Book Review / Compte rendu

Parker, I. (2020). *Psychology Through Critical Auto-Ethnography: Academic Discipline, Professional Practice and Reflexive History*. Routledge. ISBN: 978-0-367-34417-7, viii + 341 pp.

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ABSTRACT

Ian Parker has been a central figure in the movement known as critical psychology. In bringing together deconstructive methods with social justice concerns, Parker has also criticized the academic and professional norms of psychology, and not without recrimination. This review of his most recent and personal book, *Psychology Through Critical Auto-Ethnography: Academic Discipline, Professional Practice and Reflexive History*, relates Parker's narrative generally to social justice–minded practitioners and academics.

RÉSUMÉ

Ian Parker fut l'une des figures dominantes du mouvement connu sous le nom de psychologie critique discursive. En conjuguant les méthodes de déconstruction et les enjeux de justice sociale, Parker a également critiqué les normes académiques et professionnelles qui ont cours en psychologie, non sans récriminations. Ce compte rendu de son plus récent ouvrage personnel, *Psychology Through Critical Auto-Ethnography: Academic Discipline, Professional Practice and Reflexive History* (*La psychologie sous l'angle de l'auto-ethnographie critique : De la discipline académique, de la pratique professionnelle et de l'histoire réflexive*), fait état du lien général entre le discours de Parker et les praticiens et universitaires orientés vers la justice sociale..

> What psychology tells you about the nature of human beings, about what they can and cannot do, dovetails with what human beings have come to tell themselves about who they are. (Parker, 2020, p. 145)

Just over 40 years ago, a critique of psychology developed among a small group of psychologists that melded linguistic and hermeneutic insights with social justice aims. These psychologists challenged psychology's scientific methods and knowledge by highlighting that sentient humans could not be studied like non-sentient

rocks and trees (Harré & Secord, 1972) and that psychology's language was not neutral (Danziger, 1997). Most annoying to psychology's mainstream was this group's assertion that psychological knowledge was socially constructed (Gergen, 1985), making it open to deconstruction. Deconstruction refers to drawing critical attention to how knowledge or meaning has been linguistically and methodologically constructed and accepted. From these initial challengers grew a respectably sized critical psychology movement, and Ian Parker has been among this movement's central and most prolific scholars. His *Psychology Through Critical Auto-Ethnography* offers an insider's view of what taking up a leadership role inside this movement has meant to him, from his reluctant days as an undergraduate psychology student to his eventual dismissal from his academic position.

Some readers will know of Parker's work for its influence on narrative therapy and for how he has, since the late 1980s, turned his critical lens on psychology, deconstructing core psychological notions like identity, psychopathology, and psychological research methods. I reviewed his edited volume *Deconstructing Psychotherapy* (Parker, 1999) 20 years ago for this journal (Strong, 2000). Parker's most recent book extends his critique of psychology by looking back over his years as an undergraduate student, a budding scholar in a somewhat outlaw movement, and as a frustrated senior academic in neo-liberal times.

More than an autobiography, this book is a very personal chronicle of what it means to push up against a dominant culture from within. Therefore, the term "auto-ethnography" is used in the book's title, although this word or method as Parker uses it is not deconstructed in the text (my quibble). In this book, he challenges the culture of academic and professional psychology, providing examples from early covert disagreements he had with instructors as a psychology undergraduate student to his later critically oriented doctoral studies and finally to his international leadership role as a critical scholar. A Marxist since his early 20s, he chronicles why he objected to psychology's mainstream ideas and how he developed and shaped a scholarly counter-discourse informing today's critical psychology movement. Readers learn of the considerable pushback Parker encountered, from difficulties in getting his research proposals approved and getting an academic position to challenges faced within university departments as he contended with different administrations. In 2012, he was dismissed from his position as professor of psychology at Manchester Metropolitan University due to interactions associated with his role as a union representative. Parker has "walked his talk" consistently but clearly has paid for it at times.

Critical psychology grew, in part, as a response to what seemed a consensus view that psychology's knowledge base could play a role like the one physics knowledge offers civil engineering. However, to acquire their knowledge, most psychologists pursued a normative and probabilistic sense of their objectified human subjects, who were typically studied in contexts that bore no resemblance to humans' social and other dimensions of everyday life. To then apply such

knowledge in education, law, policy, psychotherapy, and back in everyday life seemed a travesty to many critical psychologists. What particularly concerned them was psychologists' inattention to social injustice and the unfair representation of who counted as proper psychological subjects. Parker reminds readers of the induction of undergraduate students (who, in his day, typically were male and in their second year) into psychological research as subjects/objects while also highlighting who was left out of that research.

Also important to critical psychologists were the assumptions associated with how psychological phenomena were represented in language and discourse. This concern extended to how features of being human are psychopathologized, how language features in psychologically derived policies and curricula, but also how counselling and psychotherapy are practised. Unsurprisingly, critical psychologists find that the fifth edition of *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) crystallizes many of their concerns, as do the notions of practice that presumably follow from its use. Critical psychology has borrowed from critical thinkers as varied as Adorno and Horkeimer, but also Foucault, Derrida, and Fanon. The pastiche of ideas that evolved into the deconstructionist wing of critical psychology most associated with Parker relates to how mainstream psychology studies, represents linguistically, and correspondingly, applies its knowledge *on* humans.

This book will appeal primarily to readers interested in what it means to pursue and to address fervently held, non-dominant views inside psychology and counselling departments as well as within the psychology profession. Some readers will disagree with critical psychology's emphasis on what psychology's mainstream fails to address, even if its critiques draw attention to social justice issues. Some will also take issue with the notion that psychological methods and knowledge are socially constructed, despite ample evidence from science and technology studies for how this occurs (e.g., Latour, 1987). For those curious about the critical psychology movement, the book offers an interesting and fraught personal history associated with Parker's many contributions, including to the work of others, such as his partner, Erica Burman (2016), author of *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology*. Parker furnishes insider insight on how critical psychology came to have its current influence on psychology and on counselling, in prose targeted to graduate-level readers interested in how academic and professional psychology has developed. I particularly appreciated reading about the movement's key early figures and events and about disputes that animated how things developed inside an irrepressible subculture within psychology. For readers curious about showing profession-shaping leadership on social justice issues in ways that require rigorous scholarship, Parker's critical auto-ethnography offers a valuable insider's chronicle of accomplishments and challenges.

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About the Author

Tom Strong is a professor and a counsellor educator who retired recently from the University of Calgary. He writes on the collaborative, critical, and practical potentials of discursive approaches to psychotherapy, most recently on concept critique and development (particularly with respect to therapy and research) and on critical mental health. Among his books are *Medicalizing Counselling: Issues and Tensions*, *Patterns in Interpersonal Interactions* (co-edited with Karl Tomm, Sally St. George, and Dan Wulff), *Social Constructionism: Sources and Stirrings in Theory and Practice* (co-authored with Andy Lock), and *Furthering Talk* (co-edited with David Paré). His website can be found at http://www.ucalgary.ca/strongt.

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