ideal opportunity for studying ideology in psychology" (Parker, 2005: 88) ... "the study of discrete 'discourses' which specify versions of the world and the individual 'subjects' who are supposed to live in it" (Parker, 2005: 89); psychoanalytic research because it "can be used to illustrate how what we feel to be so deep inside us is actually a symptom of life under capitalism" (Parker, 2005: 105); and radical action research because it is "the transformation of research into a prefigurative political practice" (Parker, 2005: 124).

Parker's discussion of method emphasises throughout that a key function of all radical research, whatever the method, is to reveal how psychological categories function to exploit and oppress by demystifying and bringing into focus people's resistance to such categorisation: it is "helpful to focus on the moments when members of a community or identity category challenge and refuse the attempts by others to make them fit into it. It is at those moments that we are able to see how the category functions to hold together a certain view of the world and, perhaps, to cover over and obscure real structures of exploitation and oppression" (Parker, 2005: 16).

Parker's discussion of method also communicates a deep loathing of the mechanistic ways the mainstream discipline likes to do research (mirroring a loathing of "the mechanistic way the discipline likes to imagine the nature of human thinking" (Parker, 2005: Preface)). Parker has contempt for the substitution of mechanical, unimaginative, repetitive, robotic, boring technique for innovative living research method and emphasises the constant creative reinvention of method in the process of any research worth its name.

Of course Parker's book is not flawless. We believe Parker's critique of community psychology (Parker, 2005: 39-40) is an attack on a straw man: in our view any community psychology worth the name is actually radical. The book makes demands of the reader: to appreciate the book's radical power as a critique of the discipline, the reader needs to be prepared to think critically about the pseudo-science currently paraded as psychology, as well as about

methodology, ontology, epistemology and ideology. This is no easy task especially for readers who have been through disabling undergraduate and post-graduate psychology degree programmes and professional socialisation. However survivors of psychology 'education' who engage with the issues raised in this book will be rewarded by insight into radical and progressive perspectives into ways to construct and maintain a coherent progressive "creative and imaginative alternative to psychology" which would "produce a different kind of knowledge in a different way" (Parker, 2005: 1).