

Whose development are we talking about? Commentary on *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology*

Universal development and the production of the ‘normal’ child

A key theme within *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology* is how developmental descriptions produce particular kinds of subjects, where description provides the language and also the practices through which children are produced as subjects of concern, intervention and study. Burman argues that, “The normal child, the ideal type, distilled from the comparative scores of age-graded populations, is therefore a fiction or myth.” (Burman, 2008 p22). The production of the ‘normal’ child, and (assumed to be) universal developmental trajectory, are central to psychology as a discipline and to everyday knowledge and understanding of children. In parts of the global North government actions, such as early intervention to screen for ‘problematic behaviour’ in children and structured (often compulsory) parenting support programmes, draw on developmental science and (assumed) universal developmental pathways to underpin interventions (Holt, 2010).

The proposition of developmental pathways sets up particular assumptions about activities that are ‘developmentally appropriate’. Children with autism are seen to be developmentally ‘different’ (and often deficient) from ‘normal’ children. Developmental checklists provide the technology through which children with autism are seen to be different. Developmental discourse positions untypically developing children, such as those with autism, as other. In our work we have noted how young people with autism make, and sustain, friendships. Traditional ‘theory of mind’ (ToM) constructions of children with autism make particular assumptions about the deficiencies in functioning (as noted, and critiqued by Burman, 2008). In my work with Charlotte Bownlow and Hanna Bertilsdotter Rosqvist (2010; 2013) we have drawn on this theoretical perspective to interrogate the production of the ‘normal’ child through an examination of children with autism. This discourse operates to

normalise particular kinds of sociality and, at the same time, render invisible others. Take, for example, parallel play assumed to be common in young children, but to then give way to more social forms of play with other children. We, and others, including people with autism themselves, have argued that parallel play and social engagement is common for many children and adults with autism and is a valued aspect of their lives. This has a significant impact on the lives of children and adults with autism for whom assumptions and interventions in their lives are routinely made based on partial and flawed theorisations, such as ToM.

Selected abstraction

In *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology*, Burman draws our attention to the abstraction of mother and child as an analytic, as well as a political unit, within the discipline of psychology and in everyday and policy discourses. She argues that developmental theorising abstracts women and children from their broader familial and cultural location. The abstraction naturalises women as carers, particularly carers/mothers of young children. Theorising gendered assumptions of care in developmental psychology has largely, as in the case of *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology*, addressed mothering. Burman's work helps us to see the notion of women as carers as naturalised within developmental theory. Her analysis can also trouble dominant developmental/psychological discourse that naturalise gendered care through the lifespan, including women's caring roles outside the role of 'mother', such as caring for elderly parents/relatives, which are less visible. In the UK and internationally, there is the assumption and implicit expectation that women will care for ageing parents. This has been enshrined within legislation and social policy (see Montgomery, 1999; O'Dell, 2007). Political stress on supposed 'family values' has led to a restructuring of the policies on familial 'home based' care – a term that elides the gendered presumption of care by women and girls. The current global economic situation has made this expectation even more evident than when I first wrote about this. In 'welfare' states there is increasing pressure to manage the financial 'burden' of state funded care which has led to an increasing reliance on 'home based care'. In other contexts such as in sub Saharan Africa and parts of South

East Asia where the HIV/Aids epidemic has been most evident, the burden of care is experienced differently but with similar stress on gendered, familial care (Ogden, Esim & Grown, 2006).

Exploring the notion of selected abstraction further, Burman is clear about the reasons for not including a specific chapter on 'gender' in *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology*, as there is in many introductory developmental textbooks. She argues that gender is infused within developmental psychology and not an element that can be abstracted out: "why is it that gender should function as the key axis of difference (...) whereas, for example, notions of classed or racialised/ethnic positions do not" (Burman, 2008 p8). Largely the dominant research base in psychology either excludes issues of culture or treats difference in highly simplified ways. For example, in research with recent immigrant children to the UK, the abstraction of the child from context produces unsatisfactory understandings and theorisation. The young people in our study (O'Dell, Crafter, Abreu & Cline, 2010; Crafter, O'Dell, Abreu & Cline, 2009) inhabit classed, gendered and racialised spaces (as well as other social signifiers) which become more or less visible (and, often, more problematised) as the young person moves between home and a mainstream/host environments such as school. The project documented ways in which young people who were language brokers (children who translate for family members) and young carers discussed their activities as both 'just a part of life' and as something seen as unusual and potentially stigmatised in school. This shifting move across cultural spaces makes visible particular aspects of their identity either as normative or as a problematic intrusion. Hence young people, we argued, need to be understood as a complex set of identities and belongings. This argument is echoed in Burman's call for researchers to trouble singular claims about what children are *really like* and instead consider multiple answers, and multidisciplinary, as a way of providing them.

Other childhoods: traumatised children

When considering the impact of *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology* the argument that childhood is multiple, fragmented and culturally and temporally contingent is perhaps hardest to sustain when considering child abuse and trauma. It may appear self-evident that abuse and serious negative life events produce trauma. To argue against such a position risks a precarious and troubled moral position of denying the harm to children from such incidents. However, Burman's work has been key to enabling a discussion and critique of such simplified positions. Dominant constructions of childhood and child development inform understandings of children who have been abused. Much psychological theory and research into child abuse draws upon a developmental trajectory which explains present functioning in terms of past trauma (Reavey, 2003; O'Dell, 2003). This contributes to taken for granted ideas about the deterministic nature of trauma and the effects of abuse which are translated into policy, legislation and everyday images of abused and traumatised children.

Burman's arguments in relation to the dangers in singularising childhood experiences and the critique of notions of trauma have been a thread through my work. This was evident, and for me, particularly disturbing, in the British media's reporting of the 'Middle East crisis' in July 2006 (O'Dell, 2008a). During this time there were daily reports of the crisis that drew on images of dead and seriously injured children. The front pages of British newspapers were dominated by the escalating violence and elevated international attention on the 'Palestinian Israeli conflict'. The conflict developed quickly and was reported with a sense of urgency in the UK. The headlines (and accompanying images) in national newspapers drew on very particular images of children. For example, the Independent's headline ; "*Another tragic day*" was illustrated with a picture of two dead children, both very young, possibly less than a year old, and both wrapped in white sheets/shrouds with only their faces (partially) shown. Similarly, a few days later the text of the Daily Mirror's story of the 'crisis', "*Suffer the children. Missiles came in the night to take 37 little lives*", was illustrated with a picture of a dead young child being carried by two rescue workers (31st July 2006). The representation of dead children fed powerfully into a colonialist appeal for 'rescue'; "*As 37 kids die in an Israeli air strike and still Britain won't call for an immediate ceasefire. We say STOP.. NOW*" (the Daily Mirror, 31st July 2006).

The representation of children in these reports, as well as in other media campaigns, such as the UK Barnardos' advertisements discussed by Burman in *Developments: Child, Image, Nation* (2008), hold up a damaged child as a symbol of transgression from the naturalised state of the universal developing child. In the case of the 'Middle East crisis' reporting, development is literally, and very graphically, cut short. These are hugely powerful discourses, and are difficult images to critique. The discourses are also directly translated into practice, policy and international development for abused children and those traumatised by armed conflict.

Burman's work in *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology*, and its sister volume, *Development: Child, Image, Nation* (2008), draws our attention to the construction of childhood. Abused or 'damaged' children stand as iconic referents to how childhood is, should be, and has been destroyed (O'Dell, 2008a, 2008b). The referents being firmly located within the cultural frame of the global North. Ideas about how trauma should be manifest are, Burman argues, inherent within developmental psychology. Through this frame, the singularisation of childhood as a time of vulnerability (as set apart/abstracted from their hazardous cultural context) and potential life-lasting trauma is played out. Ideas from *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology* provide a means of critique of this singularisation.

Conclusions

Deconstructing developmental psychology as a theoretical and political strategy enables an interrogation of the locatedness of children and the complex set of knowledges we have about them. Burman's book has been influential for me because it systematically addressed the basis of developmental science, not to deconstruct it out of existence but rather to "scrutinise the developmental claims they may be tempted either to invoke or refuse." (Burman, 2008 p ix). The assumed universal developmental trajectory and developmentalism set up an idealised childhood against which 'others' are seen to be deficient and problematic. In my work I have traced this through a number of instances of difference including representations of abused children, children with autism, working children, immigration and language brokering, and young carers. There is still much work to do to challenge the

assumption of universal developmental stages and developmentalism in developmental psychology, public imagination and more broadly in policy and political debates. Burman's work remains as relevant- and even more required- than it was in 1994.

References

- Brownlow,C., Bertilsdotter Rosqvist,H., & O'Dell,L. (2013) Exploring the potential for social networking among people with autism: Challenging dominant ideas of 'friendship'. *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research* doi 10.1080/15017419.2013.859174
- Burman, E. (1994) *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology*. London: Routledge
- Burman,E. (2008) *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology (2nd Edition)*. London: Routledge
- Burman,E. (2008) *Developments: Child, Image, Nation*. London: Routledge
- Crafter,S., O'Dell,L., Abreu, de.G. and Cline,T. (2009) Young people's representations of 'atypical' work in UK society. *Children & Society* 23(3), 176-188
- Holt,A. (2010) Managing 'spoiled identities': parents' experiences of compulsory parenting support programmes. *Children & Society* 24(5), 413-423
- Montgomery,R.J.V. (1999) The family role in the context of long term care *Journal of Aging and Health* 11(3),383-416
- O'Dell,L., & Brownlow,C. (in press) Normative development and the autistic child. Chapter 16 in M. O'Reilly & J. Lester (eds) *The Palgrave handbook of child mental health: Discourse and conversation studies*. Palgrave: Basingstoke, UK
- O'Dell,L., Crafter,S., Abreu,de.G., Cline,T. (2010) Constructing 'normal childhoods': young people talk about young carers. *Disability & Society* 25(6), 643-55

- O'Dell,L. (2003) The 'harm story' in childhood sexual abuse: Contested understandings, disputed knowledges in S.Warner & P.Reavey, (Eds) *New Feminist Stories of Child Sexual Abuse*. Routledge: London
- O'Dell,L. (2007) Complexities and ambiguities in the bonds of love: women carers of elders. *Psychology of Women Section Review* 9(2), 10-15
- O'Dell,L. (2008a) Suffering children, dead babies and the appeal of the universal child. *Annual Review of Critical Psychology*
<http://www.discourseunit.com/arcp/arcp6/O%27Dell.pdf>.
- O'Dell,L. (2008b) Representations of the 'damaged' child: 'Child saving' in a British children's charity advertising campaign. *Children & Society* 22(5), 383-92
- Ogden,J., Esim,S., & Grown,C. (2006) Expanding the care continuum for HIV/AIDS: bringing carers into focus. *Health Policy Plan* 21(5), 333-342
- Reavey,P. (2003) When past meets present to produce a sexual 'other': examining professional and everyday narratives of child sexual abuse and sexuality. In P. Reavey & S. Warner (Eds) *New feminist stories of child sexual abuse: Sexual scripts and dangerous dialogues*. London, New York: Routledge