

The background of the book cover is a vibrant red fabric, possibly silk or satin, with deep, vertical folds and highlights that create a sense of texture and depth. The fabric is draped from the top, creating a large, flowing shape that fills the entire frame.

UNDERSTANDING CRITICAL SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

KEITH TUFFIN



Understanding
**Critical Social
Psychology**



Understanding

Critical Social Psychology

Keith Tuffin

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Sweetness and light

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Prologue

Audience and aims

This book has been written for students. A key aim, and also a key challenge, in writing this book, has been to write about critical social psychology in a way that is accessible for those who are new to the area. Ideally, students who read this work should have already completed a first course in social psychology. Much of what is said here assumes familiarity with at least an introductory knowledge of the topics and methods of traditional social psychology. This book has been aimed at those students who wish to take their study of human social life beyond the traditional philosophies, methods and topics of the discipline. Initially this project involves critical reflections of these methods which, in turn, lead to a discussion of alternative research approaches. Alternative approaches are increasingly being taken up by critical scholars who have become dissatisfied with the constraints of traditional ways of doing social psychology. In a broad sense, this book aims to provide a bridge between traditional social psychology and the newer critical approaches to the discipline.

In 'bridging' the traditional and the newer approaches I have attempted to remain focused on the title of the book, and particularly the emphasis on 'understanding'. The main aim, therefore, is to explain the work of critical social psychologists for students who come to the area with an understanding of mainstream, traditional approaches. There are, of course, other aims that are best understood by looking at the achievements of contemporary social psychology. The longstanding promise of social psychology has been to unlock the secrets of human social life. This promise will be assessed through an examination of the philosophy, theories and methods of contemporary social psychology. One conclusion to emerge from this evaluation is that the discipline has, at best, only partly met the promise of revealing the core insights into human social actions. The critique which supports this conclusion is not new within social psychology, with various authors making similar points over the last three decades (see,

for example, Armistead, 1974). What this volume aims to achieve is to refresh and restate the theoretical and methodological concerns that have been gathering momentum as interest in critical alternatives has flourished. Further, this work sets out to move beyond criticism and introduce research alternatives that have developed from these growing dissatisfactions.

What is offered here is a version of critical social psychology, and it is important to be clear that this is but one of a number of possible versions. There are several excellent texts (for example, Gough & McFadden, 2001; Hepburn, 2002; Stainton Rogers, 2003) which offer differing versions of critical social psychology. While these books have similar titles to the present text, they approach critical social psychology from differing perspectives and emphasise different aspects of critical work. The exact shape that a book finally takes reflects many things, and this book has been moulded by my research interests and experience. Inevitably, readers are offered a version that is selective and unique. My hope in writing this particular version is that it does justice to the breadth of interests critical social psychologists have, and that it is able to enhance the understandings students have about critical social psychology.

The orientation of the book is one which aims to tell a simple story that begins with a critique of mainstream social psychology and looks at the limited ways in which the discipline has delivered on its promise to reveal the secrets of social life. This critique seeks to highlight the reasons why social psychology has been constrained in what it has been able to offer. Following this, readers are introduced to a new understanding of the place of language in social psychology. This in turn opens up a series of different orientations that enable social psychology to increase the range of methods it may call on in the pursuit of better understanding the 'social' in our lives. One such method, textual analysis, has become a key marker of critical social psychology. This style of analysis is based on a belief in the profound importance of language for understanding the social world. Critical scholars such as Ibanez (1997) are keenly aware of, and interested in, the importance of language for understanding our social worlds. Indeed, Ibanez suggests our social realities have a character that is uniquely contributed to by the conversations, dialogues and messages we immerse ourselves in. This interest has spawned the development of an impressive array of new research practices (for example, discourse analysis and conversation analysis), which collectively have begun to change the face of contemporary social psychology.

Having studied, researched and taught social psychology for twenty years, I am able to document some changes that have occurred within the discipline over this time. These changes are both challenging and exciting. The challenge comes in the form of critique that has been applied to traditional theories and methods. The challenge also involves writing about this in a way that is constructive and positive, without being threatening and intimidating. The excitement stems from being involved in a 'quiet revolution' (Hayes, 1995) involving the promotion of research alternatives that critical social psychology has made both possible and desirable.

Teaching critical social psychology

As a teacher of social psychology I have increasingly been excited by the critical literature and have sought to introduce this critical edge to students. In attempting to do this I have relied on notes, journal articles and snippets of material from a wide variety of sources. As Stainton Rogers, Stenner, Gleeson and Stainton Rogers (1995) comment, the syllabus for critical social psychology has largely been developed without textbooks. This has ultimately been a frustration for both teachers and students, and this book sets out to put some of these ideas into an accessible and coherent framework. The importance of accessibility cannot be overstated as students may have difficulty with the complexity and density of some of the existing writing in the field of critical social psychology. Part of the explanation for this is that new ideas are often difficult because they are new. Another part of the explanation is that critical work requires working with abstractions and symbols and there is a sense in which this can be unusually difficult. A further consideration is that critical scholars sometimes deploy esoteric language that can be inaccessible. The impact of such language is that students are denied ready access to this new and developing field. This outcome is the precise opposite of what I aim for in my teaching. Hence this book has been written in the hope that these abstractions and complexities may be presented in a user-friendly manner, thereby opening the field of critical social psychology to a broader range of students.

Critical psychology

Critical work within social psychology is a relatively recent development and it is important to locate this within the context of wider intellectual forces. It is also important to locate critical social psychology within the wider field of critical psychology. Critical social psychology should be understood as part of the critical movement occurring both within psychology (Fox & Prilleltensky, 1997), and also within the human sciences (Rosenau, 1992). The critical impetus within psychology is beginning to touch an ever increasing number of the branches of the parent discipline. In this regard 'critical social' is but one of many areas where critical work is taking hold and shaking the foundations and assumptions that psychology has previously taken as the sole basis for guiding theory, research and practice.

Within psychology, critical work (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002; Sloan, 2000) draws on a wide range of intellectual traditions in its critique of the mainstream. The broadest aims of critical psychology include an overt political agenda, which stands in stark contrast to the political innocence and neutrality that have characterised the discipline until recent times. Bradley and Selby (2001) point out that the fundamental problem with contemporary psychology is that psychologists

are seemingly oblivious to the negative effects of political disadvantage. In contrast, critical psychologists are keen to exchange political innocence for political awareness. For Fox and Prilleltensky (1997: xvi) the aim is 'to expose the unholy alliance between psychology and social norms that benefit the powerful and harm the powerless, and to offer emancipatory alternatives'. This critique of psychology's political innocence is driven by a social justice agenda, and the belief that mainstream practices work to prevent rather than enable this. These claims about psychology and politics highlight a significant irony. As Bradley and Selby note, the original assignment psychology undertook was to describe reality and then to set about improving it. What seems to have happened is that the discipline has stopped short of attempting the second of these broad objectives. Indeed, critical psychologists argue that mainstream psychology works in the interests of the powerful, which would seem contrary to the very reasons people get involved in psychology in the first place!

While an overt political agenda is a feature of critical psychology, another notable feature is the impressive range of areas where critical work is beginning to appear. Indeed, critical work is increasingly apparent across a wide spectrum of psychologies. Fox and Prilleltensky's (1997) edited book, *Critical Psychology*, includes chapters from clinical, community, cross-cultural, ethical, developmental, feminist, forensic, lesbian and gay, personality, political, and of course social psychology. While the pages of this book focus on the area of critical social psychology, it is important to be aware that critical initiatives are occurring in a wide range of sub-disciplines within psychology.

Criticality and negativity

One aspect of critical work that can be initially off-putting is the apparent negativity entailed in doing critical work. There is a certain emptiness associated with criticism that leads nowhere, and which amounts to criticism for the sake of criticism. This failing of critical work at worst resembles critique wrapped in negativity that contributes almost nothing positive or constructive. This is the reason the current text seeks to make sure that critique is not conducted simply for its own sake. Rather, I have regarded it as important to show that good critique should provide a foreground to offering something which is both positive and constructive.

Another important point to state at the outset is that I am also aware of how critical analysis of the traditional ways of thinking about and doing research in social psychology may well be unsettling and confusing. After all, all the things that have previously been taught to constitute 'good' psychology are now implicated as being inappropriate, outdated and the subject of strong criticism. Wexler (1996: 15), for example, accuses traditional social psychology of being common sense, of 'participating only in the discourse of the eighteenth century', and of making a substantial contribution to social ignorance. While this may

initially seem negative and disruptive of previous learning about psychology, I would argue for the importance of understanding the context in which criticism occurs before dismissing it. Further, I would urge that a positive feature of critique is that it can act as a catalyst for change. Out of the challenges articulated by critical scholars comes rethinking and reworking, which leads to new developments. The hope is that such challenges will lead to an invigorated form of social psychology that may ultimately enhance our understanding of the complexities of human social life.

Critique involves many skills, not the least of which is developing a good understanding of what is being criticised. This is why this book is aimed at students who have already completed a first course in social psychology. It makes little sense to criticise the philosophies and methods of a discipline before first coming to understand what is being criticised. Critique also rests on the promise that things might be otherwise, that alternatives are possible and desirable. This requires being prepared to look at social psychology from a broad perspective and stand outside the dogma that surrounds the customs and practices of mainstream social psychology. In this light, criticism should be valued as a precursor to innovation and positive change, rather than regarded as disagreement and negativity. The philosopher Passmore (1967) urges that we go beyond considering criticism as a knee-jerk rejection and see it as a creative activity that has the potential to open up new ideas, new thinking and new approaches. In this regard, criticism is regarded as a positive force that has the creative power to improve our research methods, and ultimately our understandings of social life.

Amateur social psychologists

Social psychology, whether mainstream or critical, offers scientific insights into areas where ordinary people already have an impressive store of knowledge and understanding. This comes as no great surprise since humans have been informally studying themselves and their social actions since the beginning of time. As Billig (1990) explains, social psychology's topics are also areas where people have relevant experience. Not only do people have experience, they have also frequently developed much common sense about these areas. The fascination social psychologists have for the social aspects of human existence is largely shared by the interests ordinary people have about social life. As Myers (2000: 4) puts this, 'Unlike other scientific disciplines, social psychology has nearly 6 billion amateur practitioners.' What this staggering figure highlights is that people have an intense interest in social matters. The kind of questions that professional social psychologists ask are also of great interest to everybody.

In addition to the overlapping interests of both professionals and amateurs, the topics of social psychology are relentlessly pervasive. This means that the opportunities for studying social life are enormous. Such pervasiveness makes it easy to explore what is directly in front of us daily as there is no shortage of

‘material’ in our lives as we interact with friends, family, colleagues and lovers. Indeed, the interactions that take place in sports teams, at school, at work, in cafés, bars and over the dinner table contribute to the very fabric of social life which social psychologists seek to understand. The pervasiveness of social phenomena is equally available to anybody who seeks to make sense of their social worlds and thereby develop their own theories and understandings of the social dynamics of everyday life. Indeed, we seem to do this frequently as we ask questions about who said what to whom, why this happened this way, what the current state of our relationships are, who may be trusted, and whom one should be wary of.

While these kinds of questions will have a very familiar ring to them, the standard textbook treatment of the work of amateur social psychologists involves firstly, acknowledging it, and secondly, problematising it. It is argued that common sense should not be trusted as it offers contradictory and imprecise guidance. As Stanovich (1992: 27) puts this, amateurs fail to develop coherent theories, relying instead on ‘a rag bag of general principles, homilies and clichés about human behavior.’ This situation was deplored by the influential social psychologist Homans (1961), who suggested replacing lay common sense with a scientific study of human actions. Homans argued that proverbs are riddled with inconsistency and offer little help with our attempts to make sense of the complexities of social reality. The unsatisfactory aspect of this may be illustrated with two equally plausible folk sayings or proverbs, which seem to be directly contradictory. For example, when someone announces that ‘birds of a feather flock together’ this seems strongly to support the view that similarities and shared interests are important in understanding the basis of human attraction. However, when we hear that ‘opposites attract’, this seems highly contradictory in endorsing the general notion of differences providing an important basis for understanding attraction. To take another example, ‘too many cooks spoil the broth’ and ‘many hands make light work’ are self evidently contradictory. Following Homans, the message promoted by mainstream social psychology is that common sense is contradictory, unsatisfactory and unhelpful. As Billig (1990) notes, common sense is positioned as being ‘inherently suspect’ on the grounds that it is unscientific. Mainstream textbook writers believe that scientific experimentation and the use of rigorous laboratory methods will enable us to establish which of these contradictory sayings is the more accurate and correct. In short, experimentation will permit us to establish the ‘truth’ of each saying. In this regard, Stanovich (1992: 32) refers to the role of psychology as ‘the empirical tester of much folk wisdom’.

Truth and knowledge

The way in which common sense, homilies and proverbs are viewed by critical social psychologists differs dramatically from the way in which the mainstream regards these matters. Traditional social psychologists regard the observations

and interpretations of amateur social psychologists with great suspicion as they are seen as unsystematic, inconsistent and unscientific. For the traditional social psychologist experimentalism provides a standard against which such informal methods of accessing social truths may be tested.

In contrast, critical social psychologists are more respectful of the work of amateur social psychologists. Just how such informal observations, proverbs and common sense are talked about is of great interest as this becomes potential data about how people conduct aspects of social life, and specifically how these things are actually dealt with in social situations. Critical social psychologists suspend the question of whether the conclusions of such amateur theorising and interpretation are true or not. In one sense it really does not matter, since the focus of attention becomes how such 'truths' are used, rather than whether they are, in fact, true.

Critical psychology argues against the view that experimentation will assist in divining singular truths. Critical scholars believe that there is reason to become deeply concerned when others hold themselves, or their methods, as being diviners of 'truth', and are deeply sceptical of claims that demand that truth be unitary and universally agreed on. There are serious methodological issues that arise when social psychologists claim to be able to sift social fact from social fiction. The most obvious question to arise concerns the veracity and robustness of the methods used in the process of truth saying. As Stainton Rogers et al. (1995) comment, there are serious problems associated with claiming a 'hotline' to the truth. In particular, critical social psychologists are wary of the view that there are authorised methods for distilling the truth about social life. Returning to the example of contradictory proverbs, critical social psychologists accept that both 'opposites attract' and 'birds of a feather flock together' can be true. In other words, it is possible for both similarities and differences to be important in contributing to understandings of who we are attracted to. Equally, it is possible to have some situations where it is true that 'too many cooks spoil the broth', and others where the truth of 'many hands make light work' is evident.

At this point it might be worth asking about what kind of knowledge and truth critical social psychologists are interested in, if they are disinterested in sorting out 'the truth'. Wood and Kroger (2000) have addressed this very question when they suggest that the kind of knowledge critical social psychologists are interested in might be usefully summarised as looking 'inside the correlation'. This term was coined by Wood and Kroger when contrasting their research aims with those of conventional research, which seeks to establish and measure statistical relationships between variables. They noted, for example, that in studying rape victims, Janoff-Bulman (1979) discussed a relationship between self blame and the future avoidability of rape. In a nutshell, it seemed that those women who were more likely to blame being raped on their own behaviour, were also more likely to believe they could avoid rape in the future. In contrast, the discourse analytic study by Wood and Rennie (1994) offered alternative insights into what notions such as 'self blame' meant for rape victims. Rather than

examining the relationships between self blame and future safety, this study examined the discourses used by rape victims. Notably, it was found that the women used complex strategies involving both blame and the absence of blame as they negotiated victim and non-victim identities. In this regard, Wood and Kroger argue that critical work does not accept that notions such as self blame should be treated as static constructs. Rather, they should be examined for the work they may do as participant resources. Questions of interest would include: How have participants used notions of blame, responsibility, avoidability, and victimhood? When thought about this way, the metaphor of looking 'inside the correlation' is useful for characterising the kind of knowledge critical scholars are looking for. For Wood and Rennie, the constructs of blame, safety, and even the notion of rape itself are not assumed, but are examined for the ways in which they are used by participants. This use is seldom straightforward, but contributes in complex and dynamic ways as participants seek to make sense of their experiences.

Critical social psychology stands apart from attempts to refine universal principles of social life. It regards as naive, attempts to develop universal principles of human social behaviour. While experimentalists seek the refinement of broad themes that will stand the test of time and endure across different cultural and political spectrums, critical social psychologists pursue a more modest research agenda. This agenda respects the importance of multiple truths rather than the blind pursuit of *the* truth; it seeks not merely to establish differences between groups or statistical relationships between variables, but is interested also in examining the social and psychological meaning of events.

Curious questions from the disciplinary margins

The alternatives offered by critical approaches have not been smoothly welcomed into the discipline, nor warmly embraced by most social psychologists. Rather, these alternatives have disrupted traditional thinking about the discipline, which has resulted in some unsettling of the mainstream. The challenges posed by critical social psychologists have produced tensions. At the crudest level, critical work advocates change, a mission rarely met without resistance. For some, the implications of critical work will appear heretical, others will respond with curiosity and still others will be excited and intrigued. These tensions are apparent in the following questions. Some of these questions reflect the concerns with which critical scholars are grappling, others speak to the resistance the mainstream has shown in response to the critical challenge, and still others index deep-seated concerns that drive critical work towards seeking alternatives to mainstream research practice.

The following questions are offered as a way of structuring reading about critical social psychology. The answers to most of these questions will unfold over the course of this book. Additionally, these questions will feature again in the Epilogue where each one is addressed directly.

Why is it that some of the leading British social psychologists do not even attempt to get their work accepted in the leading mainstream American journals?

Billig (1997: 37) asks, 'How is it possible to call oneself a social psychologist, but to read few of the main social-psychological journals, and, indeed, to feel alienated from much of their content?'

Why are some leading social psychologists now proudly stating that they have not conducted a laboratory experiment in decades?

The so-called crisis in social psychology has been in evidence for at least the last three decades. Why do some writers regard the crisis as over, while others believe it has just begun?

While social psychology as a discipline has demonstrable dedication to the experimental method, is it the case that experimental work is completely inappropriate and absurd?

If you wanted to understand ordinary everyday life in the middle classes, why would you spend time studying inmates in a maximum security prison?

Are attempts to establish generalised laws of human social behaviour naive, given the way in which time, place and culture impact on our social relationships and our social realities?

Has the disciplinary rush towards embracing the methods of the hard sciences contributed to social psychology losing sight of alternative opportunities in both method and topic?

Is it fair to say that mainstream and critical social psychologists live in different worlds?

Is reality socially constructed?

Why does critical work not feature more prominently in most social psychology textbooks?

Given that psychology has long been fascinated with the psychological interior, how do critical social psychologists justify their detailed examinations of talk (which is exterior) about private and personal matters?

The mainstream literature suggests racism has become increasingly subtle – why does that make studies that look at language more appropriate for studying racism?

What is so wrong with mainstream psychology's attempt at political neutrality?

Potter (1996b: 135) writes, 'Arguably, one of the most astonishing omissions in psychology for most of the 20th century has been the study of what people do: their interactions in the home and workplace.' Similarly, Reicher (2001) is critical of contemporary social psychology for almost completely failing to examine how people act towards each other. What substance do these claims have?

Why is it that the critical enterprise, which holds language as the key to understanding social life, has failed to articulate its mission successfully to students?

Overview of chapters

Before outlining the flow of topics around which the subsequent chapters are organised, I want to mention the features readers will encounter. These features are simple, and consistent with the accessible style adopted in the writing of the book. Each chapter begins with a short overview and is further supported with a brief summary at the conclusion. At the end of each chapter there is a brief list of further readings. This is an 'entry level' text to an area that is ever changing and complex. Accordingly, what is offered here is a simplified version and for this reason I urge readers to follow up the list of further readings that accompanies the conclusion of each chapter. After the Epilogue there is a Glossary of terms that will assist with the new terms introduced in this book. The terms covered in the Glossary are identified in the text in bold the first time they appear.

Structurally, the book features six substantive chapters. These chapters are framed by a Prologue and an Epilogue, which should be regarded as half chapters. While there are many issues that could have been included within these pages, not all of these are covered. This book is not an encyclopaedic overview of the full complexities of this area, but rather a modest attempt to introduce some new ideas current in critical social psychology. The material covered in this book may be classified into three broad sections. The first section (Chapters One and Two) examines and critiques existing practices within social psychology. The second section (Chapters Three and Four) lays the philosophical groundwork for an alternative way of thinking about social life and sketches an alternative, language-based orientation to research within social psychology. The third and final section of the book (Chapters Five and Six) includes material that offers a contrast between the way selected topics have traditionally been studied and how they have been examined by critical social psychologists. These broad sections fit within the structure of the substantive chapters outlined below.

Chapter One critiques traditional social psychological research methods. These methods are illustrated by taking three well-known studies in experimental social psychology and analysing these in terms of critical concerns about methodology and ethics. I argue that these studies are weakened by their reliance on placing participants in artificial situations and deceiving them about the social reality they find themselves in. The argument is made that this method of gathering data is intellectually misplaced and disrespectful of those who willingly offer their time to participate in social psychological research. Unethical treatment of participants does a disservice to the discipline and those who work within it.

In Chapter Two the orientation moves from methodology to an examination of the theory behind the methods of mainstream social psychology. This chapter is

oriented to the question of why mainstream social psychology has aligned itself so closely with positivism and experimentalism. The critical explanation for this alliance suggests that contemporary social psychology has disengaged from history, and has become narrowly focused on a philosophy of science known as positivism. The argument is made that the limited range of methods traditional social psychologists use stems from their desire to be seen to be conducting research which satisfies narrow, positivist definitions of 'science'. Doubts are raised regarding the appropriateness of positivism as the guiding philosophy for social psychology because of the way it encourages reductionism and individualism.

Chapter Three develops the suggestion that a quiet revolution is taking place within the discipline of social psychology. An alternative paradigm, which rests on the view that we are compulsive users and consumers of language, is introduced. The argument advanced is that language is the central feature of social life and this offers a powerful conceptual tool through which we conduct our social activities, and which enables us to engage in the systematic study of human social life. The social constructionist view is introduced providing an alternative paradigm through which social life may be understood and researched. The constructionist view argues that language is active and constructive, and, most importantly, that our psychological experiences are inseparable from language. The chapter concludes with a number of comparisons between experimental and critical work.

Chapter Four introduces readers to an approach to research that comes out of the work of discursive psychology. The action orientation of talk and text is a basic tenet of discursive research. The main assumptions of discourse analytic work are spelled out through a 'fly-on-the-wall' tutorial in which a series of virtual students ask questions and discuss issues with virtual tutors. A key point to emerge from this tutorial is the reiteration of language as primary in defining our social worlds. Further, readers are introduced to some of the details of conducting analysis. This is achieved by a systematic, step-by-step approach to interpreting and reading text analytically. This example establishes some basic points about doing analysis, while also highlighting the importance of carefully examining the details of text and studying language use as a form of social action in its own right. For critical social psychologists language is the key to understanding social life.

Chapter Five focuses on prejudice and racism, and begins with a historical review of the area. Also reviewed are both traditional and critical approaches. This review includes coverage of traditional approaches to understanding and conducting research in the area of prejudice. The traditional approaches cover social cognition, personality and group membership as orientations to understanding prejudice. Critical work does not assume that prejudice emanates from the psychological interior, but rather is part of the business that occurs *between* people. Critical work in this area is illustrated with discursive studies that look at discrimination based on gender and sexual orientation. Racism is also covered in this chapter. Initially this topic is shown to be one that may be increasingly characterised by subtlety and complexity. Racism has been extensively studied