8
Tracing Therapeutic Discourse in Material Culture

Approaches to language and subjectivity from post-structuralist theory outside psychology and from deconstructive perspectives within counselling and psychotherapy have questioned the way therapeutic relationships are formed in Western culture. Discourse analysis has been developed as a methodological framework to take this questioning further, and to provide detailed readings of therapeutic patterns of meaning. Foucauldian discourse analytic approaches help us to address how we are made into selves that speak, how we experience the self therapeutically. I will elaborate this methodological framework through an analysis of a piece of text – an item of consumer packaging – tracing the contours of therapeutic discourse through a series of twenty methodological steps. Therapeutic discourse draws the reader in as the kind of subject who must feel a relationship at some depth with the (imagined) authors for the text to work. The chapter thus illustrates the value of discourse analytic readings of texts, and helps us to reflect upon our commitment to discourses of counselling and psychotherapy as empowering stories and as culturally specific patterns of subjectivity.

A variety of arguments from post-structuralist theory outside psychology have been brought to bear in recent years upon the activities of counsellors and psychotherapists (e.g., McNamee and Gergen, 1992b). The social construction of therapeutic work in Western culture has been thrown into question, but the ‘deconstruction’ of therapeutic discourse has been adopted by some practitioners to assist their own critical reflection and to make it possible for counsellors to address patterns of discourse which structure their relationships with clients (e.g., Parker, 1999c). The work of Michel Foucault has been particularly helpful to psychologists here (Parker, 1995a), and forms of discourse analysis have been developed in psychology which draw upon Foucault’s (1975a,
1976a) systematic critical analysis of discipline and confession (e.g., Burman and Parker, 1993; Burman et al., 1996). Foucauldian discourse analysis draws our attention to the ‘conditions of possibility’ for counselling and psychotherapy to work, to the way we experience therapeutic relationships when we are positioned as therapeutic subjects in the texts which comprise this culture. This chapter aims to show how Foucauldian discourse analysis may be of relevance to counsellors and psychotherapists, and how this methodological framework functions as part of the broader ‘deconstructive’ turn in psychology.

I will work through a piece of text which looks, at first glance, to be innocent, but which participates in what Foucault would call a ‘regime of truth’ that is at one with the ‘psy-complex’ (Ingleby, 1985; Rose, 1985). It may be thought that the text in question is too trivial to bear the weight of the reading that I weave around it. However, I have chosen this text, in part, precisely because it circulates as a fairly insignificant part of consumer packaging, and we might be tempted to assume that it escapes larger-scale patterns of ideology and power. One of the points we have to keep in mind when we are analysing the discursive construction of knowledge is that such construction operates throughout language, and in the smallest texts. When we are looking for a definition of what a discourse is we cannot do better than start with Foucault’s statement that discourses are ‘practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak’ (Foucault, 1969: 49). I will work through a piece of text following methodological steps that have been derived from this definition (Parker, this volume, Chapter 6, 1992, 1994). The first set of fourteen steps are designed to systematically tease apart the text, identifying objects and subjects, networks of relationships, and the contradictions between different images of the world. Also in these first steps, the identification of labels for the discourses – including therapeutic discourse in this case – that run through the text is intended then to open up the way in which certain realities are constructed in the text that enrol us as we read it. Let us now move straight to the text, and take up theoretical issues from Foucault’s work in the course of the analysis.

The material

The text is from the cardboard package for ‘Silly Strawberry’ children’s toothpaste. It is mainly marketed, from Maine in North America, through wholefood shops.

The front of the box has the manufacturer’s logo ‘Tom’s of Maine’ (in green), the brand name ‘Natural Toothpaste for Children’ (in red),