Against Relativism in Psychology, On Balance

Relativism in psychology unravels the truth claims and oppressive practices of the discipline, but simply relativizing psychological knowledge has not been sufficient to comprehend and combat the discipline as part of the ‘psy-complex’. For that, a balanced review of the contribution and problems of relativism needs to work dialectically, and so this chapter reviews four problematic rhetorical balancing strategies in relativism before turning to the contribution of critical realism. Critical realism exposes positivist psychology’s pretensions to model itself on what it imagines the natural sciences to be, and it grounds discursive accounts of mentation in social practices. The problem is that those sympathetic to mainstream psychology are also appealing to ‘realism’ to warrant it as a science and to discredit critical research which situates psychological phenomena. Our use of critical realism calls for an account of how psychological facts are socially constructed within present social arrangements and for an analysis of the underlying historical conditions that gave rise to the ‘psy-complex’. Only by understanding how the discipline of psychology reproduces notions of individuality and human nature, a critical realist endeavour, will it be possible to transform it, and to socially construct it as something different.

Introduction

The argument in this chapter cuts across and against one of the most progressive recent movements in psychology. Different forms of relativism have inspired imaginative theoretical refusals of ideological motifs in the discipline, even when many of its adherents eschew theory (e.g., Gergen, 1994b; Newman and Holzman, 1997). It has fuelled useful methodological critiques of pretend-science in the discipline, even
when its practitioners avoid a commitment to any particular method (e.g., Shotter, 1993; Stainton Rogers et al., 1995). Much contemporary critical psychology draws sustenance from relativist writing (e.g., Fox and Prilleltensky, 1997; Ibáñez and Íñiguez, 1997). Critical psychology is a heterogeneous process of critique and autocritique in the discipline which focuses on the way psychological theory and practice operate to reduce social phenomena to the level of the individual and to normalize certain kinds of behaviour and experience (Parker, 1999a). In this strand of work, the study of power and ideology in the maintenance of oppressive relationships by psychology is often facilitated by relativism. Relativism includes a broad array of social constructionist, discursive and postmodern re-readings of psychological texts which serve to ‘deconstruct’ them and to reveal their status as stories about the mind, so critical psychologists, among others, will ask why we now need to mark our distance from it.

To address this question, our use of critical realism needs to look to an account of how psychological facts are socially constructed within present-day social arrangements (e.g., Curt, 1994; Harré, 1983) and for an analysis of the underlying historical conditions that gave rise to psychology and the ‘psy-complex’. The ‘psy-complex’ is the dense network of theories and practices to do with the mind and behaviour which divide the normal from the abnormal in order to observe and regulate individuals (Ingleby, 1985; Rose, 1985). Understanding how the discipline of psychology reproduces notions of individual cognition and human nature, a critical realist endeavour, will enable us to transform it, and to socially construct it as something better, perhaps. In the process, relativism also needs to be understood and situated both as a useful tool for ideology-critique and as an ideological form which increasingly evens out the cutting edge of critical work in psychology. Critical realism takes a step beyond positivist attempts to establish regularities between cause and effect ‘to recognise that there are enduring structures and generative mechanisms underlying and producing observable phenomena and events’ (Bhaskar, 1989: 2). Such a step requires a view of an enduring ‘intransitive’ dimension which for some authors provides ‘the most promising basis for securing the status of critical theory in relation to the sciences as a whole’ (Morrow with Brown, 1994: 77).

To follow this step in psychology, and against relativism in the discipline, I need to trace my way through ten different ways ‘balance’ is constituted and negotiated in psychology. In this first introductory section of the chapter I give due credit to social constructionist writing in psychology (Balance I) and my arguments against relativism and for critical realism in