

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

*Part One*

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TEXTS AND RHETORIC

[pp. 15-16]

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Social psychology is a collection of texts and practices. The five chapters in Part 1 focus on texts, and the ways in which these texts attempt to produce and guarantee 'truth' in the discipline. Peter Stringer opens the set with an overview of introductions to social psychology textbooks. The introduction to a textbook attempts to account for the spread of different, contradictory theories and 'discoveries' about social behaviour that the reader will find. It is a good place to start in a deconstruction of social psychology, for the introduction foregrounds some of the (dubious) assumptions that the writer is making about what a social psychologist should be doing. These assumptions can be unravelled further by distinguishing between different narratives that run through the enterprise holding its texts together. Corinne Squire draws attention to the detective story, autobiography, and science fiction story narratives which organise social psychology's search for truth, enlightenment and progress. This scathing attack helps expose the falsities which masquerade as facts, as a narrative grips the writer and reader and draws them into the discipline.

There is a risk, of course, that critics of traditional social psychology might attack the texts as fictional accounts only to be caught in the trap of positing their own 'true' account. Worse, they may start conceding that there are true descriptions in social psychology which have to be sorted out from the false ones. Here, of course, radicals can all too quickly be drawn by an undertow, straight back into the discipline. One of the characteristics of a deconstructive approach to texts is that the contradictions and oppositions that it sets up are simply *strategic* devices to help us escape from the dominant concepts. When we draw attention to the rhetorical nature of social psychology, for example, we are [16] making a point about all texts, including our own. Michael Billig, then, emphasises that there are argumentative aspects to all accounts of social activity. A reflexive outcome of this position is to say that a radical social psychology would be deliberately rhetorical. Celia Kitzinger drives home the point by showing how the opposition between 'pseudoscience' (a merely rhetorical, and therefore false science) and 'true science' has the effect of reinstating some very nasty 'truths' and unpleasant scientific norms. The opposition between true and false science is rhetorical. It is a textual and - to anticipate themes taken up later in the book - a political matter.

Matters would be so much easier if we could judge the truth of a text by finding out what the position and intentions of the author were. Social psychologists do, in fact, often labour under the illusion that it is possible to untangle rhetoric and textual devices free from the individual who produced it. Deconstruction takes off, however, from the text itself, and Antony Easthope draws on Derrida to show why this is so. He offers an example of the deconstruction of a text in which theories of intention are especially important. We have arrived at the point where the theory of writing, of *différance* that deconstruction works with becomes relevant. The turn to rhetoric, and the deconstruction of the opposition between slippery rhetoric and perfect communication, are crucial to an understanding of how social psychology operates. [End of page 16]