

Parker, I. and Shotter, J. (eds) (1990) *Deconstructing Social Psychology*. London: Routledge.

Chapter Fifteen

DIFFERING WITH DECONSTRUCTION:

A FEMINIST CRITIQUE

[pp. 208-220]

Erica Burman

[E.Burman@mmu.ac.uk]

As this book testifies, deconstruction, and associated poststructuralist ideas have been used in psychology in a number of ways. As a feminist I have felt wary and even hostile to these approaches, and not only because of the complexity and commitment to theory that its deployment presupposed. In this chapter I outline the political challenges presented by deconstruction, not only those through which they are used to critique psychology, but also the difficulties that the use of these methods present to the maintenance of a progressive politics. It is worth, however, briefly summarising de construction's progressive possibilities before moving on to look at the problems.

PROMISES

1. Attention is drawn to the materiality of language: discourse is seen as constitutive of and linked to practice, hence it is possible to theorise psychology's relationship to social practices as both reflective and productive. Rose (1985), for example, highlights how the domain of 'individual psychology', focused around the key concepts of 'ability' and 'temperament', developed to provide the technology to segregate and classify people through personality and intelligence testing; to differentiate the 'fit' from the 'feeble-minded', and to diagnose indications of 'degeneracy' and 'delinquency'. Thus its subsequent history traces the struggle to legitimise that 'expertise', to maintain its monopoly on its administration.
2. The approach succeeds in relativising psychology, and highlighting the historical variability of discursive relations. This affords a clearer method and perspective of theorising our own [209] positions in relation to psychological practices, and enables us to identify progressive or reactionary features of discourses according to our purposes. For example, the 'human rights' discourse of 'normalisation' which is so prevalent in mental handicap can be seen to be gender insensitive (Adcock and Newbigging 1990); the discourse of protection and violation of innocence surrounding child abuse denies childhood sexuality and correspondingly positions a 'knowing' child as culpable (Kitzinger 1988); the child-centred discourse of 'natural needs'¹ can skate over issues of school racism as 'adolescent peer group problems' (Warren 1988).
3. Deconstruction focuses on dominance, contradiction and difference: in highlighting the multiplicity of positions afforded by competing discourses and their contradictory effects, it enables us to envisage ways of disrupting the dominant discourse and to construct positions of resistance. So, for example, Steedman (1982) points out how young girls can use their extending symbolic repertoire to reflect upon and transcend their social positions; Walden and Walkerdine

(1982) highlight the gendered culture of early education as providing an environment in which girls are supported and encouraged to be successful (in marked contrast with later schooling); and Hudson (1984) suggests that young women adopt the discourse of 'adolescence' as a strategy to escape the more confining definitions of behaviour and opportunities permitted by 'femininity'.

4. Deconstruction also introduces a politics of subjectivity: This accounts for the dynamics of subordination, including female narcissism' and even 'masochism' as constructed through cultural forces, and it has prompted powerful analyses of pornography and media representations of women, as well as more theoretical analysis of women's excursion from systems of representation as their constitutive feature. This work is empowering in so far as it avoids positioning women as passive victims. Now women are beginning to challenge the traditional relations and idealised images set up in technologies of representation (Spence 1986). Moreover, these accounts highlight the absences, resistances and denials of psychology as a gendered practice.

5. When Foucault's (1979a) work is brought in, it provides a description of power. What we can gain, then, from poststructuralist critiques in psychology is a framework to trace, theorise and talk about the power relations it both participates in [210] and gives rise to. So, for example, Walkerdine (1981) accounts for a group of three-year-old boys' verbal sexual harassment of their nursery school teacher in terms of their strategic adoption of masculine discourse, which positions them as dominant in relation to a female teacher, to counter their otherwise subordinate position as pupils. The teacher, however, is disempowered from resisting through her subscription to a 'child-centred' pedagogy which positions her as powerless to interfere in the 'natural' course of children's development. Three major issues follow from this analysis: first, the child-centred model, arising out of post-Darwinian evolutionary theory, presents an asocial model of development as an organic unfolding of inherent abilities Venn and Walkerdine 1978) which denies or neglects gender relations and specificities (Urwin 1986). Second, drawing attention to the gendered culture of early (and in different ways later) education has implications for our understanding of the relative progress and achievements of girls and boys. Third, the discourse of child-centredness, with its notions of 'readiness', 'treating each child as an individual', 'learning through play', and 'interest-driven learning' accords so little agency to teachers or schools as responsible for children's educational progress that the only explanation available to account for failure is one which lapses into a cultural or class deficit model (Sharp and Green 1975). Hence 'progressive education' as enshrined in the 'positive discriminatory' policies of the Plowden Report is shown to slip into victim blaming, taking the child as responsible for their disadvantage and treating this as an unalterable quality of the individual which is unamenable to intervention.

These, then are some of the powerful analyses made available by deconstruction and post-structuralism. Yet despite the powerful practical and conceptual apparatus these offer to a feminist critique of psychology, there are also areas in which poststructuralists and fellow travellers and the now attendant culture of deconstruction - postmodernity - are fundamentally at variance with this project.

CONFLICTS AND COMMONALITIES

The overall problem concerns the approach's inability to ally itself with any explicit political position; and following from this, a [211] deliberate distancing and 'deconstruction' of any

progressive political program. Indeed, a key feature of 'deconstruction' is its explicit critique and proscription of any commitment to a conception of history as moving forwards. Teleology is seen as one of the key characteristics of the modernist movement it seeks to deconstruct, and all utopias are branded as idealist, unattainable and metaphysical. This is all very well when we want to use deconstruction to highlight the underlying political program of psychology as reproducing and perpetuating a liberal humanist ideology of the rational uniform subject. Here deconstruction allows us to highlight the default politics at work, the cultural imperialism, the individualisation and denial of oppression, and ultimately the reinstatement of the mind-body, self-other, emotion-reason oppositions that have structured western philosophy and politics since the 'coincidental meeting' of Descartes and capitalism. Unfortunately it also rules out building a feminist or socialist politics into the deconstructive enterprise. For deconstruction to join forces with feminism and socialism would be to prioritise particular textual readings in a way that is utterly antithetical to its intent.

This issue has largely been elaborated in terms of current debates about the nature of postmodernity and the future of socialism. Drawing upon Lyotard's (1984) distinction between 'grand' and 'little narratives', we can see that there are continuities as well as conflicts between feminism and deconstruction. This opposition between narratives mirrors a tension within feminism, that of the problem of integrating the 'little stories' of individual women with the wider narratives of history and patriarchy - a tension heightened by the fact that a feminist politics is premised on the necessity and possibility of articulating the two (hence 'the personal is political'). Marxist analyses have also addressed this issue by trying to link the history of the working classes and understanding of capitalism with the activities of the workers. But while in Marxism the tension between the personal and the grand narrative is bridged or articulated primarily through notions of a 'vanguard' (with all the problems this entails), feminism goes further by threatening (deconstructing) the opposition through developing new ways of organising. In this way feminism can be seen to problematise the hierarchical nature of most left organisations and Marxist politics, showing how they are in danger [212] of reproducing precisely those inequalities they are against.

However, there is one area where feminism's partiality for the personal may lead it into the same political cul-de-sac as deconstruction. In particular we can notice continuities between the cultural corollary of deconstruction, postmodernism, and current tendencies in feminism. Just as the post-modern subject is said to be caught in a static series of presents rather than history, capable only of pastiche rather than parody, pleasure rather than politics, is individualised rather than collective, so too we can interpret and evaluate 'identity politics' as leading towards an individualisation and depoliticisation of experience with a corresponding shift from questions of oppression to identity (Bourne 1987; Burman, in press).

DILEMMAS

Not only are there conceptual problems in trying to mesh together feminism and deconstruction, but there are also more immediate tactical dilemmas that feminist involvement in deconstruction poses. Much of the impetus for the deconstructive enterprise in psychology, as elsewhere, has come from feminists. However, there is a danger that deconstruction may be appropriating feminist critiques, through claiming to incorporate and thus rendering irrationally invisible a specifically feminist contribution and project. In social psychology this is illustrated through the ways feminist research and methodological critiques have been assimilated into 'new paradigm'

research, which draws heavily on, but rarely acknowledges, a much longer tradition of feminist work. As Reason and Rowan put it in a section of their introduction entitled 'The feminism issue', '... there seems to be a real danger that in new paradigm research men will take a "female" view of looking at the world, and turn it into another "male way of seeing it"' (Reason and Rowan 1981: xxiii). Indeed, it is interesting that this danger was highlighted by the (male) editors of a 'handbook' of 'new research methods' which was guilty of precisely this inadvertent disenfranchisement of feminist research, and even more significant that in the follow-up book (Reason 1988) neither 'feminism' nor 'feminist research' appear in the index and the only references are in fact cited within a general rubric of 'post-positivism' (Reason 1988: 3). [213]

This argument has parallels in the broader arena in which deconstruction critiques arise before gradually percolating into psychology. It may have taken the insights of post-structuralist psychoanalysis to *theorise* women's subversion of the patriarchal order, but this powerful critique is predicated on the prior existence of women's resistance. Psychoanalysis may have facilitated *recognition* of women's oppositional relation to as well as (and by virtue of) our exclusion from dominant systems of representation. Drawing on Irigaray's (1977) analysis of the speculum as the symbol of how masculine practices are shaped by the feminine void they seek to master, we might even go further to posit the category of the feminine as their suppressed/repressed constituting force. However, there is no reason why feminists should necessarily defer to a theoretical framework such as deconstruction simply because it lends some credence or legitimacy to our demands. Nor is it clear that these analyses of 'femininity' necessarily have anything to do with feminist politics unless they are linked to theories of both resistance and change. Indeed, deconstruction could well become a new technology to colonise women's critical and revolutionary potential.

While it may be tactically useful to adopt deconstructive approaches for progressive political projects, this could be done at the expense of failing to advance the underlying feminist and radical project through lack of explicit commitment to it. Hence we marginalise those feminists who do not seek refuge under deconstruction's 'facilitating' mantle, and at the same time surrender the expression of our own motivations to be cast within its own terms. This raises then the question of dangers from within of being recuperated into a new kind of orthodoxy or subject position.

DANGERS

The main danger deconstruction holds for feminists is that of depoliticisation. There are a number of subtle ways in which this possibility arises, some of which I have already touched upon. Here I want to concentrate on one main issue: the political consequences of deconstruction's celebration of 'difference'.

Difference (with '*différance*') is perhaps the key term in the deconstructive lexicon (Derrida 1982b); its methodology is to [214] adopt the devalued term of the opposition it identifies to highlight the metaphysical dynamic of its construction. However, just as affirmative movements have their limitations as political strategy, so too the principal danger with deconstruction is that difference may become a substitute rather than a starting point for resistance. Hence it is in relation to this issue that debates about deconstruction and feminism are most closely intertwined.

The post-structuralist package of Derrida, Foucault and Lacan offers critiques and insights into the constitution of dominant patriarchal discourses and constructions of feminine positions,

but leaves feminists in some confusion as to what action follows from this analysis of women's relation to the symbolic. As Toril Moi's (1985) account of Kristeva's analysis of the implications of post-Lacanian psychoanalysis for feminism points out, there are three possible avenues for feminist politics. The first of these, women's demands for equal access to the symbolic order, can broadly be equated with 'equal opportunities'. This is liberal feminism, where equality is defined in terms of male (patriarchal) norms, and as such is clearly insufficient to dismantle patriarchy. The second position is that of radical feminism, where women reject the male symbolic order in the name of difference. This glorification of the (formerly devalued term of) femininity can be seen as congruent with the practice of deconstruction, and is epitomised in the writing of Hélène Cixous. However, this position, through its undoubtedly empowering celebration of women's bodily and psychological qualities, lapses into biologism and essentialism, and treats difference as universal and timeless. Equally, as Moi's critique of Irigaray demonstrates, ignoring material and historical specificities of women's relation to power permits the essentialisation of women's experiences, reduces us to our bodies, individualises our struggles and positions us as uniformly powerless within the dominant order so that resistance from within cannot be envisaged.

This is perhaps the primary danger of deconstructive critiques, a danger that is acknowledged in wider discussions of post-modernism where the subject is depicted as alienated from a collective politics, as able to sustain only a momentary criticality, and as ultimately stranded in a timeless present that maintains and constitutes itself only by carnivalesque allusion to past genres (Jameson 1984). At the theoretical level, we have seen how de- [215]construction is fundamentally committed to a liberal pluralism which renders each of its deconstructive readings as equally valid, and paralyses political motivation. Again, there are some connections to be made with contemporary debates in the women's movement, most notably around theorising differences of culture and heritage through 'identity politics', and the politics and ethics of women's sexuality as in addressing sado-masochism.

Deconstruction, like some varieties of feminism, seeks to undo or reject the dichotomy between masculine and feminine by demonstrating its metaphysical (and, for feminists, political) basis (this is Moi's third position). As Moi points out, while it is *politically* essential that feminists defend women as women to counteract our oppression as women under patriarchy, 'an "undeconstructed" form of "stage two" feminism, unaware of the metaphysical nature of gender identities, runs the risk of... uncritically taking over the very metaphysical categories set up by patriarchy in order to keep women in their places, despite attempts to attach new feminist values to these categories' (1985:13).

DILUTIONS

As well as its inherently problematic nature for radicals, there are also difficulties associated with introducing post-structuralist ideas into social psychology. I will confine myself to two examples here.

The psychological concept of 'androgeny' is perhaps the shining example of the career of an undeconstructed critique of 'masculinity' and 'femininity', yet which nevertheless anticipates some of deconstruction's rhetoric. Formulated as a way of escaping the restrictive confines of polarised psychological sex roles, it has been hailed as a visionary promise of what life without sex typing could be like. What it notably fails to theorise though, through its equal valuing of qualities traditionally associated with masculinity and femininity, is the initial inequality of

gendered positions. It thus renders oppression as simply a feature of individual incompetence or unwillingness to change (Carrigan *et al.* 1987). Like postmodernism, 'androgeny' needs to be seen in the context of the market needs of late capitalism, and that this is recognised (even welcomed) by its advocates is seen by one of the paradigmatic examples of androgenous behaviour offered by Bem (1976): the ability to sack an employee 'with sensitivity' (Billig [216] 1982). This is no rejection of the masculinity/femininity distinction as metaphysical, but a simple exploitation and construction of human potential to meet the demands of capital.

Second, one of the primary routes by which deconstruction has found its way into social psychology has been through 'discourse analysis'. Perhaps the paradigmatic case of the consequences of this is the construction and reception of Potter and Wetherell's *Discourse and Social Psychology*, (1987), which has created a first legitimate foothold for post-structuralist critiques in mainstream social psychology. The book holds within itself a number of contradictory positions, sometimes claiming that the role of discourse analysis is to comment on and critique social psychology, and at other times asserting that it is part and parcel of the proper business of social psychology. Moreover, the sample analyses of transcripts reveal a reluctance to deconstruct their own discourse as researchers (Bowers 1988). So far so good: strategy may prevail over logic; sometimes there are good reasons for not wanting to entirely undermine authorial authority, particularly when seeking to make a credible case for innovation. However, it would have been better to acknowledge properly the post-structuralist inspiration for their approach. Although Foucault and Derrida are briefly cited, the potential of discourse analysis to surprise, disrupt and unsettle psychology is instead safely attributed to developments in ethnomethodology, ordinary language philosophy and linguistics. (Psychoanalysis, let alone Lacan, does not get a mention.) Deconstruction may be watered down to such an extent that it can easily be assimilated into prevailing paradigms, and renders even more difficult the project to bring the full force of these critiques to bear on the practice of psychology.

DIVERSIONS

There is a further sense in which post-structuralism could be seen to be diversionary rather than simply dangerous, particularly in the seduction of form. (Of course, this reintroduction of the form-content opposition is heresy to deconstruction.) It is easy to be hypnotised by the aesthetic of argument, to create a kind of conceptual analysis for pleasure rather than for politics (indeed such is the dynamic of deconstruction proper) Just as anti-nuclear activists can become fascinated by the details of the horror of [217] weapons of mass destruction, so too we can become so absorbed in analysing the technology of symbolic domination that we come to treat the discursive as a *purely* symbolic relation, and forget the material and historical basis of oppression.

Of course, this argument could be turned against me to suggest that the account I have presented here is motivated by an unconscious desire simply to deconstruct deconstruction rather than subject it to a thoroughgoing political critique. But how are we to judge? Am I answerable to history? To a wider community of feminists? Or, as current vogue would have it, to my therapist (should I have one - should I have one?)? Perhaps speculation of this kind is symptomatic of the priority individual reflection is accorded over action through a politics informed by deconstruction. At the very least, the lack of specification of a political accountability should be good grounds for suspicion.

Deconstruction's avowed focus on the materiality of discourse can have other effects

too: it is easy to over-interpret interventions at the level of discourse as necessarily having political implications and to divert political projects into discursive ones, misrecognising full-blown political resistance in every momentary contradiction.

At a wider level, the cultural correlate of deconstruction in wider society, postmodernism, is characterised by a political apathy and disengagement that itself mocks politics as 'post'. This resignation and indifference should lead us to be wary of the current moves to see in popular culture and consumption a 'political' resistance. Further, the contemporary left rhetoric of 'new times' and, still worse, 'new realism' can be seen to reflect the same political fatalism and preoccupation with ephemera that postmodernism engenders.

CONVERSES AND CONCLUSIONS

Given the arguments and issues outlined in this chapter, it is not surprising that the feminist response to post-structuralist ideas in the social sciences is far from uniform. Some feminists are in the forefront of developing deconstructive techniques and some give it an enthusiastic reception as a political tool (Weedon 1987), while others find it possible to develop a progressive political practice within psychology without invoking a post-structuralist framework (Sayers 1986), or are actively hostile to it as an elitist [218] and intellectualist substitute for politics (Stanley and Wise 1983).

As far as social psychology is concerned, like Humpty Dumpty, deconstruction takes it apart and refuses to let it be reconstituted. Rather, it comments on the political undesirability and theoretical impossibility of such an enterprise. For to 'reconstruct' psychology is to tie it to the limits of our current vision, to foreclose possibilities for change, and to return us to a static and essential social psychology that counters any genuinely historical and materialist analysis. At the level of theory, deconstruction seems to be a sharp but dangerous tool. The political impasses and consequences of a commitment to the deconstructive enterprise seem to take away as much as they offer. In fact the problems and pitfalls of poststructuralism as a whole for a radical critique of social psychology derive from precisely those features which I outlined at the beginning as potentially most promising: highlighting the materiality of language carries with it the danger of tackling the representation at the expense of engaging with the political reality; using the multiplicity of readings to indicate ideological operation of dominant discourses opens the project up to liberal pluralism; acclaiming the subject's multiple positioning in discourse as facilitating contradiction and resistance also presents the prospect of fragmentation and incipient dissipation of political energies; and focusing on a politics of subjectivity can lead to a celebration of difference rather than a galvanising into action.

In terms of practice, the recent history of the uptake of these ideas in British psychology provides some instructive lessons. While they were initially circulated through the shortlived but influential radical journal *Ideology and Consciousness* (later *I & C*) in the late 1970s, they were first collected together to mount a sustained and specific critique of psychology in *Changing the Subject* (Henriques *et al.* 1984). The reception and effects of this book present in microcosm the dilemmas posed by post-structuralism in psychology. A striking feature is its highly uncharacteristic publishing history: like any other book, its sales started with an initial peak which gradually declined, but unlike many others it has reproduced this pattern several times over the last five years, almost as though it is rediscovered by successive cohorts of radical psychologists. However the dangers of producing a 'new orthodoxy' which simply replaces the

old were epitomised by what, [219] with hindsight, sound like complacent and mistaken claims made for it as marking a new era in psychology (Ingleby 1984). Nevertheless the book, and the ideas contained within it, did become the focus of debate by some psychologists, although others found the meetings alienating, academic and insufficiently linked to action. Ultimately the networks created have largely become a forum for postgraduates doing similar research, hence reinstating with an over-elaborate if potentially progressive theory the traditional division of labour and interests between academics and practitioners. The endeavours that have tried to follow the real political reverberations in psychology accompanying deconstruction have so far been dogged by its theoretical reputation, which has, paradoxically - in terms of the substance of the ideas - foreclosed further radical political developments.

POST-WORD

As I finish this chapter, I am no longer certain whether my account has dispensed with deconstruction by showing some of its political impasses; or has in fact reinstated it through employing deconstructive methods to highlight its own limitations. Have I deconstructed my own resistance to deconstruction through using its methodology to critique it? Or still yet fallen prey to the charge of subordinating a feminist politics to deconstruction? Or both of these? I suggested earlier that the danger of deconstruction is that it invites us to let difference stand in for political action. Writing now at the brink of the 1990s and in the middle of third-term Thatcher Britain, understanding 'race', class, and sex subject positions in relation to power is more than academic. And yet I am drawn back to the question that the political critique both afforded and problematised by deconstruction poses for feminists: How can we resist the seductiveness of difference? Should we resist poststructuralism or can we appropriate its analysis of sexual difference to inform our own struggles? If post-structuralism has anything useful to tell us it can illuminate the processes of objectification and idealism that construct and maintain prevailing (patriarchal) power relations. To take up deconstruction's interpretation of difference and *différance* poses two major challenges to a feminist politics: to re-envisage subject positions that are capable of change [220] beyond merely reproducing the inverse of what they are not; and to take seriously our own claims that discourses are practices which lie beyond as well as within language.

Deconstruction offers a notion of difference that resists closure and is always provisional. Yet part of the very popularity of its ideas must be understood in terms of its emergence at a particular juncture in late capitalism. Indeed it is the very discourse of discourse that makes it possible to speak of its effects. Rather than allowing deconstruction to function as a defence, a displacement used to defer political engagement, a feminist position on deconstruction, as with every other dominant social/symbolic practice, can only be one of a strategic marginality and subversion.

NOTE

I would like to thank Jonathan Potter for his helpful comments on an earlier version of this chapter. [End of page 220]