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Critical Educational Psychology

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Introduction

TOM BILLINGTON, ANTONY WILLIAMS, DAN GOODLEY
AND TIM CORCORAN



EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY: TOWARDS A HUMAN SCIENCE

Many of us have committed our working lives ostensibly to help young persons who are experiencing difficulties of one kind or another. For many who work as educational psychologists, it can be more than a job, it can be our life's work, not only a professional commitment but a highly principled activity underpinned by a seemingly solid foundation in psychological knowledge.¹

What a cruel twist then when we can find the humanity of our concerns constantly challenged, not merely by the difficult social, economic and political circumstances in which as practitioners we ply our trade but by the very psychological discourses upon which we are supposed to base our work. For those sociocultural arenas in which we operate are dominated by discursive repertoires of quantification and ableism in which young people can be subjected to batteries of tests, schools ranked in terms of a host of performance indicators and curricula are narrowed in ways that reduce educational success to individual achievement. Meanwhile, as we know from studies of ableism and disablism, young people find themselves faced with ever more pressurising assessment procedures that demand student autonomy and make it easier to mark out those students who disrupt these educational practices (Goodley, 2014). As a profession we have too often been required only to contribute to particular processes in which individual young people are singled out for special attention in ways which are not so straightforward as might at first seem to be the case, and as targets of psychological models which position them as deficient human beings, a position from which it becomes almost impossible to escape. These are the root conditions of a disabling educational psychology: one in which we become complicit in the constitution of the individualised problems and failings of education.

This book is the product of (mainly) practitioners associated during the past 15 years or so with the School of Education at the University of Sheffield, all of whom share a belief in the potential of educational psychology to contribute to the public good but who believe too that some of the practices historically associated with its performance are not only flawed but potentially damaging. In this book we are searching for alternative ways in which we can support educational psychologists in their efforts to engage more ethically, critically yet scientifically with those people who are the recipients of our practice. The familiar vision of the therapeutic dyad invokes a scene set in a school office where the practitioner intervenes with a student. But as we envisage it, critical educational psychology takes place in a variety of settings and includes all stakeholders in education – from headteachers and their staff, to students and their families – as well as policies and regulations that seek to define our work's agenda.

The book clearly does not come from nowhere: it has a history; and that history has local, national and international antecedents. The origins of educational psychology in the United States can be found in the works of William James, G.S. Hall, Edward Thorndike and John Dewey while the history of educational psychology in the UK is inexorably linked to the appointment in 1913 by the City of London of Cyril Burt as the country's first educational psychologist. All these men [*sic*] and others too (e.g., Binet in France) were confronted by a problem which we still share today, what should be done with those young

people who, for one reason or another, struggle to thrive in schools? A century ago, the mass schooling systems, then only recently created by the newly industrialised societies, were themselves struggling to accommodate many young people and it seemed only natural that the new science of psychology be enlisted to help with the new social phenomena. We are now at a vantage point from which we can survey the hundred years of subsequent practice and can reflect on the successes and failures of educational psychology during that time and its contributions to the social (and political) problem bestowed on us.

Certainly, many of us would like to think that through our work we have been contributing to improved circumstances for many individual young people, their families and their teachers but, while this will undoubtedly often be the case, as authors in this book we share some concerns. We do not intend to side-step a suspicion long held in critiques of educational psychology that arguably its most notable achievement during the 20th century was its development of the technical means, systems and individual practices by which selected individuals could be positioned as defective, deviant or as a member of a transgressive category; for example, as a disability or in special need. This would clearly be a challenging critique for us and indeed such an analysis is itself reductionist as well as an affront to the commitments of the many practitioners and scholars who have dedicated themselves to the needs of the disadvantaged or those in distress. Unfortunately, the focus of our work, however well intentioned, has ushered in practices which function politically in respect of the kinds of gendered, racialised, dis/abled populations being targeted for scrutiny.

It is thus important to state from the outset that as authors in this book we are challenged by the epistemological roots of our discipline, and unite in unequivocal opposition against much of what Burt (1913) chose to focus on in his work: that is, his insistence on the concept of a fixed and innate intelligence; the straightforward biological heritability of that intelligence; the consequent need for human selection; and the ableist, class-, gendered- and race-based explanations for human difference. Burt was a eugenicist and while this begs more detailed and sensitive historical and contextual analysis, we are opposed to all those practices which uncritically align with such ideological positions. Indeed we have explored elsewhere the non-science of Burt which, in our view, owes more to a technological entrepreneurship than to a science of the human (Billington & Williams, 2015).

While we do not claim in this book to be the only educational psychologists who recoil at images of the person constructed by a Burtian dystopia, our motivations are to be found directly in the research and practice of many other educational psychologists associated with the University of Sheffield during the past 15 years, and likewise with a longer tradition in the School of Education, of scholars who have shared our concerns for social justice in education, especially within the field of inclusive education and disability studies (Armstrong, Armstrong & Barton, 2000; Barton, 2001; Barton & Clough, 1998; Barton & Oliver, 1997; Carr, 1995; Moore, Beazley & Maelzer, 1998). Educational psychology at Sheffield also has a context within the wider university. William Henry Hadow (vice chancellor at Sheffield between 1919 and 1930) was the principal author of six highly influential reports for the British government on a range of educational matters and from 1923 onwards he was chair of consultative committees whose reports were to influence British educational policy for a large part of the 20th century.

Specifically in respect of this book, Hadow was the author of the very first UK government *'Report...on psychological tests of educable capacity'* (Hadow, 1924). This document set the agenda to this day, not only for the performance of educational psychology in British schools

but actually for the whole system of selection in British schools which has haunted, in particular, the secondary mass schooling system ever since. Cyril Burt was allowed to write some of the appendices and in some instances his name presents as joint author for the whole report. However, it is not only the subsequent disrepute which he brought upon our profession for the fraudulent use of test results that leads us to distance ourselves from his work here (Hearnshaw, 1979; Mackintosh, 2013) but also the wish to overcome the reluctance of our profession to sustain an effective critique in respect of the scientific bases of such work. Psychological ‘tests’ were Burt’s way of invoking the power of scientific discourse, relying on a culture of measurement of young people which has underpinned many professional practices, and purporting to be (erroneously in our view) a science of the human. It is important to state at the outset our belief that, while undoubtedly there are many circumstances when psychological tests can be used genuinely to identify levels of need, misconceptions have arisen that the tests are scientific in the same sense that a natural scientist would use the word. Indeed, it is our position that psychological tests are not scientific in that sense but the product of technological endeavours, subject to economic and political forces, which construct human subjects according to their own ideological image and likeness, for example, as either ‘normal’ or deficient.

First, therefore, psychological ideas or indeed tests cannot be anything other than a product of the social conditions in which they were constructed. Any devices such as tests are technologies, infused with social and cultural bias (typically constructed in the past by white males from a particular Western cultural and political caste) and continue to propagate restricted and reductionist psychological discourses in relation to specific aspects of human functioning (Corcoran, 2016). These ableist discourses became established in the early years of our discipline, manifest in such concepts as mental deficiency, heritability and in attempts to fix intelligence as something static. As critical educational psychologists, however, we maintain:

1. that the (mis)use of such concepts continues to misrepresent and undermine the potentialities of human subjects;
2. that the aetiology of human functioning is a complete reversal from that popularly circulated – rather, as human organisms our development is defined by the ‘conditions’ (James, 1890) of our environment (i.e., we are *a priori* ‘relational beings’ (Gergen, 2009));
3. that psychology’s tendency to individualise invites a reduction of the complexities of being-in-the-world to simplistic psychological categories.

Psychological tests do not reveal the nature of the person but a view of the person from a particular vantage point, sometimes providing descriptions which the persons themselves might not recognise, either now or perhaps even in the future.

Second, many of the ideas and practices generated under the banner of educational psychology, while seemingly based on the kinds of methods derived from the natural sciences, bear a likeness to science only insofar as they use numbers, statistics and mathematical formulae. Our claims to science are flawed since, in our efforts to attain the status accorded to the natural sciences, we have sought as psychologists initially to mimic only the research methods used and in the process created our own discrete world of non-human methodologies which are unable to capture the phenomena of persons. We are thus concerned about

the dangers of a 'logical positivism [which has] elevated discussions about the scientific method above empirical science itself' (Costa & Shimp, 2011, p. 26). It is our contention that the experimental natural sciences appear to be more successful in remaining focused on the phenomena to be considered while educational psychologists have often been encouraged in research or practice which:

1. prioritises methodology over the phenomena to be studied (a practice known as methodolatry, expanded on with wit and verve by C. Wright Mills (1970));
2. adopts methods that are ill-suited to recognise the phenomena under scrutiny (i.e., the study of the human);
3. investigates and reinvestigates versions of persons it has itself constructed (e.g., as evidenced in the development of the psychological industry around the label of autism: Runswick-Cole, Mallett & Timimi, in press).

PSYCHOLOGY IN EDUCATION: BUILDING BLOCKS FOR RECONSTRUCTION

Since William James first began to delineate the boundaries of a positivistic psychology (1890), there have been many psychologists who have been alert to the theoretical omissions of educational psychology. Initially Dewey (1916), later Vygotsky (1978), then Bruner (1991), for example, each in their own way, envisaged a psychology of the person which was impossible to contain within discourses of isolated individuals. Dewey was convinced of the importance of the social environment on human mind and behaviour and Vygotsky too focused on explanations more obviously rooted in the social world while Bruner arguably emphasised the more expressly human. Deweyan ideas about school and social reform, neo-Vygotskian ideas about learning and language as well as Brunerian narrative approaches have encouraged many psychologists and social scientists to aspire to less disabling forms of practice by demanding that analyses become more sensitive to the dynamic, intrinsically social possibilities within human beings and their situations (White & Epston, 1990; Berliner, 1992; Reissman, 2002; Daniels et al., 2009).

In 1974, Bruner joined with Martin Richards, Ryan, Shotter, Harré, Ingleby and the Newsons to produce *The Integration of the Child into the Social World*, which, along with *Reconstructing Social Psychology*, published the same year, sought to articulate the fundamentally social (and hence also political) nature of human development. In the UK the emergence of these publications alongside a growing interest in the recently translated works of Vygotsky led to critical stirrings within UK educational psychology, most clearly articulated by *Reconstructing Educational Psychology* (Gillham, 1978). *Changing the Subject* (Henriques et al., 1984) and *Children of Social Worlds* (Bruner, 1986), the follow-up to *The Integration of the Child into the Social World*, reflected the growing interest in, and understanding of, the fundamental importance of the social world when contemplating children, childhood and the gaze we bring to bear on them. The mid-1980s was also a time when we heard the term 'psy-complex' (Ingleby, 1985; Rose 1985), which had been coined to develop critiques of the influence of psychological knowledge and which were informed by Foucault's introduction of the

genealogical method. Critical thinkers drew upon strands of psychology, psychoanalysis, linguistics and semiotics to examine the structuring influence of language. Two seminal works published in 1987, Potter and Wetherell's *Discourse and Social Psychology* and Billig's *Arguing and Thinking*, signalled an increasing appreciation of the power and influence of language in structuring what we accept as reality (see also Hollway, 1989; Parker, 1992). It is upon the work of these critical thinkers, their colleagues and the resources they have provided that we seek to build this book.

Critical psychology can help us to recognise the ways in which educational and other authorities not only regulate – which is not necessarily a problem – but also effectively exclude – which is a problem, especially given a growing unease as to the quality of the ‘science’ on which (politicised) decisions are being justified. There are many resources now that psychologists and their services can use when constructing professional practices which are not only sensitive to social, cultural and political variables but also provide the means of achieving a more scientific discipline. Erica Burman's (2008) utilisation of deconstruction as a tool for critiquing development narratives together with her exploration of a feminist agenda reaffirm the potentially debilitating nature of many current theoretical preferences and practices in childcare and educational arenas. Isaac Prilleltensky emphasises critical approaches and the possibility of community solutions (Fox, Prilleltensky & Austin 2009; Nelson & Prilleltensky 2005) while Ben Bradley (2005) similarly employs critiques of psychological paradigms to provide alternatives in respect of professional training. There are increasing numbers of psychologists working in education globally who are developing a more critical psychological research and practice – for instance, Newman and Holzman (1993); Bird (1999); Neilsen & Kvale (1999); Billington (2000); Sloan (2000); Gallagher (2003); Kincheloe (2006, 2008); Corcoran (2007); Goodman (2010); Goodley (2011, 2014); Mercieca (2011); Martin and McLellan (2013); Vassallo (2013); Williams (2013); Sugarman (2014); and Todd (2014).

This renaissance of enthusiasm for the potential in our discipline is in marked contrast with an unjustifiably complacent neo-Burtian educational psychology, which rested on an intellectually limited personal agenda, ‘It is my personal conviction that the main outlines of our human nature are now approximately known, and that the whole territory of individual psychology has, by one worker or another, been completely covered in the main’ (Burt, in Hearnshaw 1979, p. 49). It is to Hadow's credit that he was clearly suspicious of such grandiose claims and there are several examples where, in 1924, he provides more cautious analysis relating to the narrowness of the psychological landscape being envisaged. As co-authors of this book we want to find ways of re-engaging with the hopeful possibilities for educational psychology first realised by both James and Dewey in order to construct a canvas upon which we can create new forms of social activity, re-envisage its scientific credentials and find ways of speaking ethically to an emerging globalisation of the process of psychologisation. Indeed, as scholars at the University of Sheffield, we have found ourselves pushed into (not unwillingly we might add) transdisciplinary contexts in which we seek to talk of the human in ever more complex ways. The establishment of a new research centre – The Institute for the Study of the Human (iHuman) – came from a number of conversations and collaborations with colleagues across faculties of science, medicine, the humanities and social sciences about the kinds of intellectual projects that can be made to respond to not only rapid expansions in technology, but also an epidemic of psychological knowledge about what it means to be a valued or marked human being.² This book, then, is timely not least

in reminding educational psychology to think carefully about the ways in which it marks, values, pathologises or expands humanity.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

This book is delivered in three parts. The first part focuses on introducing the theoretical resources that we suggest can be drawn upon in situating a critical psychological practice. These theoretical starting points are diverse, but have in common the fact that they are all in differing ways reflexive foundations on which to build a psychological practice. They envision both ourselves as practitioners and those with whom we work as thinking, speaking subjects with agency, who thus offer the potential to appreciate a complex subjectivity 'in which a sense of agency is tangled up in cultural forms' (Parker, 1997, p. 12), which is a starting point for a potentially emancipatory practice. It would be naive to suggest that practice with emancipatory potential is limited to the theoretical resources we offer or that a practice grounded in these approaches will necessarily offer such potential. However we do suggest that the theoretical approaches in Part I may be drawn upon and, indeed, produce in their application a more complex subjectivity than has often been offered. A vision of the human, as Parker (1997) recognises, is one that takes seriously both the intentions and desires of the individual and the operation of social structures and discourse which structure the spaces in which we all live and work. As such Part I begins with Allen's questioning of the assumptions that permeate both education and psychology. In exploring how psychology and education define and thereby limit our freedom, Allen asks whether or not they are 'good' or 'bad'. Chapters 2 to 5 introduce constructionist (Corcoran), narrative (Fogg), post-conventionalist (Goodley) and psychoanalytic (Williams) theoretical resources for the construction of a critical educational psychology practice.

Part II focuses on ethics and values in practice. In this part, Goodley and Billington explore connections between critical educational psychology and critical disability studies. The ethics of practice are then interrogated in three chapters which examine in differing ways how ethical concerns are inherent in everyday practice (Bennett; Devlin; Mercieca & Mercieca). Chapter 10 (Beal) explores the notion of expertise in practice, calling for a recognition of the multiple and diverse forms of expertise that are required for psychologists and clients to produce empowering working alliances. Martin Hughes then introduces Q methodology, presenting the approach from an ethical and practical perspective. Part II concludes with a chapter that asks: Are we all psychologists now? In posing the question, Williams introduces the concept of psychologisation and its ongoing shaping of modern Western culture, suggesting that in the age of the psychologised subject the role of the critical educational psychologist may be that of the psychologist willing and able to critique the ideological function of psychological knowledge in any particular situation.

Part III contains a series of chapters that put the critical theoretical resources to work in practice. These chapters are written in the main by practitioners who focus on specific arenas of practice, including mental health (Mills; Monkman), school behaviour policies (Harold), faith and educational psychology (Saxton) and the role of gender in school-based exclusion practices (Bradley). Further chapters critically explore mindfulness (Davis), the use of stories in practice (Khoshkhoo), video interactive guidance (Pomerantz), social theatre (Hammond), dyslexia diagnosis (Cameron) and the growing influence of neuroscience (Billington).

GETTING ON WITH IT

In the groundbreaking text *Changing the Subject*, Couse Venn (1989) posed the following question: What is the subject of psychology? His answer, and one with which we agree, is the living human subject. Educational psychology has for a hundred years understood its subject as a young person who will require some kind of intervention. In practice, this subject has quickly become known in terms of available psychological discourses of the isolated and static individual, assessed and probed according to practices which, ultimately, demand the improvement of the subject in relation to a narrow understanding of their deficiency.

What could be the subject of educational psychology? Critical psychology intervenes to advise: 'Rather than "telling it like it is", the challenge for the [critical educational] psychologist is to "tell it as it may become"' (Gergen, 1992, p. 27). This affirmative, forward looking and inherently reflexive statement demands that as educational psychologists we look for opportunities to construct practices which potentially empower children and young people, not as individuals disconnected with the (social) world but as social living beings, and look for occasions when we could work as allies with them, their families and the educational professionals that seek to support them.

Yet such potential alliances require us to remain mindful of the potential dangers of psychology; a discipline that has been historically built on the construction of a model of human subjects who are inherently flawed, lacking or deficient. Whether researchers or practitioners we aspire to a criticality which involves:

1. identifying the ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions which populate the landscape of educational psychology;
2. exposing the kinds of human subject constituted and restricted through these discursive knowledges;
3. identifying ideas, practices and support mechanisms which enable children and young people to successfully resist and move beyond any such oppressive regimes and navigate more successfully their educational lives.

Our work at Sheffield and in this book is intended to develop and support communities dedicated to resisting the psychopathologisation of human difference, wherever in the world educational practice exists.

NOTES

1. As this is a BPS textbook, reference throughout is made to educational psychology, inferring inclusion of both educational and school psychology.
2. See the following link: <http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/faculty/social-sciences/ihuman>

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Part I Reflexive Foundationalism: Critical Psychological Resources

In this section of the book, contributors consider the theoretical foundations required to conceptualise the notions of 'education', 'psychology' and 'critical'. The authors recognise the need to continually re-create our foundations, precisely because we find existing ones unsatisfactory. What results is a reflective or creative foundationalism, in which values are lived out and discussions of ethics and values can never be separated from and are inherent to every act.

