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Psy disciplines

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Introduction

The knowledges and practices of the psy disciplines have become a central focus of attention within *critical* psychology because of a recognition of the power the disciplines exercise in constructing and constituting people in particular ways; in labelling and shaping people; in effecting the resources, opportunities, and restrictions accorded people. The psy disciplines are the professional, expert arenas where consequential judgements are made about people's mental health, behaviour, cognitive capacities, personalities, and social functionality. Judgements extend to the restriction of bodily freedoms and restrictions on capacities for self-determination and the right to take part in social life. Critical approaches to the psy disciplines interrogate what knowledge/powers are exercised via those disciplines, including critical psychology, how that knowledge/power occurs, and, crucially, on what grounds knowledge/power is exercised.

Definition

The psy disciplines are those fields of knowledge associated with mind, mental life, and behaviour. Most typically, the psy disciplines include psychology, psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and psychotherapies, but extend more broadly to a wide range of applied areas such as developmental, educational, and occupational psychologies, and encompass academic and practitioner spheres (Burman, 1994; Parker, 1994; Rose, 1985). The term psy disciplines is closely associated with the concept of the psy complex and they are frequently used interchangeably. However, a useful distinction is that the concept of the psy *disciplines* foregrounds the particular regimes of knowledge and expert practices; whereas the psy *complex* invokes a stronger recognition of interaction between the disciplinary expert knowledge regimes, and those subjected to, interpellated into, and interacting with those disciplinary knowledges.

Keywords: Psy disciplines; psy complex; knowledge regimes; subjectivity; regulation; self-regulation.

Traditional debates

Modern psychology, that is, from the late nineteenth century onwards, was a project of the period of Enlightenment. It had roots in seventeenth century natural

philosophy (Billig, 2008) but grew rapidly throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century, driven partly as a response to massive social upheaval and change (Osborne, 1998; Rose, 1985; Teo, 2005). Borrowing from the natural sciences model, psychology and its related disciplines set out to establish scientific universal truths, to identify and apply normative measures to human behaviour and experience, and to create order. The production and organization of psy knowledge promised a means to categorise, measure, and thus exert social control on individuals.

The influence of the natural sciences model on psychology goes to the heart of the critical psychology project. The natural science model is premised on the understanding that disciplinary truths about human behaviour, mind, and mental life pre-exist the discipline and the task is to uncover those truths and organise knowledge. However, following Foucault (1961, 1973, 1975) and the subsequent elaboration of psy discipline knowledge regimes and practices by Rose (1985, 1999), the postmodern critique has argued that the psy disciplines do not represent that which pre-exists them; rather they create the expertise which they then employ to measure and categorise. Premised in this way, the psy disciplines bring into existence the thing they purport to measure. They generate particular kinds of expert knowledge and have the capacity to produce politically expedient measures of normativity which can be harnessed to shape particular kinds of socially desirable individual. Moreover, these fields within the psy disciplines provide the means of socio-political control precisely because of their claim to being underpinned by an apolitical scientific paradigm capable of establishing truths about human nature and behaviour (Burman, 1994).

Critical Debates

Crucially, in this Foucauldian framework, the shaping of the subject is not simply a process of psy expert knowledges being imposed on people; rather, this is a bewildering set of practices people also take on for themselves. The discourses, metanarratives, and other apparatus of psychology, psychiatry, psychoanalysis, etc., – in Foucauldian terms the *dispositif* of these regimes of knowledge – provide people with the ways and means of knowing and doing subjectivity. These technologies create identities ‘out there’, but they are also the means of thinking about and experiencing oneself internally. They provide the means of regulation and self-regulation. The language and other practices of the disciplines travel out of the disciplinary spheres into everyday life. They become resources for making oneself into a particular ‘psychologised’ subject, understanding oneself to have particular attributes of personality or intelligence, for example, to experience particular emotions and so on. The argument is that subjectivity itself then does not pre-exist historically located institutional practices. Instead, the discourses and practices of institutions such as the clinic, the prison, the school, create the space, structure, content and meaning of being a subject and doing subjectivity.

Historically, then, different institutional practices create ways of being particular kinds of subjects. Rose (1999) argues that in the production of modern subjects, subjectivity and self-understanding, the psy disciplines are core contributors.

Knowledges constructed in the psy disciplines, practised in and through institutions, train people into thinking of and experiencing themselves in a particular set of ways; as individuals responsible for the moral and practical production of their own lives and behaviours, responsible for their own personhood, and for their own self-regulation. For Rose, this operation of the psy disciplines is inextricably bound with the neoliberal politics associated with contemporary western democracies. Individuals are required to understand themselves as responsible, autonomous, choice-making subjects. The psy disciplines train people in particular configurations of 'self' and 'other', to have expectations, capacities and understandings of normativities and to be equipped to fit with requirements of society. Notably, for Rose, a critique of the psy disciplines is not necessarily a critique of inappropriate technologies and practices but an explication of a set of means which enable people to live with the burden of 'liberty', 'autonomy', and 'self-realisation' which have become the valued forms of living in contemporary western neoliberal politics (Rose 1999). For others, the politically expedient disciplinary power of the psy knowledges also creates exclusions, marginalisations, and the capacities and means for oppressions.

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