

Critical therapy!

Book review

Parker, I (ed) (1999) **Deconstructing psychotherapy**. London: Sage.
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Psychotherapeutic practice in post-apartheid South Africa seems to have retreated back into the consulting room, focussing largely on individuals, and there appears to be little sign of the political critique which emerged from certain groups within the discipline prior to the 1994 elections. As a psychotherapist, I have felt growing concern that much current practice lacks a "critical edge" and is largely oblivious to the dynamic debate around integrating concern with social and political issues and practice which is gaining ground elsewhere. In a number of other parts of the world, psychotherapists are being challenged to broaden the scope of both their practice in their consulting rooms, as well as to engage more actively in more public debate in order to tackle the crucial influences of socio-economic and political issues on individual and group mental health (e.g. Samuels, 1993). Certain "schools" of psychotherapy are grappling with the incorporation of the philosophical and practical applications of ideas and concepts drawn from what is broadly termed postmodernism. It was therefore with anticipation that I tackled this book, hoping that it might provide some guidelines for considering and critiquing psychotherapy in South Africa.

Vigorous debates have emerged in the literature in the past decade as perspectives and techniques influenced by postmodern approaches have been applied to the psychotherapeutic endeavour (McNamee and Gergen, 1992). In more extreme forms, critics are dismissive of the psychotherapeutic endeavour; whilst more moderate proponents call for a substantial redefinition of psychotherapeutic concepts and practice, leading to the development of innovative approaches (Gonzalez, 1997). It is from this context that Ian Parker draws the material for **Deconstructing psychotherapy**. Theoretical and practical contributions have been elicited from diverse settings in both the Northern and Southern Hemispheres, illustrating a continuum of perspectives from moderate to more extreme. The book is aimed at practitioners who wish to re-think their approaches to clients in mental health settings.

Following an introductory chapter by Parker, there are three sections: The first explicates some of the philosophical bases for deconstruction; the second illustrates the pragmatic expression of these in a variety of settings; and the third challenges the

reader to consider a way forward. The book is intended to be a collection of perspectives rather than to present a unitary viewpoint. Parker acknowledges that contributions may be contradictory of each other, representing the state of the field, where a pre-emptive imposition of integration would foreclose the deconstructive imperative to continue questioning and provoking new thoughts and ideas. He writes of the potential of the endeavour to provoke innovative work, an exciting prospect to those of us concerned with current practice.

The introductory chapter provides a background to the book, locating the narrative broadly, and outlining the potential of "deconstruction". Parker acknowledges that the term "deconstruction" does not have a unitary definition as a technique, and that the products of deconstructive approaches are multiple. He describes the tensions and dialectic between the "respectful" and "critical" stances required in deconstruction; and goes on to trace the psychotherapeutic origins of such approaches in critical psychology and the field of family therapy. Important emergent themes such as those of meaning and power; reflexivity and responsibility; context; and subjectivity; are highlighted as contributory to the debates. This leads to an exploration of ways in which deconstruction can be used in - , as -, and of psychotherapy, providing the rationale for the three parts of the book. Parker's goal is that the reader should create "your own picture of the process of deconstructing psychotherapy" (p14).

In Part One, five chapters consider the varied sources and contexts of deconstruction. In a chapter promoting non-regulative praxis, John Kaye illustrates ways in which both traditional and narrative approaches to psychotherapy may be re-framed from a postmodern perspective; considering such issues as the authority of the therapist and the risks of the colonising of the client by the therapist's belief and value systems, potentially continuing the normalising and oppressive practices of society. He proposes the discursive approach as having the most promise, since it privileges narrative multiplicity, considering social constructions and historical situation. He recommends that therapists hone their sociopolitical awareness in order to work collaboratively with the client, to enable consideration of the position of each with regard to dominant and other discourses. Furthermore he believes it is imperative for therapists to scrutinise their own practice as well as to guard against a potential new hegemony of political correctness and certitude. In this chapter, the argument gets lost at times in the wooliness of some of the detail, however Kaye's critique is respectfully challenging and persuasive. He acknowledges that whatever the chosen approach, psychotherapy runs the risk of being regulative if the therapist does not continually question her or his own position, motives and role.

Glenn Lerner provides a complex and scholarly account of the multiple ways in which the writings of Derrida are influential in a deconstructive approach, and of the context provided by the "inevitable struggle with power" (p40) in psychotherapy. He argues against the formation of yet another school of psychotherapy, promoting rather the rethinking of the multitude of concepts which inform practice, in order to provide new possibilities. He believes that deconstruction in psychotherapy contributes to a deeper ethical practice which considers both the responsibilities and impacts of participants. He warns of the potential violence of theory, expertise, technology and authority in silencing the voice of the other; and writes that the therapist needs to balance his or her position

of power by an ethical stance which prioritises the voice of the other - "to be powerful, for the other"(p48).

In the fourth chapter, Vincent Fish situates the writings of Foucault in context, indicating the ways in which Foucault took Marxian assumptions seriously, and then attempted to go beyond these in his formulation of the functions of power, knowledge and discourse in the construction of consciousness. Fish warns that, in the United States, it is possible that the popularity of Foucault's work has been due his seeming distance from Marxism (since he does not directly refer to its influence), but that this ignores the context of Foucault's work. Whilst Fish acknowledges the important contribution that Foucault's work has made in linking individual symptoms and social contexts, and in considerations of various sources and applications of power in psychotherapy, he cautions against a wholesale appropriation of this work. This is based on concerns regarding the innate Eurocentricism of Foucault's work and inherent contradictions and ambiguities which Fish identifies and illustrates: Foucault's obscuring of matters of historical accuracy; Foucault's pessimism regarding individual political agency; and Foucault's limited considerations of the implications of dehistoricising patients' problems in the service of ideology. He notes that other writers in the field may in fact offer more, for example those who have incorporated Foucault's ideas into postcolonial studies.

In the last two chapters of the first part, both authors consider the creation of a transitional space which the ideas of postmodernism evoke. Roger Lowe, in considering the difficulty of defining postmodernism, positions the contributions of postmodernism as a "metaphorical transitional boundary ... a site for critically rethinking therapy discourse, rather than as an obligation to take sides and declare allegiances" (p72). Nollaig O'Reilly Byrne and Imelda Colgan McCarthy, referring to the mythical Fifth Province in Ireland, write of their "Fifth Province Approach" which creates "a dialogical and imaginative space wherein participants might create together opportunities for a polyphonic and polysemic interplay" (p96). Lowe considers the potential impact of postmodernism on modernist approaches to psychotherapy, and then engages in hypothesising about psychotherapeutic discourse and critique after postmodernism. He considers the various tensions of the modern/postmodern divide, and then encourages the move to engage in dialectics between the polarities, a move beyond into a transitional space. Similarly, Byrne and McCarthy draw from a variety of sources, including the rich base of feminist writings, in order to call for opposition to colonising discourses, thus destabilising sites of oppression and working toward an ethic of reciprocity, in which universalist ideas are eschewed for considerations of the specificity of the experience of the other, in the multiplicity of subject positions and social relations.

All of the chapters in the first part are soundly referenced, providing rich resource lists for readers who wish to explore further. The writers presume that readers will have at least an introductory grounding in postmodernism, and the chapters by Fish and by Byrne and McCarthy launch into critiques from the start. Thus, the style of writing in much of the first part does not make for easy reading for those who do not have a solid background in the postmodern discourse, and I felt concern that the important and valid ideas and challenges are at times lost in the density of detail.

The second part of the book makes for easier reading, since it is more firmly grounded in psychotherapeutic practice. The writers grapple with the applications of

deconstruction in diverse settings: from the furthering of feminist aims through therapeutic work (Vanessa Swan); to the dilemmas of a male therapist who is concerned to take responsibility for challenging the abusive practices of males (Ian Law); to the challenges of considering the problems of authority and truth and the desire for personal agency in work with Christian clients (Wendy Drewery and Wally McKenzie); to work with a client in a chronic psychiatric ward labelled “suicidal and depressed” (Stephen Madigan). Each of these chapters traces the philosophical and theoretical principles which have informed practice, and then demonstrates the impacts on therapeutic work. Much of the detail indicates the way in which narratives and discursive practice may be considered, externalised in the dialogical and relational context, and the clients' sense of agency rendered more powerful through such engagement. The work is underpinned by therapists engaging in critiques of their own positioning and worldviews, enabled in the process by engaging in team work with others, and continually sensitive to the powerful positions they occupy in the interchanges. The chapters left me with a feeling of some optimism, since the writers strove to demonstrate how they operationalise both ideas and alternative techniques which are respectful of the individual's positioning and constructions, but consider the broader discourses and contexts which inform each person's subjective experience.

The third part of the book is intended to consider the deconstruction of psychotherapy as an enterprise, to reflect critically upon its role in helping and providing expertise “applied to the distress in people's lives” (p11). The chapter by John Morss and Maria Nichterlein is an attempt at deconstructing narrative therapy by use of the “externalising technique” of letter writing between themselves and an imaginary narrative therapist as client. Whilst a novel idea, the “letters” come across as contrived and inauthentic, disrupting rather than enhancing their discussion of pertinent issues in the positioning of the therapist. I found the final chapter by Eero Riihonen and Sara Vataja similarly disappointing. Whilst their intention is provocative, wondering firstly whether we can in fact deconstruct psychotherapy when it is an illusory thing which defies a unitary definition, and then problematising academic discourse as monological; I found that their call for freshness and metaphoricality and the challenges to psychotherapy were lost in an unconvincing argument. Certainly, some thought-provoking ideas are floated in this third part, but it lacks the rigour of the first part and the grounding of real interactions of the second.

The book engages with the complexity of the field, striving to both deconstruct the psychotherapeutic endeavour (with all the attendant difficulties, given the diversity of approaches subsumed under the title), and to consider shifts in practice more in keeping with ethics emerging from postmodern debate. This has resulted in a book which has the potential to stimulate dialogue rather than lead to conclusions, considering such issues as the importance of external forces on individual lives; the cognitive constructions of individuals as well as the broader discourses which are influential and often uncritically accepted; the context of the therapy room with its intensely relational context; and issues related to ways of listening and being heard.

How, then, does the book measure up to my initial anticipation? Not surprisingly, given the topic, I am left feeling ambivalent. The book presumes a basic acquaintance with some of the writings which inform the postmodern debate, whereas in much South African psychotherapeutic practice, there has been little engagement with critiques of

the “institution”, the discourses in and about the endeavour, or considerations of the positioning of participants and techniques applied. However, for readers immersed in the postmodern literature, the book would no doubt be disappointing, lacking enough of the more radical thought in the field. Thus the book seems to aim at a “middle ground” of readership, thus risking a falling “between stools”. To a large extent, the book is still supportive of the psychotherapeutic endeavour; but I believe in our context, it may not challenge the ediface enough. There is some repetition of themes from one chapter to the next, and the debates are at times convoluted; however, the chapters can stand alone, thus being potential stimuli for academic debate. The book does provoke reflections on one's own attitudes and beliefs, and offers examples of innovative practice; however, I fear that it will only appeal to a limited readership, rather than be a widely used resource to challenge workers in mental health.

The book is a welcome addition to literature in the field, however, and signals the need for more vigorous engagement and debate, informed by postmodern discourse, in South Africa. I am aware that there are certain groupings considering the work in the so-called “narrative approaches” (e.g. White, 1995), and this book would be of interest to reading groups who have already engaged with these ideas, perhaps enabling further critique. This book could also have a useful place in postgraduate courses, since a number of the chapters warrant re-reading and closer study; and has the potential to make a valuable, but purposely incomplete, contribution to reflexive practice.

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