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*Chapter Two*

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CRISIS WHAT CRISIS?

*DISCOURSES AND NARRATIVES OF THE 'SOCIAL' IN SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY*

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Social psychologists have been telling themselves, and anyone else who will listen, that their field is in crisis, since the 1950s. The antecedents of the problem can be traced much further back, to the discipline's nineteenth-century psychological and sociological precursors (Jaspers 1983). But the fact that social psychologists go on researching and writing in spite of this persistent difficulty, suggests that the discipline may be enabled, as well as limited, by its crisis. This chapter explores the problems and possibilities raised by the different narratives of crisis which operate in social psychological texts. First, though, the chapter looks more generally at the nature of the crisis in social psychology, and the different discourses, or structures of power and knowledge, which articulate this crisis.

Today, social psychologists usually accept that their attempts to understand human behaviour and experience scientifically generate serious and permanent difficulties with, for example, the objective assessment of subjectively significant events, and with the separation of psychological from social influences on subjectivity. This tendency shows up clearly in textbooks, the medium through which knowledge of social psychology is most broadly disseminated - especially in their introductory chapters (see Stringer, Chapter 1, in this volume). Brown, who in 1965 put social psychology alongside the physical sciences, now admits 'that social psychology is a less objective discipline than physics' (1986: xiii). Social psychologists still tend, however, to give simple, stable accounts of the discipline's crisis. Once they have explained it, they do not feel obliged to ask, '*what* crisis', again. Instead they suggest that, within its limits, social psychology should go on trying [34] to develop scientifically, as it always has. Brown claims that social psychology makes a vital experimental-scientific contribution to the 'unchanging agenda of basic questions' (1986: xiii). Even Aronson, one of the most critical textbook writers, admits to the 'secret belief that social psychologists are in a unique position to have a profound and beneficial impact on all our lives' (1988: xi). This chapter tries to formulate social psychology's crisis in a less homogeneous and rose-tinted way.

DISCOURSES OF SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL CRISIS

Social psychology's crisis is, in part, a manifestation of general problems within psychology. Canguilhem (1980) describes psychology as a discipline set up to solve the problems other disciplines encounter with subjectivity, by taking subjectivity as its object. The problematic status of this object, defined largely by its exclusion from other sciences, combined with the unreliability of psychology's methods, and the complex, incomplete and non-predictive nature of

psychological theories, cast doubt on psychology's scientificity. The discipline's close association with biology mitigates these difficulties, providing it with a concept of a unitary, consistent subject, and with some parasitic scientific validity.

Psychology is also interested in the subject as a social being. It has contributed to twentieth-century western discourses of social phenomena such as the family, education, work, social conflict, crime, and mental disorder (Henriques *et al* 1984; Riley 1983; Rose 1985). But it centres on an ultimately biological subject, and biological theories remain most powerful in it. Sometimes, biological explanations are offered for phenomena, like gender-specific play and excessive drinking, which it would be much simpler to account for socially. More generally, social factors are reduced to modifying influences on a biological foundation, and are treated as if they all belong to the same category. Psychologists are continually trying to improve this situation by becoming more socially aware, but are continually unable to do so. And so psychology's crisis is a crisis of its relations with the social world. This crisis of the 'social' emerges with particular force and persistence in social psychology, where the objects of investigation are social behaviour and experience, and where the methods are [35] close to those of sociology. One sign of this is that social psychological discussion of feminism is widespread in comparison to that in other psychological fields. But conventional social psychology's dominant, social-cognitivist approach leads it, too, to relate all social differences to the same, ultimately biological cognitive processes, and to see these differences' categorisation and even their hierarchisation as inevitable (Condor 1986a, 1986b).

### *The mainstream discourse*

Social psychology's crisis of the 'social' takes different forms. In the mainstream discourse it is formulated in a reformist way, in appeals for the revision and extension of existing objects, methods and theories. These appeals let the conventional discourse display its vitality, and cater to its need to demonstrate its social relevance, without endangering its specifically psychological character. The reforms' negative, disruptive effects are outweighed by the good new ideas they import from outside. And they too subscribe to social psychology's dominant cognitivism, and its underlying biological rationales. For these reasons, social psychologists working on fashionable topics, like attribution and social representation, are often keen to study topics of social concern, such as gender differences. But here, as elsewhere in the traditional discourse, the cognitive interpretation of psychological gender differences denies their specificity, and makes them seem unavoidable.

### *The alternative discourse*

Social psychology's crisis is articulated more openly in a second discourse, which sets itself up against the conventional and reformist discourse, as an alternative to it. This 'alternative' discourse does not just demand a socially wider realm of study and explanation. It also insists on a method which departs from natural-scientific standards of objectivity, and which is not restricted to experiments. Such a move is specially important for a discipline like social psychology, which, in claiming to be a science, makes method its priority.

The alternative social psychological discourse addresses low-prestige subject areas outside the mainstream, like women's [36] experiences, and leisure activities. And it tries to use ways of getting knowledge which are associated with these areas, like personal accounts and sociological

analysis. I have called this 'alternative' social psychology, both because it presents definite alternatives to the mainstream discourse, and because its most obvious examples showed, after social psychology's usual cultural lag, an affinity with 'alternative' social and political movements of the 1960s. The book to which this book's own tide refers, *Reconstructing Social Psychology* (Armistead 1974), is an obvious case. It questions the methodological and philosophical assumptions of traditional empirical social psychology, takes an interested but critical approach to third-force, phenomenological and ethnomethodological psychology, and tries, often within a Marxist framework, to find ways to think about human interaction and agency in the context of its social heterogeneity and complexity.

The alternative discourse of crisis is, nevertheless, tied closely to mainstream social psychology. Its 'alternatives' are attempts to enumerate all that the conventional discourse leaves out, and so it is indirectly defined by that discourse. As a result, it, too, tends to homogenise social relations. Harré's call for a social psychology of the real world, 'out in the streets, at home, in shops and cafés and lecture rooms where people really interact' (in Armistead 1974:250), for instance, implicitly equates very different environments, across a range bounded by the experiences of academia. The alternative discourse also often replicates humanist psychology's interest in self-actualisation, and the cultural insularity of this 'middle-class leisure activity' (in Armistead 1974: 326). These limitations develop because the alternative discourse, despite its interests in the social construction of subjectivity, centres, like the mainstream discourse, on a concept of a socially modified but ultimately biological individual subject.

### *The commentary discourse*

A third discourse of social psychological crisis exists, alongside the other two. Current, self-conscious versions of this discourse challenge the mainstream's dominant cognitivism by addressing the structure and contents of subjects' collective representations of the social world, rather than their individual cognitions of it; or by exploring mainstream social psychology's own concepts, and [37] their historical and social determinants; or by adopting some combination of the two (e.g. Billig 1982, 1987; Henriques *et al.* 1984; Parker 1989; Potter and Wetherell 1987; Shotter 1986b). These initiatives are influenced by structuralist and post-structuralist concerns with signification's uncertain meanings, authority, and materiality, and by social psychology's own history of treating language as an index of the social relations which it neglects. Such initiatives also frequently express a commitment to reflexivity.

The third discourse of social psychological crisis occurs more widely, however, in implicit, unconscious versions. It emerges wherever social psychologists explore the structural ambiguities of the traditional discourse, rather than reforming it or producing an alternative to it. Such a discourse is often less clearly oppositional, more obviously involved with the difficulties it describes, and hence more modest, than the 'alternative' discourse. It seems to take a step backwards from it: a step marked in this book by a concern with *deconstruction*, rather than reconstruction. But this concern is really a step sideways, into commentary, rather than critique. This commentary discourse of social psychology does not ignore the boundaries of the mainstream discipline, as the alternative discourse does; but it questions them, and develops connections with fields close to them, like sociology, linguistics, and philosophy. Such moves are important in a discipline so preoccupied with its autonomy, yet so vaguely and controversially defined.

The commentary discourse is close to the kind of philosophical and literary

critical work called deconstruction. Like deconstruction, social psychological commentary looks as if it could generate endless random readings of text - in this case, the 'texts' of behaviour and experience. But as with deconstruction, social psychological commentaries concentrate on particular, symptomatic details. This selectivity gives them a definite direction. And so they have an affirmative, as well as a sceptical effect (Derrida 1976, 1988).

No social psychological text fits exactly into the reformist, alternative or commentary discourses of crisis described above. But the rest of this chapter tries to operate broadly within the last of them, in order to give an account of the narratives which characterise each discourse, and of how these narratives' patterns [38] of omission, contradiction, and elision can produce a kind of deconstructive commentary within all three discourses.

## NARRATIVES AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

A narrative is the story of a series of events, usually in chronological order, involving descriptions of the people and other circumstances involved. Why is this a useful object of analysis? Narrative is, first of all, a form of signification, and so many interests of recent, language-oriented versions of the commentary discourse can be examined through it. Second, studying different narrative forms is a good way of questioning social psychology's shaky but fiercely-defended boundaries. So far, when social psychologists have addressed narrative, they have concentrated on its logical story-telling structures. The specificities of narrative genres, which are studied predominantly in non-psychological, literary work, have been ignored. Rhetorical forms (see Billig, Chapter 3, in this volume) with their extrapsychological affiliations, in this case with linguistics and philosophy as well as literary criticism, have been similarly neglected. If social psychologists are going to continue working on language, they will have to start looking at such non-psychological bodies of knowledge. This is especially helpful with narratives, whose familiarity and accessibility present a particularly clear challenge to social psychology's esotericism. Third, and most importantly, specific narrative forms resemble specific approaches to social psychology in important ways. Many twentieth-century western fiction narratives have, like social psychology, been interested in individual subjectivity, and in the conflicts between this subjectivity, and the social relations in which it is embedded. This interest is expressed differently in different narrative forms. Comparisons between these forms, and different forms of social psychological narrative, produce interesting readings of social psychology's crisis.

I am going to describe three narratives of social psychological crisis: the detective story, the autobiography, and the science fiction story. These are not the only narrative forms which can be identified within social psychology. I have chosen them because of their marked relationships to particular social psychological discourses, and because a lot of work has been done on them [39] outside psychology, in literary criticism. Much of this work resists mainstream literary theory, often from a feminist perspective; and within social psychology, too, feminist interests are becoming an increasingly frequent mode of resistance to the mainstream discipline. The special popularity and straightforwardness of these narratives is, finally, a good antidote to social psychology's theoretical isolation.

### *The detective narrative*

The detective story is a widely-read and increasingly self-critical and self-conscious form of

fiction narrative (e.g. Craig and Cadogan 1981; James 1986; Mann 1981). By setting up a problem, an unresolved crime, and resolving it, step by step, it crystallises narrative's interest in logical completeness, or closure. It also expresses a kind of social psychological concern with subjectivity, through what P. D. James (1986) describes as its recapitulation of the morality play. Like a morality play, the detective story is concerned with events to which it attributes definite meanings, rather than with inner experiences or multiple meanings. But the detective story's quest for knowledge follows events which concern the self, rather than the social body. This quest is pursued most importantly through the central figure, the detective, who furthers the narrative by discovering missing knowledge. This figure is an outsider, an enemy of criminals and, more broadly, of any moral order which permits or produces them.

Texts in the conventional social psychological discourse resemble detective stories in a number of ways. Like them, they begin with a problem, and try to investigate and resolve it logically. Introduction, method, results and discussion, strung together in this order, generate a chronological, continuous, closed narrative. Mainstream texts often display elements of the thriller's driven, concise style, especially where the topic of study has popular as well as psychological currency. Haney and Zimbardo's writing on the Stanford prison experiment is an obvious example. Bypassing any introductory theoretical review, it plunges into an account of method, delivered at thriller-level pace and force: 'The quiet of a summer morning in Palo Alto, California was shattered by a screeching squad car siren as police swept through the city, picking up college students in a mass arrest' (Haney and Zimbardo 1976: [40] 226). This style increases the immediacy of the experimental hypothesis. It also intensifies the reformist crisis of the 'social' which is implicated in conventional social psychological research. Haney and Zimbardo's experiment was concerned not just with whether the prison role-play would work, but with the strength of social, 'situational' influences on behaviour; and the detective story style makes both issues seem more urgent.

More general structural features of detective narratives also work within conventional social psychological texts to express their reformist discourse of crisis. Like detective stories, such texts discover knowledge about the individual subject through events, or behaviours, rather than through less certain experiences or meanings. And they, too, are preoccupied with the morality of these events. For although an experiment seems to be pursuing facts, it is committed more to the scientific process than to the facts themselves, just as a detective story is committed to pursuing justice, at the expense of confusing or extenuating aspects of the evidence. Social psychological texts often use their moral scientific authority to bid for a wide explanatory range, finding, not just scientific knowledge, but solutions to social dilemmas, in their results. The clearest examples are US texts from the 1950s, which used the moral status of experimental method to extend their experiments' conclusions on conformity, obedience, and prejudice from the laboratory, to 'society' as a whole. While such broad extrapolations are rare now, mainstream social psychological texts continue to use the moral clout of psychological science to claim a wider social expertise.

Social psychological narratives usually differ from detective stories in writing the investigator out, stating that 'an experiment was performed', for instance, rather than that 'X performed' or 'I performed' an experiment. But the authority of the absent investigator lies behind every passive textual construction. It is he or she who decides hypotheses and methods, and draws conclusions from results. The investigation tries to increase scientific order and truth at the expense of the chaos and errors in the field. In so doing, s/he becomes like the detective, the moral reformer guiding the narrative.

The detective story narrative, then, helps articulate the reformist crisis of the 'social' in the conventional discourse. It is possible to understand more of the structure of this crisis by [41] looking at the crises in detective narratives. Like all narratives, detective stories are inconsistent and incomplete. Questions remain at the end, about clues missed as well as found, about the interpretation of facts, and about the failings as well as the successes of the investigator. These uncertainties arise from the ambiguous morality of the investigator, who struggles against criminality, yet is often complicit with the criminals scapegoated by the dominant moral order. The investigator is outside this order, but is also necessarily a part of it, reforming it by his or her opposition to its worst excesses. Often these uncertainties generate a continual moral debate within the story. This does not always create, as James (1986) suggests, a self-absorbed melancholy; often it also gives rise to a sort of mourning (Parkes 1972), involving grief, resentment, and anger at dominant discourses of justice, but also a tentative exploration of possible alternative justice systems. Such a mourning process works as a deconstruction of or commentary on the dominant storyline.

Social psychology's detective-type narratives generate similar internal commentaries. They, too, are contradictory and illogical. Methods and results constitute an inner, procedural narrative, bracketed by the theoretical outer narrative of the introduction and discussion. The text often anticipates or repeats itself. The introductory hypothesis may predict the conclusion, for example. Some narrative strands may conflict, or may not be tied up. Elements of the results may be ignored in the discussion, and mismatches between the hypothesis and its methodological operationalisation are common. As in the detective story, these ambiguities arise from a perpetual moral anxiety - in this case, about the investigation's balance between scientific and social validity, and about the investigator responsible for this balance. In another version of deconstructive mourning, the morality of science is bewailed, railed against, and continually modified and reformulated. In detective stories, the clearest example of such a process is when the investigator agonises over his or her place in the dubious justice system which the narrative explores, and speculates on other courses of action that could have been taken. This is paralleled in Milgram's (1963) and Zimbardo's (1973) exhaustive and defensive commentaries on their own ethics.

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### *The autobiographical narrative*

The second form of narrative whose relation to social psycho-logical texts I want to examine, is that of autobiography. Autobiographical writing has often been seen as an inferior sort of literature, limited in scope, and characteristic of writers' first books, of one-book writers, and of writers who write the same book again and again. But twentieth-century western literature's concern with subjectivity often brings it close to autobiography. Structurally, this link has resulted in less logical and more psychological lines of narrative, incorporating associations, repetitions and elisions that represent conscious and unconscious psychic processes. In terms of content, the western literary mainstream has started to notice, and sometimes to include, the autobiographical voices of black people, white working-class people, and white middle-class women.

Autobiographical writing is rare in conventional social psychological texts, where its distance from objectivity, and its inability to support wide-ranging, predictive theories, tend to make it an index of failure. Even here, some autobiographical elements intrude, in opaque comments about the psychologist's role, and in fragments of qualitative data about individual subjects. But social

psychologists working within the alternative discourse use their own and their subjects' autobiographical narratives more explicitly, as a way of challenging what they see as narrow empiricism and restrictive obsessions with objectivity in the conventional discourse. Harré and Secord's (1972) emphasis on self-reports, and *Reconstructing Social Psychology* (Armistead 1974) interest in phenomenological, ethnomethodological, and symbolic interactionist approaches, are good examples. These autobiographically-oriented narratives also allow alternative social psychology to express aspects of subjectivity which the conventional discourse's narrative structures exclude, and to increase the representation of neglected subjects. Armistead, for instance, begins *Reconstructing Social Psychology* with a chatty coming-of-age story about his difficult experiences as a psychology student and academic, which is miles from textbook introductions' standardised treatment of students' lives (see Stringer, Chapter 1, in this volume). Work on social identity, social representations, and interpretive repertoires, frequently includes quotations from [43] individual subjects' speech or writing about their experiences. This use of autobiographical data supports the work's interest in how subjects from specific social groups, especially groups which social psychology has neglected, structure their representations of themselves and of the social relations which affect them.

Autobiographical narratives generate tensions and crises of their own (e.g. De Man 1979; Marcus 1987; Steedman 1986). They are alternatives to conventionally objective narratives, but as such, they also retain an intimate relationship with them. They often present themselves as complete or at least completely truthful accounts, for instance, as if to mimic the objectivity of conventional texts, and claim their power. 'I know this from personal experience' can sound as authoritative as 'the evidence shows this'; and a few quotations presented, in the common conference phrase, 'to give you a feel of the material', are often forced to bear the weight of a complex theory. But autobiography never sets forth experiences absolutely fully or accurately. It always expands, condenses, or displaces them. And so it oscillates between being a definitive account, and tracing out the endless uncertainties and contradictions of an individual life. Autobiographies also have to work on the unsupportable assumptions that the significations they deploy have single, direct relationships to experience and reality; and that the story of one subject's life can represent the lives of other subjects.

Similar self-deconstructing elements of commentary emerge within autobiographical social psychological narratives. Armistead's (1974) confessional words, for example, do not erase his power as an author, or his discursive power as a psychological professional. And so his confession has double meaning, affirming conventions, as well as opposing them. In contemporary, language-orientated research, quotations from subjects' own accounts often give a more complex and valuable picture than the surrounding text, and despite disclaimers, this endows them with the status of incontrovertible evidence.

### *Science fiction narrative*

I want to look now at a third form of narrative within social psychology, the form in which elements of deconstructive commentary emerge most clearly. This is science fiction. Like the [44] detective story, science fiction has recently received some serious critical attention (e.g. Green and Lefanu 1985; Parrinder 1980). Like both detective stories and autobiographies, it has acquired a particular twentieth-century significance as a literary way of exploring subjectivity. Even the most technologically obsessed examples of the genre relate the changed circumstances they describe, implicitly or explicitly, to their concepts of the human subject. For however

rigorous science fiction aims to be in its own terms, and however many connections it alleges with scientific knowledge, it is not a science, but fiction, and this encourages it to be much more interested in subjectivity than scientific texts usually are.

Science fiction's departures from consensual knowledge about reality involve infractions of conventional narrative logic. Often, in common with much western twentieth-century writing on unconventional subjects - like a lot of early Marxist fiction, for instance - it has tried to redeem its radicalism by being conservative about narrative structure; by insisting on internal consistency, for instance. Contemporary science fiction, particularly feminist science fiction, is more stylistically adventurous. But the persuasive effect of any science fiction story depends on it maintaining strong connections with traditional narrative, and the realities it represents: connections which distinguish it from both fantasies and utopias. It ends up too far from conventional representations of reality to be taken seriously as an alternative to them, but also close enough to these representations in some ways, to be co-opted into them. This ambivalence provides a powerful means of commenting on existing narratives and reality.

Science fiction's ambivalence is a kind of speculation (Derrida 1987), a qualified, uncertain exploration beyond the conclusions derived from evidence. Psychologists have started to explore the psychological significance of such narratives (Ridgway and Benjamin 1987), but they have not addressed the science fiction aspects of psychology itself. Traditional social psychology is, in any case, opposed to science-fiction speculations. It wants to tell stories about a wholly real world, while science fiction bridges metonymically the imaginary and the real. But science-fictional speculations generate the new hypotheses, models and theories which sustain social psychology as a discipline. The mainstream discourse's denial of such speculations leaves processes like [45] hypothesis formation in the realm of mystery, or reduces them to deduction.

Science fiction narratives are more explicitly speculative than detective stories or autobiographies, and so they articulate social psychology's crisis of the 'social' in a more consistently deconstructive way. In social psychology, they take over where detective story and autobiographical narratives leave off, and move further outside the discipline's conventional borders. They explore roles for the psychologist other than that of the detective, for instance, or introduce a speculative twist to autobiography by sketching different interpretations of the same life events. Recent work within the commentary discourse of social psychological crises develops more cautious, involuted speculations. Billig (1987), for instance, examines the rhetorical structure of psychology and its material, and leaves this new, 'antiquarian' psychological project open and unresolved.

The majority of science fiction narratives in social psychology, however, are less self-conscious and coherent. They appear briefly, alongside conventional, detective-story narratives, in texts that belong predominantly to the dominant, reformist social psychological discourse. The relative abundance and familiarity of these fragments of unconscious science fiction narrative make them the most interesting cases. A forceful example is Bem's account of gender schema theory, which, half-way through, takes what she calls a 'highly speculative' (1983: 609) turn, and starts to plot parental strategies for teaching children that sex differences, but not gender differences, are important; and for giving them alternative, subversive, sexism schemata, to inoculate them against the wider gender-schematic world. Bem sees her work as preliminary, not definitive; yet, with deliberate boldness, she wonders how such practices could be adopted more generally, and pictures the gender-schematic future which might result. And so the paper manages to be, as she later described it, both a 'feminist utopia', and an example of 'theory-building and logical inference in an empirical science' (1984:198, 197).

A social psychology which is really 'social' cannot be simply or solely scientific. Social psychologists might better understand and work with the crisis which this contradiction provokes, if they wrote more science fiction. A social psychological narrative would then be more like those which the science fiction writer Joanna Russ [46] describes herself as producing: a story that can seem ridiculous, and may be derided and ignored, but that tells itself persistently to everyone, inside and outside the discipline, until, suddenly, it appears 'quaint and old-fashioned' (1985: 213). Its time has passed, and, for a different reason, it is, again, ignored. [End of page 46]