Parker, I. (1992) *Discourse Dynamics: Critical Analysis for Social and Individual Psychology*. London: Routledge.

Chapter 4

Discourse discourse, postmodern psychology

[pp. 64-81]

> We were really shocked when we first saw the see..... We couldn't believe our eyes. Our insurance man was the first non-Muslim we showed it to and even he could match the writing ['Allah is everywhere'] ... Allah is showing he is the creator of the world. I don't know why he chose an aubergine.
>
> *(Guardian,* 28 March 1990)

Political debates outside psychology often seem more depressed now than in the late 1960s and early 1970s at the highpoint of the 'crisis, and this has meant that the rhetoric of paradigm revolution and contests over theories and methods has softened somewhat. Things appear to have settled a bit, and, in the place of arguments over the ways in which the discipline has or has not participated in the oppression of ordinary people, we have milder debates over the conceptual value pf attending to the accounts ordinary people give (Antaki, 1988). A symptom is that psychologists today are developing an interest in rhetoric, narrative, discourse. This does not mean that the turn to discourse is wrong. Far from it. The question is what that turn means, what else it carries in its wake.
I will situate the debates over discourse in this chapter in the context of theories of postmodernism, in particular the argument that we have moved into a postmodern condition of culture, from modernity into 'postmodernity'. I will set out two possible directions that the turn to discourse can take psychology in, then go on to show why the reflexive postmodern tendencies in recent discourse work should be supported, exacerbated, and arrive at a cautionary endnote about the role of critical psychology in postmodern (academic) culture. The future of critical psychology, postmodern or not, is [65] intimately linked to the power of traditional psychology to absorb its opponents, and so it is worth reviewing the progress of alternative currents in the discipline so far first.

AFTER THE CRISIS

The dominant theme in the 1970s crisis critiques of the then dominant laboratory-experimental paradigm was a complaint about the positivist methods and assumptions which underpinned research on social behaviour (Harré and Secord, 1972). A 'new paradigm' informed by a realist philosophy of science was proposed, and the focus of research was to be the accounts people gave of their actions. One line of reasoning here was that accounts and actions had the same origin, and that the collection of accounts would be tapping the collective knowledge which constituted the social world, the 'expressive' sphere. In this way the trap of introspection would be avoided, for the object of study was to be shared social knowledge rather than private individual mental

processes (e.g., Harré, 1979). A parallel tack was followed by those who drew upon hermeneutics, and they argued that accounts had the function of making sense as a *process* (rather than having, in finished form, 'made' sense). A researcher did not have privileged access to what was 'really' going on; a researcher made their own sense (e.g., Gauld and Shotter, 1977). It soon became clear to many psychologists that a key problem with traditional approaches was that they studied a silent world. Psychology needed to turn to accounts, to speech, to language. Although this trend was known as 'new social psychology', it actually affected many parts of the discipline of psychology as a whole, and still does (Harré, 1983; Harré *et al., 1985).*

These moves reflected wider-ranging academic contests in other disciplines, and although the participants in the paradigm debates rarely refer to structuralism and post-structuralism, the 'crisis' literature was as informed by those conceptual developments as it was by the political upheavals in the academic institutions (Parker, 1989a). Academic psychology tends to trail miserably behind intellectual trends outside, and it was inevitable, perhaps, that it should only belatedly shift its attention to the organisation of language, to discourse. It should be noted that (i) the 'new social psychology', (ii) deconstructive attacks on texts and (iii) the analysis of discourse have been selectively and cautiously adopted, and [66] co-opted, by the discipline. It is worth briefly tracing the fate of each of these three strands in turn.

New social psychology

New social psychologists (Harré' and Secord, 1972; Gauld and Shotter, 1977) have remained on the fringe of the discipline, and their uses of structuralist and hermeneutic work had the effect of marginalising them. Although mainstream social psychologists recognised the value of the criticisms made of the bulk of trivial and dehumanising laboratory work, there was never actually a 'paradigm shift'. (This would in any case have been impossible as social psychology has never been a natural science governed by 'paradigms' in a Kuhnian sense.) Social psychologists could not see in new social psychology the systematic methods for the prediction, control and replication of behaviour they desire, and they could not take on board complex theoretical debates from philosophy, sociology and literature. They also suspected that some underlying political agenda, or effects, would accompany the critiques. Since those times, prominent new social psychologists have either regressed to the mainstream, returned to the philosophy of science, retired or retreated overseas. This stream of debate, however, did provide space for other developments.

Deconstruction

Deconstruction emerged from structuralism as part of the poststructuralist package of critical work on texts (e.g., Derrida, 1976, 1983), and a concern with taking apart texts of different kinds has appeared in psychology in recent years. Some variants of this work explicitly draw upon Derrida, deconstruction is used to tease apart the dominant concepts in the discipline (e.g., Parker, 1988a; Sampson, 1989), and other attempts to make deconstruction more accessible and politically useful to radicals in psychology have included a number of critical perspectives on psychology's texts (Shotter and Gergen,

1989; Parker and Shotter, 1990). It is harder to conceal deconstruction in the normal garb of psychology, and the signs are that the mainstream practitioners will not wear it. They see woven into it political critiques of the whole fabric of the discipline. Deconstruction and textual analysis are on the fringe. These metaphors end here. [67]

However, the deconstructionist tendencies are useful not only in introducing the work of Derrida to psychologists and exploring the implications of that work for conceptions of 'the self' (e.g., Sampson, 1989). Deconstruction is one sign in the wave of post-structuralist writing which has mutated in recent years into what we now call postmodernism (Dews, 1987). It is also tactically useful as a way of disrupting theories, opening up *conflicts.* In the case of a critical psychology concerned with the dynamics of discourse, we need to open up conflicts, and not want to see them settled. If language and thought are inherently 'dilemmatic' as Billig *et al.* (1988) say, then to try to end disputes over the nature of psychology would be quite wrong.

Discourse analysis

Discourse analysis, on the other hand, has been successful in a short amount of time in marking out a fairly secure niche in the discipline. The current of discourse theory pursued in this book makes overt use of Foucault's (1972, 1980) descriptions of discourse and power and locates social psychology in the midst of discourses of surveillance and subjectivity (Parker, 1989b), and one influential strand employs Lacanian theory alongside Foucault's work (Henriques *et al.,* 1984; Hollway, 1989). The examples of discourse analysis which could be taken up by an increasing number of psychologists, however, are more careful about these Foucauldian filiations; Potter and Wetherell's (1987) work, for example, appeals to microsociology, analytic philosophy and, more cautiously, semiological traditions. Now while it is true that these traditions are, in some senses, as subversive as post-structuralism, and cannier traditional social psychologists recognise this, and that the representation and repertoire research has developed alongside more overt discussions of ideology (e.g., Billig *et a!.,* 1988), discourse analysis has almost broken out of the margins of social psychology.

At the risk of seeming paranoidly suspicious of anything that is successful in the discipline, I do want to point out that there is a problem here. The success is double-edged. On the one hand, discourse analysis, in its description of the recurrently used words, phrases and linguistic devices which categorise and reproduce the social world, provides techniques which could build on content analysis up to higher levels of meaning, and these techniques *appear* [68] to be systematic. The versions of discourse analysis tied to conversation analysis and sociolinguistics are most at risk here (e.g., Atkinson and Heritage, 1984; Brown and Yule, 1983; Stubbs, 1983). On the other hand, and this is the positive side, the versions pursued by discourse researchers in psychology have moved further away from this, and, although discourse analysis can play the scientistic language game of the discipline, it also breaks some important rules. It breaks the rules in three ways.

First, discourse analysis is deliberately reflexive about its own truth claims, and draws attention to the discursive construction of its own theoretical position and its 'data'. This invitation to reflexivity is not restricted to statements that any 'social text' can become an object of research and that the text of *Discourse and Social Psychology,*

for example, 'should not be immune from this kind of examination' (Potter and Wetherell, 1987: 3). The inclusion of earlier drafts of their book in their book is designed to provide Potter and Wetherell with the opportunity to discuss their own activity as writers. This is not to say that they *always* succeed in including a reflection on their own position as researchers (Bowers, 1988), but they do struggle against the scientistic closure which afflicts much social psychology. Elsewhere, Potter (1988a) makes the point that discourse analysis should celebrate the ambiguity and undecidability of social scientific knowledge, and here the work appearing in psychology connects with sociological research and reflexive activities (Ashmore, 1989; Woolgar, 1988b).

Second, discourse analysis corrodes the truth claims of other supposedly scientific 'discoveries'. (I was being ironic when talking about 'discovering' discourses in the title of Chapter 1.) Many of the most useful examples in *Discourse and Social Psychology* concern the rhetorical devices that scientists use to support their own findings and to discredit the theories of their opponents. This line of attack applies to psychologists, and the readings that they make of one another's work (Potter, 1985, 1988b), and to the 'natural' scientists whose rhetoric is problematised by combining the sociology of scientific knowledge with discourse analysis (Potter and Mulkay, 1985). The relativism that results from this enterprise can facilitate an increased attention to what the knowledge *does.* Billig *et al.* (1988) also throw standard approaches to psychology (and our received academic wisdom about what individual psychology *is)* into question.

A third point is that the relativist and reflexive dynamic of [69] discourse analysis impels psychology a step further into the crisis. Sometimes deliberately, and sometimes despite itself, discourse analysis breaks the rules by raising broader issues to do with the enterprise of psychology. Whilst the use of approaches to texts from other disciplines could serve to demarcate social psychology more rigidly from other human sciences, because discourse analysis demands a shift of *topic* from measured behaviour to the dynamics of meaning, it could also dissolve the boundaries. At some point the intensification of the crisis through the use of relativist notions and an insistence on reflexivity will lead to a choice between a political understanding of' a reflection on what psychology *does* (a concern with conflict) and a continuation of reflexivity as a solution in itself, an attempt to bring about consensus. I will return to this issue, but first I want to connect this turn to language with the supposed cultural shift in the West to postmodernity.

DISCOURSE AND THE POSTMODERN: TWO MOVES

Lyotard (1984) claims that the overarching 'metanarratives' of modern enlightenment culture have given way to the little stories of the postmodern condition. Lyotard's study, sub-titled 'a report on knowledge' was originally written for the Canadian government to help it assess how best to get into the information technology market. It turns out that Lyotard, an ex-Marxist, has succeeded in producing a desired cultural commodity, and features on the postmodern have sold avant-garde journals as fast as turtle merchandise. Not only that, and the Canadian government made a wise investment here, the moral of the story, or little stories, is that large-scale attempts to change society are out-of-date residues of the old modern age. The big theories of social progress and the scientific work which grounded these theories in truth are replaced by a multiplicity of language games.

In the place of modern political projects which traced the emergence of oppression and promised that collective action would see them end, we have pluralism. In place of truth, we have perpetual reflection on the impossibility of truth. Just as accounts of the social have lost their way in the postmodern, so have senses of individual identity. The personal meanings of each citizen of the modern state have given way to fragmented, contested and situation-dependent experiences which cannot be interpreted to reveal signs of the truth [70] of the human condition. Humanism as a secularised modern translation of religious belief dissolves into the hedonism (or resignation on the part of disappointed ex-radicals) of the postmodern condition: 'intensity' instead of interpretation, or interpretation which will never kid itself that it has got closer to a true account.

What is significant about Lyotard's claims for discourse analysts is the reflection on the way in which narratives work as stories about the world. Discourse is now seen as responsible for having constituted a particular reality and subjectivity in modern times, and we are invited to believe that the shattered remains of discourse hold together the moves in language in the postmodern. There is no more than sets of competing discourses, and notions of social structure are themselves just discourses. This is a thorough, and deliberate, anti-realist world view.

One useful way to think about these transformations is actually to locate them in the context of theories of language, in the shift from structuralism to post-structuralism (Dews, 1987). While theories of discourse are reworking post-structuralist approaches inside psychology, outside the postmodern is a condition which operates as if post-structuralism was true. Postmodernism in psychology is the state of things that results when we come to believe that there really is no object of study but discourse, no way of studying it but discourse analysis, and no way of grounding a critical view of discourse but in reflexivity (that is, no way of grounding a critical view).

The relativism and reflexivity which discourse analysis prompts constitutes one more discipline in the social sciences as postmodern. There are two important ways in which the postmodern differs from the modern: (i) there is shift from a critical stance towards the world which attempts to realise human values and needs against existing institutions and patterns of culture to a positive stance which celebrates the way things are because any other way is as unreal; and (ii) there is a shift from metaphors of depth to the surface, so that instead of attempting to uncover deeper underlying structures of oppression, experience or progressive dynamics of change, the attention is to meaning alone. The turn to discourse is such that all there is in the world is seen as a discursive matter, and that is a good thing (or so we are told). In this sense, the postmodern is an experience of signification in which each and every thing is equally invested with meaning (Lash, 1988).

Outside psychology, this manifests itself either in deliberate [71] references in popular culture media to postmodernism or in related fashions. In the 25 July 1990 issue of the pop-weekly *Smash Hits,* for example, the Soup Dragons talk about this: ' "We've been dabbling in Chaos Culture for about six months now," insists Sean, "I just love the idea of things that are made by human beings, like computers and mixing desks having a mind of their own" ' (17). (The resurrection of Situationist ideas shorn of politics in some House pop or in the (uncredited) rehashes by Baudrillard are similar cases.) Inside psychology, the investment of things with meaning occurs in the context of discussions of discourse. Potter gives one striking account in the Calgary *DARG Newsletter:* 'The

contribution by Malcolm Ashmore... focussed on Latour's arguments about the actant status of doors... and proposed that the appropriate Sociology of Scientific Knowledge [S.S.K.] approach was not conceptual critique but an analytic study of doors and their interaction with human beings. To this end he had brought along a fifteen minute video of doors filmed in various places on the Manchester Polytechnic campus' (1990: 11).

'Post'

However, to say that discourse analysis is postmodern is not to say that this particular expression of the claims of post-structuralists, over-determined in this particular case by microsociology, analytic philosophy and semiology, is part of postmodernity. We need to distinguish two manifestations of post-structuralism as it has mutated from a type of analysis into a way of seeing the world and of experiencing culture.
The term '*postmodernism',* on the one hand, describes the conditions of uncertainty, frivolity, relativism and reflexivity in different artistic and scientific fields. These conditions are experienced as neither static - it *is* a state of flux, of *differance* writ large - nor necessarily progressive; in some cases these conditions are viewed as degenerate, and each area has its own point of collapse into the postmodern as well as a particular rhythm of adoption and resistance. It is difficult to generalise from one area to the other, though a symptom, paradoxically, of postmodernism is that one is continually impelled to try and do exactly that. In the case of psychology, the discipline insulated itself fairly successfully from other academic areas such as sociology, economics, philosophy or psychoanalysis up until the late 1960s, and did not entertain doubts [72] about its serious mission to discover the truth about behaviour and apply it. Postmodern tendencies in psychology arrived late, and were unwelcome. (This partly accounts for their subversive feel.)

The term *'postmodernity',* on the other hand, applies to the condition of culture which encloses and informs the abandonment of the grand narratives of humanised science, progress and individual meaning in all areas. It is sometimes useful to describe architecture, music or psychology as postmodern, and to use that term to fix a contemporary point conceptually in the process of acceleration of reflexivity which the enlightenment, modernity, set in motion (Berman, 1983). However, the notion of postmodernity is a little more double-edged. There is, strictly speaking, no such thing as post-modernity. There are, rather, pockets of contemporary culture in which it is possible to identify postmodern themes, and for which the postmodern condition may be 'true'. We have to take care to distinguish the collapse of the modern project in sectors of academic life and avant-garde culture from the delusional projections of that postmodern condition out onto the whole of society. Lyotard (1984) and critical writers, such as Jameson (1984), who engage with him on his ground are wrong to apply postmodern categories to the *whole* of culture. (Furthermore, the attribution of meaning to *everything* has long operated in religious systems outside the realm of the post-modern, as the quote at the beginning of this chapter illustrates.)

The distinction between postmodernism and postmodernity, and the correlative refusal to admit that *everything* is up for grabs, opens up a choice between two directions that a discipline like psychology could move in. Should psychology guard against the intrusion of the postmodern, prevent the prescriptions of postmodern writers from

becoming, through the operation of a gigantic self-fulfilling prophecy, true, and try to understand the phenomenon of postmodernism? Or should psychology welcome postmodernism with open arms, dissolve itself into language, and lose its anchor in reality? This choice has been raised in other academic disciplines, such as sociology (Bauman, 1988a), but I will trace through an answer which is directed at psychology. The 'two moves' we could make are to use modern psychology to understand postmodernism *or* to make psychology itself postmodern. I will take each in turn. [74]

The starting point of the first move is to accept that psychology as the science of mental life or of behaviour has been from the beginning a thoroughly modern discipline. Psychologists have been obsessed with trying to discover universal truths about mental processes, and have maintained a disarmingly naive faith in their steady accumulation of facts. In Britain this project is being accelerated as the British Psychological Society, with pretensions to become a version of the BMA, publishes a register of 'Chartered Psychologists' and aims to build up files of 'facts' which can be retrieved at the right time to be applied'.

We could generate a psychological programme of study of the postmodern, and perhaps this would both improve the discipline and add to our understanding. Within the array of traditional techniques are a number which could be brought to bear on this topic: (i) experimental and interview studies of attribution which focus on commitment to personal relationships, and the degree to which motives and desires are ascribed to the other (modern interpretation) or rated second to attractiveness (postmodern sensation); (ii) questionnaire studies which could tap attitudes to the modern and discover who is, and to what degree they have 'lost the nostalgia for the lost narrative' (Lyotard, 1984: 41), and whether there is a postmodern personality (correlated perhaps with Type B profile, external locus of control, paratelicism, etc.); or (iii) observational and multidimensional-scaling studies of the cognitive maps of subjects in the Bonaventure Hotel, say, which would (rather worryingly) lock into Jameson's (1984) proposals for a way out of the cultural logic of late capitalism. Maybe these are not entirely serious proposals, but there is a phenomenon of postmodernism at work in some way in some sectors of culture, and a description of how it operates would be useful.
Qualitative psychology, and this would be the arena where discourse analysis could be helpful, adds to this some possibilities: (i) ethnographic interviewing, which focuses on the experience of the impact of information technology (connected with oral history projects to contextualise these changes) and the ways in which knowledge is used, could be connected with contemporary work and leisure practices; (ii) studies of the rhetoric and representations (employing hermeneutic methods) of scientific ideas and the ways in which these are turned into a 'common sense', and employed as true [74] stories, urban legends or simple pragmatic language games; and (iii) participant research descriptions (using 'ethogenic' approaches) of the small social worlds and subcultures which are postmodern could be linked to work in the sociology of scientific knowledge and an attention to the academic interests served by postmodern notions (Bauman, 1988b).

The task in these examples would be a modern study of the postmodern phenomenon, and would usefully include an examination of the ways in which the postmodern has found its way into sectors of popular culture. I have a tea-towel, for example, from Australia with 'Foucault a' Go Go' splashed over it in large letters and a text underneath the picture which reads 'She loved him in theory. But how could she find

a place for him in practice'.

Psychology as postmodern

However, if the heralds of postmodernity are right, then modern studies of postmodernism are fated to fail, and to fold sooner or later into their objects of study. The second move we could make would flow from this view that we have to change psychology itself into a postmodern discipline. Apart from the quote (from Ken Gergen) in the publisher's blurb for *Discourse and Social Psychology* (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) which claims the book is a step toward postmodern psychology, a claim Potter and Wetherell do not themselves make, the term 'postmodernism' is slowly dribbling into psychology.

From new social psychology, Shotter (1987) cautiously uses the term to radicalise descriptions of accountability and selfhood. More enthusiastic advocates in psychology refer to the 'postmodernists' as combining constructivism and deconstruction and moving the discipline forward to give a more liberal understanding of gender differences (Hare-Mustin and Maracek, 1988). (Cf, Owens (1985) for a more thoroughly postmodern account of gender and Burman (1990a) for an appraisal of the problems this raises for feminists in psychology.) In sociology this astonishingly fast recuperation of postmodern writing has led to claims that social scientists could benefit from 'postmodernists" attention to the value base of data, a point at which, we are told, 'postmodernists differ little from Weber' (Murphy, 1988: 606). (At any rate, if nothing else, the uptake of postmodernism, and it appears in this literature as a euphemism for a watered-down post-structuralism, could set up productive conflicts [75] with the Hegelian fringe of the 1970s new psychology (Marková, 1982; Reason and Rowan, 1981).)

It may be the case that postmodernism in social psychology will develop through the work of figures whose work was postmodern *avant la lettre.* Lyotard (1984) suggests some contenders for admission to the pragmatic and pluralist research world which has supposedly displaced the modern. It is instructive that the following three - Wittgenstein, Austin and Goffman - are both sources of the original 1970s turn to language and reference points for a cultural turn to the postmodern.

Lyotard's (1984) use of Wittgenstein, and in particular the notion of language games, is a first case. What is important to notice, however, and social psychologists would probably not normally notice it because Lyotard is following a move that the discipline plays with the strength of a repetition compulsion, is that the location of *conflict* is shifted. Conflict is not at the level of class or the State, but is to be found at an interpersonal level. The gloss on this is quite interesting. We are told that '[c]onsensus has become an outmoded and suspect value' (Lyotard, 1984: 66), and that the best way of coping with the breakdown of consensus is to recognise the 'heteromorphous nature' of language games *(ibid.)*. However, we are invited into a world in which consensus has broken at a small-scale level, precisely because (though Lyotard does not spell this out), consensus at a larger level is the necessary condition, the backdrop, for the little games to take place.

The use of Austin, and the meaning which is tacked on to the term 'performative', is also designed to have the same effect; it 'realizes the optimal performance' (Lyotard, 1984: 88) for an account of economic conditions which are now depicted as flowing

happily and naturally from the activities of individuals. Discourses, now ‘little narratives’ rather than metanarratives, which mesh together culture are reproduced in a series of moves which redefine truth when and as is necessary. With this flows an account of legitimation which rests on the performance of the system, the system of moves (‘paralogy’ which includes, as a function of its operation, but cannot be reduced to, innovation). This, for Lyotard, is also now a description of postmodern science. This, in a sense, is where discourse analysis came in, for many of the examples so far of devices in discourse which have truth effects in the discourse literature are from the language games of scientists (e.g., Potter and Mulkay, 1985). [76]

Thre is a danger that research into discourse will reinforce the view that the essential ‘reality’ of the discourse lies at an interpersonal level (though I have tried to prevent that from happening with an account in Chapter 2 of the way a realist framework looks to wider and deeper structures of power). Discourse analysis participates, then, in this series of games whether it likes it or not, and implies a discourse user who is either ignorant of the moves or, more often, is restricting their concerns to the pragmatic aspects of encounters. Lyotard (1984) is preoccupied with pragmatics and the ploys and moves which hold social life together. In many passages of *The Postmodern Condition,* and, not surprisingly, alongside Wittgenstein and Austin, Lyotard cites the work of Goffman. Goffman (1968, 1971) provides accounts of the self-presentational tricks and turns by which we ‘bring off’ a part or role. The most influential strand in the ‘new’ social psychology, Harré’s (1979) ethogenics, borrowed Goffman from across the disciplinary border, from sociological social psychology, and claimed to provide a theory and method in psychological social psychology to underpin Goffman’s dramaturgical descriptions. Although Harré’s ethogenic psychology was supposed to be rooted in a ‘realist’ scientific tradition, it tends to fold into an idealist position, one in which meaning overrides material structures of domination. Psychology should be concerned, Harré has said, with the ‘interplay between a practical order, concerned with the production of the means of life, and an expressive order concerned with honour and reputation’ (Harré, 1979: 4). He has claimed that, whilst Marxism developed an appropriate description of the practical order, it was Veblen (1899) who successfully described the codes which held the expressive realm together.

The fateful slip into linguistic relativism occurs when the distinction (a useful one) is used to make claims about the priority that should be given to (new) social psychology: for ‘[o]nly in exceptional circumstances does the practical dominate social life’ (Harré, 1979: 35). This dynamic is continued when it is asserted that not only is the expressive sphere dominant in most places at most times, but that ‘[i]mpression management and other forms of expressive work involve control of personal style and monitoring of performance that calls for a higher order cognitive functioning than the consciousness required for skilled labour’ (Harré, 1979: 31). This is a revealing claim, for the value attributed to ‘control’, ‘monitoring’ [77] and higher order ‘cognitive functioning’ reveals the hold of *modem* conceptions of individual rationality and subjectivity. The problem here is that it is a modern conception of the person and its internal mental processes which splits the individual from the social and so falls hostage to cognitivism (a reductionist style of explanation that I try to counter in Part III of this book). Paradoxically, alongside the postmodern drift to relativism runs a modern view of the individual.

Not only are we invited to buy Goffman's dramaturgical descriptions of self-presentation (1971) and his account of the moral careers, for example, of asylum inmates (1968), but we are also drawn into the moral universe that his role-players inhabit. In this respect Maclntyre is quite right to say that Goffman's books 'presuppose a moral philosophy' (1981: 110), and that the dramaturgical view of social life is of a piece with the 'emotivism' of contemporary society, a moral relativism in which ethical judgements become reduced to individual preference, and which 'entails the obliteration of any genuine distinction between manipulative and non-manipulative social relations' (Maclntyre, 1971: 21). The bleak vision Maclntyre presents of the new 'dark ages' which have come upon us, where we have indeed lost the moral narratives necessary to an ethical human community, ties together in a disturbing way the microsociology presented by Goffman and the politics of the postmodern.

POSTMODERNITY AND REFLEXIVITY

This is a good point to stop and ask whether we should opt for the first direction I signalled earlier on in which we use psychology as a modern discipline to understand postmodernism or whether we should support the tendency of psychology to break with its past and become postmodern. This is a good point to stop and ask that question because a consideration of Goffman's place in the post-modern raises explicitly political problems, and it is a political understanding of the issue that is required. This would be politics in an unashamedly modern sense, and of a kind that is aware of the importance of conflict, in at least three senses of the word. First of all, it would appreciate the role of conflict between the liberatory aspirations of modern thought on the one hand and the conservative nature of modern *institutions* on the other. Second, it would also need to be a politics which opened up the conflict between reflexivity which merely dissolves our experiences in a plurality of different [78] perspectives and *reflection* which grounds our activities in a wider context. Third, it would attend to the conflict between individual experience and social structures.

It is the third of these conflicts that I want to focus on, for it is salutory to point out that traditional social psychology, which we could expect to provide at least the attempt to understand the relationship between the individual and the social, is founded on the premiss that the gulf between the individual and the social can be bridged. The paradox is that while social psychology is supposed to be that bridge, it is not. Because of the way social psychology was formed at the beginning of the century in America as an experimental discipline trying to screen out the social as pathological (Parker, 1989a), it has actually functioned *as* the gap itself. Now the problem that faces radicals in the discipline is that the 'discourse' discourse resolves, or *appears* to resolve it. It appears to bridge the gap but it fails, like traditional social psychology, with dire consequences for a wider understanding of the reproduction and transformation of social structures outside discourse. I will show how by contrasting two ways of connecting the individual and the social. First, through practice.

Connecting: through practice

Outside psychology, it has always, in modern culture, been possible to bridge the gulf

between the individual and the social. The connection between individual singular experience and general social structures is made through political practice. You cannot start constructing a critique of psychology without raising the question of politics, and, as the assessment of Goffman and the postmodern attests, the same applies to social psychology. The words 'critical', 'radical' and 'progressive' are codewords. They take on meaning only when a connection is made between studies of the individual and a political understanding of the social. The debates in academic psychology are interesting, but they cannot provide a reference point for understanding what psychology *does.*

When psychologists have been radical, it has not been in terms of their theories but in terms of their own political practice. The use of political reference points outside also leads to an understanding of psychology as a problem, and the modern project of self-understanding, progress and social reconstruction can then be [79] distinguished from the modern social scientific institutions. It is only then that we will be able to distinguish between the way we would like things to be and the way they actually are. The descriptions of social life and individual choice offered by postmodernism are very appealing, and we may want 'modernity', in the sense of it being an alienating experience of serial relentless progression and a chase after the 'new', to end (Anderson, 1984). Buying, often literally buying, into the promise of the end of modernity from the relatively privileged position of academics and social science researchers, however, can lead us into slipping into a celebration of a politically regressive abandonment of modern political projects. There is some truth, for example, in the argument that, as far as the destruction of progressive humanist aspirations are concerned, 'the goal is no longer truth but performativity, not reason but power. The CBI are in this sense spontaneous post-structuralists to a man' (Eagleton, 1985: 63). These points about the end of modernity lead us to an alternative (mistaken) way of connecting the individual and the social.

Connecting: through reflexivity

The reason why the role of discourse theory is at issue here, and why the fate of discourse analysis is so closely connected with postmodernism in psychology, is that there is a powerful ideological fantasy that the chasm between the individual and the social *is* being bridged today. The turn to discourse provokes the use of 'reflexivity' as a solution to the crisis that each critical social psychologist experiences when they carry out research. Reflexivity is advertised, in some accounts of the postmodern, as the central defining feature of this new state of things (Lawson, 1984), and some of the enthusiasts of the postmodern in the social sciences see in it a way of overcoming the gulf between the individual and the social; 'postmodernists', we are told, advocate an 'anti-dualist position' (Murphy, 1988: 603). Reflexivity *appears* to provide the answer. We turn around and reflect on ourselves and our language. Reflexivity is used to denote our deliberate awareness of our place in things and our difference from others. To reflect thoroughly enough on your activity as a researcher often unfortunately, is to problematise your own position as distanced observer, and then to dissolve any space between the topic and the resources you bring to bear upon it. [80]

There is something odd going when the connection between the individual and the social is made in terms of 'reflexivity' instead of political practice. My caution is that we have to understand the political functions of that connection instead of heaving a sigh of

relief because a connection has been made. Reflexivity is an attempt, well suited to the postmodern condition, to connect which is *depoliticised.* And it leaves traditional academic disciplines concerned with subjectivity, such as psychology, in their place. The new discourse about the nature of discourse and the analysis of discourse in psychology encourages practitioners to join the spiral of reflexivity.

CRITICAL DISTANCE

Jameson (1984) takes the notion of postmodernity too seriously, but is right when he insists that we need to construct some 'critical distance' between ourselves and the culture we inhabit, and which inhabits us. The prerequisite for that critical distance is that we mark a critical distance between ourselves and the stories psychology tells. When a connection between the individual and the social is made through political practice, that practice distances us from psychology. It should. One problem with the turn to discourse is that we could lose sight of how bad psychology actually is, and the oppressive ways in which it operates when it is not just theorising but also practising on people.

So, tactically and paradoxically, the move towards the postmodern in social psychology should be supported *because* it is right to defend a modern understanding of the world and modern political projects. Psychology is one modern institution which has little to offer radicals. The institution needs to be opened up, deconstructed so that the conflicts within it become clear, so clear that it is too much to bear. This does not mean, of course, that no elements of psychological theory are useful - there are always helpful spin-offs from harmful enterprises, like non-stick saucepans developed from military space research (and a psychology book which is as useful as a non-stick pan is a rare thing). Here the strand of critical work in deconstruction is useful, and it is possible to engage with discourse analysis by emphasising, and thereby increasing, the post-structuralist influences within it, as this book has done. (At this point, of course, we *should* be concerned above all with performativity, with what the effects of our intervention are.) [81]

This means that the reflexive tendencies in psychology should be supported. While they disrupt the dehumanising truth claims that the discipline makes inside, *outside* critical discourse analytic psychologists can develop a realist, *grounded* understanding of social structures. When critical analysts study the dynamics of discourse, they do so by bringing in an historical account of the development of the power of discourses and accounts of the institutional and ideological repercussions of texts. Discourse analysis can be put to progressive uses, but only because we also hold to narratives about progress which are more important than psychology. In part, this is possible because discourse analysis is still on the margin. None of the Discourse Groups operates as an institution. The field is open for debate and the elaboration of critical approaches to meaning. This does not mean that discourse analysis could not become institutionalised, absorbed, recuperated. One of the lessons of the fast uptake of postmodern ideas and their role in the derogation of radical politics is that the development of an approach to discourse dynamics has to adopt auxiliary criteria (concerned with institutions, power and ideology) and take supplementary steps which cannot but entail a moral/political stance on the part of the researcher.

This does not mean, however, that the discipline should just be pulled

down, as if we could pretend that there was no such thing as subjectivity and no good way to talk about it. The experience of individuality in modern culture is private, isolated and dehumanised, but the attempt to wish away that experience as if it rested on nothing, as if there was no material basis, no human nature, would be as bad as behaviourism or as bankrupt as the promises of the post-modernists. Discourse analysis provides a way of describing the moral/political character of personal action (no individual can 'escape' from culture), the social nature of subjectivity. But how do we describe the person as 'discourse user'? We can see discrete biological units like ourselves sharing discourse with us, so what vocabulary might be helpful to capture a sense of the social *and* of the individual? I suggest some answers to this question in Part III. [end of page 81]