DECONSTRUCTING SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

Edited by
Ian Parker and John Shotter
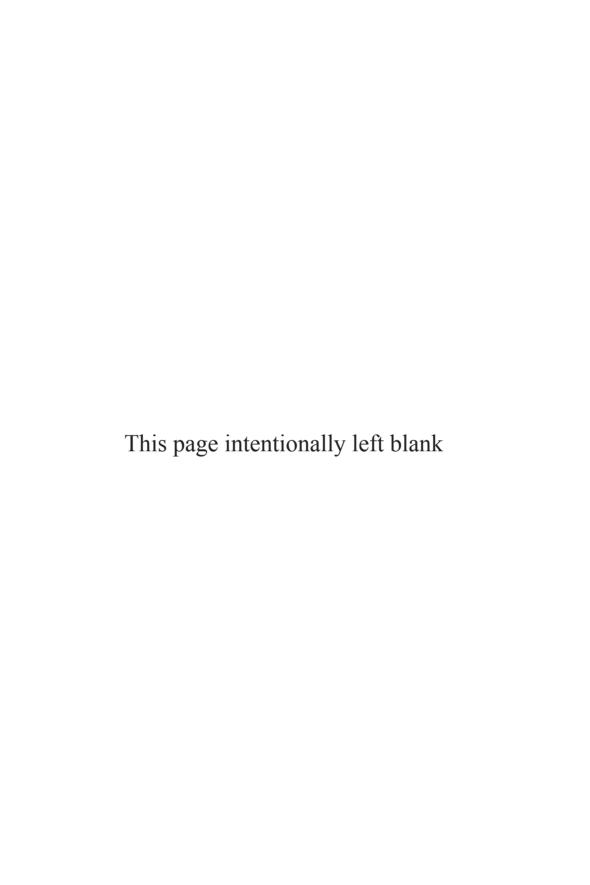
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and
JOHN SHOTTER

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ROUTLEDGE
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INTRODUCTION

Ian Parker and John Shotter

This book follows in the wake of *Reconstructing Social Psychology*
(Armistead 1974) – an influential collection of papers published
more than a decade and a half ago which was critical of the
theories and assumptions in the discipline. Then, social
psychology appeared to be in the middle of a resolvable crisis. Now
we realise the problems were more deeply rooted. For the crisis is
not to be found just in the theories and assumptions of social
psychology, but in a whole set of 'crises' to do with the very
character of the conduct of western intellectual life. They are
implicit in the *practices* and *institutions* within which not only social
psychological knowledge, but all our knowledge, is produced. It is
these practices which must be criticised and changed if these crises
are to be resolved. We need to press forward the critical dynamic
which *Reconstructing Social Psychology* encouraged, and to draw
upon contemporary theoretical debates to unravel the ways in
which the very nature of our knowledge-producing practices and
institutions entrap us, and lead us into simply reproducing
unchanged what in fact we thought we were reconstructing.

DECONSTRUCTION AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY'S
CONSTRUCTION OF ITS OWN SUBJECT MATTER

What is 'deconstruction', and why is a movement in literary
criticism (which, to the extent that it uses literary devices in its
conduct, has dared even to criticise philosophy) of relevance at all
to the crisis in social psychology? While philosophy may be
vulnerable to such a form of criticism, why should a concern with

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the nature of the literary and rhetorical devices constituting the structure of a *text* be of concern to *scientific* psychologists?

We have no doubts at all about the powers of language as a story-telling medium. We all know we can be moved to tears of pity or joy in contemplating the actions and sufferings of a fictional character in a non-existent world; that people can easily tell us lies and deceive us; that we can easily deceive ourselves. Hence our concern in psychology with trying to be scientific: we are aware of the persuasive force of language alone, and attempt to guard ourselves against its powers to mislead us by taking account in our formulations of publicly available evidence and observations. Second, the fact is that until now we have ignored (or repressed) the degree to which social psychology is textually constituted. Whatever else is involved in the doing of a science, a central activity is the writing and publishing of textual material. Indeed, just as this book illustrates, without written texts, social psychology would be not only unable to formulate and instruct its practitioners in its theories, methods and procedures, and to argue for their correctness, it would also be unable to be self-critical, and to entertain alternative versions of itself.

Thus we once again face the anxiety we had hoped to avoid by using our concern with observation and evidence. Could it be that our scientifically acquired knowledge of the world and ourselves is not determined by our and the world's 'natures' to anything like the degree we have believed (and hoped) in the past; and that instead our knowledge is influenced by the 'ways', the literary and textual means, we use in formulating our concerns (Gergen 1985)? To go further: could it be that we spend our time researching into fictions of our own making? These are the questions 'deconstruction' faces us with. They arise out of the peculiar nature of academic textual communication.

The strange and special thing about an academic text, which makes it quite different from everyday face-to-face talk, is that by the use of certain strategies and devices, as well as already predetermined meanings, one is able to construct a text which can be understood (by those who are a party to such 'moves') in a way divorced from any reference to any local and immediate contexts. Textual communication can be (relatively) *decontextualised.* Everyday talk, on the other hand, is marked by its vagueness and openness, by the fact that only those taking part in it can

understand its drift; the meanings concerned are not wholly predetermined, they are negotiated by those involved, on the spot, in relation to the circumstances in which they are involved (see Shotter, this volume, Chapter 11). Everyday talk is *situated* or *contextualised*, and relies upon its situation (its circumstances) for its sense. But more than that, its use is for practical purposes, and it is understood 'practically', i.e. each statement is responded to in terms of its practical import in the immediate (but symbolic) context of its utterance – hence, the opacity of written transcripts of such talk. To the uninvolved reader, they are disorderly, they lack coherence; the reader lacks access to the 'background' in terms of which the recorded utterances make sense. Academic texts are different: they do make sense to the reflective, uninvolved reader. Irrespective of their surrounding circumstances, in their reading of the text, readers seem able to construct a new context (from the syntactically related parts of the text), an *intralinguistic* context, in terms of which the text itself makes sense.

VARIETIES OF DECONSTRUCTION

In discussing the 'deconstruction' of such textual based activities, we should make clear that in this book, there are at least three different senses in which this term is employed. The first is that derived from the work of Jacques Derrida (1976, 1978, 1982b), who offers a series of techniques and examples which show how texts – *systematic* texts of a philosophical, scientific, or of any everyday kind – can, so to speak, be subverted. They can all be revealed as containing 'hidden', internal contradictions, and the absent or 'repressed' meanings can be made visible. Derrida's spectre hangs over the discussions (and destructions) of texts, narratives, and rhetorics in the chapters making up Part 1 of this book. But, as Erica Burman points out in Chapter 15, this form of deconstruction does not automatically lead to reconstruction. Allowing repressed terms a voice within a discourse is not the same as them speaking within a discourse of their own.

This leads us on to the second sense in which 'deconstruction' is used in this book, the sense which in fact predominates. It is concerned with what Foucault (1977, 1980, 1981) calls the *genealogy* of a social formation, whether it be an academic discipline, a social technology it legitimates, or the form of

subjectivity it induces within the form of social control it institutes. In taking a genealogical approach, Foucault subverts the privilege classically afforded *systematicity* in academic analyses. He wants to uncover the working not of abstract principles and universal laws, but the particular and local (i.e. irregular and discontinuous) operation of the actual power relations at work in structuring social forms in the modern world. This emphasis upon revealing the 'workings' of disciplines (whether academic or otherwise), of power and its resistance, is present in Part 2. Yet, although there are important differences between Derridian and Foucauldian forms of 'deconstruction', both can be used to make visible the otherwise 'hidden' social and political processes in the *orderly* products of academics. But are such revelations enough?

This brings us to a third sense of the term, one which reveals in fact a degree of resistance to the rather elitist and alienating language of post-structuralism itself. To 'deconstruct' in this final, third sense, is not just to unravel hidden assumptions and to uncover repressed meanings, but to bring to the fore concerns altogether different from those implicated in the discourses concerned. It is here, for example, that feminist work on the social construction of gender is situated. Psychoanalytic notions (often, but not always drawing upon Lacan's post-structuralist ideas) – to the extent that they afford a space for the exploration of an 'other' in a more radical sense than a mere polar contrary – are prominent here. It is this third sense which is represented in Part 3, and it is here that an approach to politics in terms of a political economy of voice and silence is stressed.

For this we feel, in the end, is the subject matter of politics: a struggle to do with a scarcity of opportunities to be someone, i.e. of opportunities to speak about who and what one is, and about what one feels one needs in one's future in continuing to be oneself, and to have what one says taken seriously and responded to by the others around one. Only in such circumstances, in which one can play an influential part in determining one's own future, can one be said to be leading one's own life and not to be oppressed.

DECONSTRUCTION AND RHETORIC

In the rest of this Introduction we would like to begin with an account of the first (Derridian) sense of deconstruction, and some

of the general issues of textuality and power this work raises. We will draw attention to links with other useful work on meaning, and develop arguments about the role of contemporary discourses in psychology, here making use of the second, looser sense of deconstruction. Later, however, we shall inevitably find ourselves in the realm of politics, and our deconstruction widens out into the third sense we discussed above – to do with attempts to resist some of the hidden powers and forces at work in currently, unreconstructed versions of social psychology.

To turn then to the nature of the processes by which social psychology produces a new, *intralinguistic* reality to research into, to replace the actual, everyday world of social life. What is the general nature of the linguistic and textual strategies and devices by which this effect is achieved?

First, it is necessary to emphasise that, as most theorists of language since Saussure (1974) have claimed, language does not work by combining a set of isolated, unchanging, atomic elements, but by making and marking *differences* within a global, temporally developing totality (of speech sounds, for example). Thus what something 'is', can only ever be characterised linguistically in terms of its distinctive features: it owes the kind of distinctiveness we perceive it as having in our lives, its significance, not only to its relations with (and thus differences from) other 'parts' or 'aspects' of a present totality, but also to some 'part' of a totality in the past, out of which it was differentiated. (If this is all too abstract, think of the child's development of speech sounds, as he or she learns to articulate within the otherwise vague sounds they make, some clear differences.) Thus any attempt to talk about a particular part of such a system, assumes that *always already* the whole system is on hand as an 'invisible' background. For any use of a 'difference' remains a mere 'promise' of a contrast, until reference to the other polarity of the contrast is ultimately and actually made. However, as Derrida (1978) points out, this reference may be *deferred* in time, sometimes indefinitely. (Deconstruction also, we must add, subverts the notion of 'totality' which we are using here as a step in our account.)

This reliance upon differences, *whilst* deferring reference to both sides of the polarity constituting the significance of a text, is where all our problems lie. For no element of a text can function as a sign without relating to another element, one which is not

itself actually present. These problems become particularly acute in supposedly *systematic writing,* the type of writing common in scientific social psychology, which assumes that a 'bit' of experience can be discussed independently both of whose experience it is and the context in which it occurs. The aim in such writing is to construct a system of dependencies (or dominations), a set of scientific laws of behaviour. Within language itself, however, no one would ever claim, for instance, that just because the sound signifying /m/ *depends* for its signification upon its relations to the sound signifying /n/, that /m/ *dominates* /n/ – for /n/ clearly also depends upon /m/. Yet people *do* try to suggest in their textually expressed theories, that certain terms, instead of being mutually interdependent, are 'logically' dependent upon others, i.e. they are derived from them, or are dominated by them.

It is here that Derrida's (1976) attack upon the 'ruling illusion' of Western ways of thinking and philosophising – that they can somehow proceed without taking their reliance upon writing into account, and can simply present themselves as a matter of orderly and systematic *thought* – which has proved particularly devastating. For what he has shown, by subjecting philosophical texts to literary analysis, is their essential *differential* structure, and how this structure undermines any claim that they can provide indubitable foundations for knowledge. He shows all such structures to be unstable, for all the relations of one-way dependency relations are in reality (just as in the example of a language's sound system above) two-way ones; the claims to truth made could just as equally be the other way round. Indeed, he goes a step further and, following Nietzsche, he unmasks the claims to systematic knowledge made in the dominant texts of our culture, as elaborate schemes for preserving and disguising the intellectual will-to- power.

TEXTUAL TRICKS AND STRATEGIES

In their attempts to represent the open, vague, temporally changing nature of the world as closed, well-defined, and unchanging, they have made use of certain textual and rhetorical strategies to construct a closed set of intralinguistic references. In other words, in moving from an ordinary conversational use of language to the construction of such systematic texts, there is a transition from a reliance on practical meaning, upon reference

to the immediate context, to a reliance upon links with what has already been, or with what might be said. In essence, there is a decrease of reference to what 'is' with a consequent increase of reference to what 'might be', in other words, to fictions. Such a consequence, however, requires the development of methods for *warranting* in the course of one's talk one's claims about what 'might be' as being what 'is'. It is by appeal to such methods to give support to one's claims, that those who know such procedures can construct their statements as factual statements – and claim authority for them as revealing a special 'true' reality behind appearances – without any reference to the everyday context of their claims. About such textually structured ways of talking, Dreyfus and Rabinow (1982), in their discussion of Foucault, say:

> This exotic species of speech act flourished in especially pure form in Greece around 300 BC, when Plato became explicitly interested in the rules that enabled speakers to be taken seriously, and, by extrapolating the relative context independence of such speech acts to total independence, invented pure theory.
>
> (*Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982: 48*)

What this means (now just as much as then) is that certain speakers, those with a training in certain special techniques – supposedly to do with the powers of the mind to make contact with reality – are privileged to speak with authority beyond the range of their merely personal experience.

Let us examine what some of these special techniques are: First, we should mention Marx and Engels's (1977: 66–7) account of the tricks involved in the production of 'ruling illusions' – their concern here is with how something *imaginary* can be posited as 'ruling' our lives and with how we can become victims of fictions of our own devising. The three tricks involved are discussed in Shotter (this volume), so we will not mention them further here, except to remark upon their resemblance to the 'controls' required for the collecting and relating of data to theory in the doing of experiments. The second textual process we would like to draw attention to has been called by Ossorio (1981) the *ex post facto* fact fallacy: it is to do with the concealing or hiding of the social origins of 'ruling illusions'. The general form of the temporal sequence of events involved is as follows:

(a) First, a statement is formulated as a description of a state of affairs which, although we may not realise at the time, is *open* to a number of possible interpretations.

(b) We are then tempted to accept the statement as true.

(c) By its very nature the statement then 'affords' or 'permits' the making of further statements, now of a more well articulated nature.

(d) The initial interpretation (already accepted as true) is now perceived *retrospectively* as owing its now quite definite character to its place 'within' the now well-specified context produced by the later statements – it has been 'given' or 'lent' a determinate character in their terms which it did not, in its original *openness*, actually have.

Someone who has studied its nature in relation to scientific developments, is Fleck (1979). He comments upon the general nature of the process as follows:

> Once a statement is published it constitutes part of the social forces which form concepts and create habits of thought. Together with all other statements it determines 'what cannot be thought of in any other way'. Even if a particular statement is contested, we grow up with its uncertainty which, circulating in society, reinforces its social effect. It becomes a self- evident reality which, in turn, conditions our further acts of cognition. There emerges a closed, harmonious system within which the logical origin of individual elements can no longer be traced.
>
> *(Fleck 1979: 37)*

In attempting retrospectively to understand the origins and development (and the current movement) of our thought, we describe their nature within our to an extent now finished and systematic schematisms. But the trouble is, once 'inside' such systems, it is extremely difficult to escape from them. We can, as Stolzenberg (1978) puts it, become 'entrapped' within them in the following sense: that 'an objective demonstration that certain of the beliefs are incorrect' can exist, but 'certain of the attitudes and habits of thought prevent this from being recognised' (1978: 224). And the attitudes and habits of thought which prevent those

within the system from recognising its inadequacies arise out of them ignoring what Stolzenberg (1978: 224) calls 'those considerations of standpoint that have the effect of *maintaining* the system.'

In other words, their plight arises, not just from them ignoring the fact that they have located themselves within a particular discursive or intralinguistic reality (sustained by a discourse couched within a particular idiom), but also from the fact that their (self-contained, systematic) way of talking does not 'afford' or 'permit' the formulation of questions about its relations to its socio-historical surroundings. Syntax masquerades as meaning to such an effect, that, as Wittgenstein (1953, no. 104) points out, 'We predicate of the thing what lies in the method of representing it . . . .'

PROFESSIONAL DISCOURSES

To learn to speak these professional discourses is to learn a vocabulary and a set of analytic procedures for 'seeing' what is going on (in the everyday activities under study) in the appropriate professional terms. For we must see only the partially ordered affairs of everyday life, which are open to many interpretations (see the *ex post facto* facts fallacy above), *as if* they are events of a certain well defined kind. But to 'see' in the 'theory-laden' kind of way, we require training. For, to the extent that all theoretical writing claims that things are not what they ordinarily seem to be, but are 'in reality' something else, the terms of a theory are not intelligible in the same way as terms in ordinary language. They need a special form of introduction: if people want to be taken seriously as making *scientific* claims, they need to be 'instructed' (and now even 'chartered', i.e. officially certified and qualified) in how to see various social phenomena *as* having a certain psychological character, e.g. how to see them as 'social representations', *as* 'prejudices', *as* 'attitudes', *as* 'attributions', *as* 'learned helplessness', etc. The effect of this 'transformation' – of an everyday world, in which ordinary people act according to their own reasons, into a professional world of behaviours, readily categorised for study as to their causes – is the construction of a world in which only the voice of the professional has currency, while the voices of those outside are rendered silent.

To put the matter in Garfinkel's (1967) terms, the activities of

everyday life are, quite literally, *made* 'rationally-visible-and-reportable' within the institutional order of the profession, and quite literally, *made* 'rationally-*in*visible' within their own terms. But more than that, as the various forms of deconstruction displayed in this book reveal, much that has been rendered 'invisible' has also been *repressed* – by being embedded within larger, all embracing orders. These larger orders achieve their influence whenever any breakdowns or puzzling circumstances arise: for it is then, in making repairs, or in formulating explanations, clarifications, etc., i.e. giving accounts of 'what is happening', that reference to such orders is made. They provide the final court of appeal. So, although social psychology's most important practice might seem to be its explicit 'methodology', within the actual day-to-day conduct of social psychology as a professional enterprise, this 'methodology' only has sense, and only makes sense, in the context of the use and production of *written texts* and the professionalised images of human beings they purvey. All professional psychology and social psychology moves from text to text, usually beginning with the reading of already written texts, and ending in the writing of further texts. Hence, all the problems identified by Derrida, to do with the sources of a text's authority, apply in Social Psychology. Whether it is to be found in certain, special scientific techniques within the profession, or outside in the practices of everyday life, is according to him an undecidable question. How should claims to truth now be warranted?

This same confusion and undecidability is readily apparent also, in a brief but crucial section in a report prepared for the British Psychological Society (BPS 1988: 45–6) on the future of the psychological sciences. It states in para. 12.1: '[A]Chartered psychologist, should be able to indicate clearly the extent to which the procedures they adopt have been validated . . . . [But] what are the criteria for legitimate claims?' How should one warrant one's claims? Even within the BPS itself there are, as the report says, 'clearly . . .grounds for controversy,' for the fact is that:

> If, in addition to quantification, objectivity, and openness, 'scientific' should be taken to mean the control of all salient variables, then clearly many practical aspects of psychology cannot be evaluated from a strictly scientific point of

view . . . . Many applied psychologists believe that the validity of their practice can only be established by extra-scientific procedures.

(para. 12.2)

In discussing how they might proceed in the future, psychologists were undecided:

A fair proportion of the submissions to the Working Party noted that while psychology may have established its credibility on the basis of its scientific approach, an over-reliance in the future on such an approach may serve to lessen the impact of psychology in the public domain. Nevertheless, other submissions coherently argued that the scientific approach had served psychology well and that it should remain the dominant model.

(para. 12.3)

Either way it would seem that the criteria to which one should appeal for deciding the legitimacy of one's claims should now be discussed in terms not of truth, but of professional interest (see section 18 of the report: *The Marketing of Psychology*, especially para. 18.10, the marketing analogy; and para. 18.11, delivering the goods to other professions). Deconstruction, on the other hand, with its associated return to rhetoric, gives us another way: public discussion and political action.

CONSEQUENCES

Garfinkel (1967: 44–65) discusses the feelings of anger occasioned by the 'experiments' he had his students do upon unsuspecting people, in which they transgressed, in an attempt to make them explicit, the rights and duties, the 'moralities' (Sabini and Silver 1982) implicit in everyday conversational interchanges. The anger occurs because the nature of such 'open' interchanges is such that those involved in them should have to negotiate in 'making sense' of their common circumstances (see Shotter, this volume, Chapter 11). To 'close' negotiations prematurely by imposing a set of already determined meanings, is to deny people these rights. Such feelings of anger at being 'silenced' are now beginning to be

extensively reported in the writings of women, and of colonised peoples (Smith 1988; Spender 1980; Thiong'o 1987). The deconstruction of the theoretical texts in social psychology, which fail to give a voice to oppressed people, has to be linked with a deconstruction of the institutional apparatus of psychology. This much is clear from the following bizarre paragraph from the BPS future of the psychological sciences report:

> Para. 21.1. *A Significant Intervention at the Harrogate Conference.* During a discussion period at the Harrogate conference a female (*sic*) participant made a vigorous contribution .... She suggested that the language we use affects the way we think and that sexist language had a distorting effect both on the nature of psychology and the nature of personal relations. The reaction of the audience was not easy to inter- pret, but it is safe to say that it was not overtly positive or supportive of her views.
>
> (*BPS 1988: 77*)

No matter how benevolent one as a psychologist may be towards those one studies, no matter how concerned with 'their' liberation, with 'their' betterment, with preventing 'their' victimisation, etc., the fact is that 'their' lives are made sense of in terms which do not in fact make sense to 'them'. They only make sense, as Smith (1988) points out, within the 'ruling apparatuses' of the State, e.g. within schools, universities, polytechnics, the law and the police, health care, social welfare policy, etc. In such apparatuses the 'relations of ruling', as we might call them, are mediated by various discourses, texts, or idioms, certain accepted, proper, or professional ways of talking within which one can only properly have a place by being 'licenced', by gaining the appropriate credentials – otherwise, one runs the risk of having what one says not taken seriously, ignored as 'unprofessional'.

These, then, are some of the dilemmas we face: although one may pride oneself upon one's radical stance, upon one's attempts to subvert oppressive projects, upon one's ability to reveal the moral scandals and hypocrisy at the heart of 'their' activities, if one wants to speak as a professional, the fact remains that one usually continues to participate in the very discipline that makes those activities impossible. (It *could* also be argued that professional psychology does provide some powerful 'tools' for human better-

ment; and it would be foolish to recommend their destruction.)

What seems to be required is the deconstruction of the whole (Enlightenment) project of an intellectual élite discovering the basic principles of mind and society. Instead, the intellectual class might be seen as society's 'psychological instrument' (Vygotsky 1966) makers, and an attempt made to reconstruct the aim of social studies as a rhetorical enterprise in which the voices of those who are other than professional 'scientists' can also be heard. Then it might be possible to construct a real (as opposed to counterfeit) set of analytic procedures and terms, for a proper emancipatory social psychology. To a first approximation, the task is, we feel, as stated by Clifford Geertz:

> The problem of the integration of social life becomes one of making it possible for people inhabiting different worlds to have genuine, and reciprocal, impact upon one another. If it is true that insofar as there is a general consciousness it consists in the interplay of a disorderly crowd of not wholly commensurable visions, then the vitality of that consciousness depends upon creating conditions under which such interplay will occur. And for that, the first step is surely to accept the depth of the differences; the second to understand what these differences are; and the third to construct some sort of vocabulary in which they can be publicly formulated.
>
> (*Geertz 1983: 161*)

But it is at this point we must break off Geertz's account, for he then goes on simply to list the *academic disciplines* which would then be enabled to give 'a credible account of themselves to one another'.

But the problem is more than a purely academic one; it is a practical–political one too: that of devising the kind of analytic vocabularies and arenas in public life for their use, in which all can participate in the interplay of which Geertz speaks. And this is why we feel the processes of deconstruction displayed in this book are important. For deconstruction cannot lead to a proper pluralism, nor is Geertz's vision of the interplay of a disorderly crowd of not wholly commensurable visions possible, while present power relations remain intact. Thus, as we see it, although deconstruction does work against the repression of both concepts and

subjects in psychology, it is only *one* strategy among others. It is necessary for critical opposition to be plural and many-faceted, and to be open to different tactics at different times. But this task is much easier to describe in theory than to achieve in practice.