# TRAINING PSYCHOLOGISTS AND THE DEFORMATION OF PSYCHOLOGY: A CONVERSATION WITH ERICA BURMAN AND IAN PARKER

*A FORMAÇÃO DOS PSICÓLOGOS E A DEFORMAÇÃO DA PSICOLOGIA: UMA CONVERSA COM ERICA BURMAN E IAN PARKER*

*LA FORMACIÓN DE LOS PSICOLOGOS Y LA DEFORMACIÓN DE LA PSICOLOGÍA: UNA CONVERSA CON ERICA BURMAN Y IAN PARKER*

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## Introduction

Erica Burman and Ian Parker are two key academics and worldwide-known authors on critical psychology. Despite their different and peculiar academic trajectories, as will be presented in this interview, they articulated their political and theoretical interests to co-found the Discourse Unit in 1991. Since then, as co-directors of such trans-institutional collaborative centre, they have been organising uncountable academic activities, texts, and supervisions, supporting a variety of qualitative and theoretical research projects, and contributing to the development of radical theory and practice. Their work has been relevant to researchers and activists from the 6 continents who had the honour to work with them.

Erica Burman is Professor of Education, at Manchester Institute of Education, at The University of Manchester (United Kingdom). She was recently Adjunct Professor at Oslo and Akershus University College (Norway) and has held visiting professorial posts in South Africa, Brazil and Spain. She is a feminist and childhood researcher, supervisor and consultant working around questions of 'race', gender and class inequalities, particularly in relation to mental health and psychological issues and intersections of state and interpersonal violence. She is also a qualified Group Analyst. She has written dozens of books, book chapters and academic papers, which were translated into different languages. Some of her latest texts are: (a) *Fanon, education, action: child as method* (Burman, 2018); (b) *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology* (Burman, 2017); (c) *Developments: child, image, nation (*Burman, 2008). Ian Parker is Honorary Professorial Research Fellow in Manchester Institute of Education at the University of Manchester, Emeritus Professor of Management at the University of Leicester, and has visiting professorial posts in Belgium, Brazil, South Africa, Spain and the United Kingdom. He also wrote dozens of books, book chapters and academic papers, which were translated into various languages in the field of psychoanalysis, psychology and social theory, with a particular focus on discourse, critical psychology, mental health and political practice. He is a practising psychoanalyst, and is currently President of the College of Psychoanalysts – United Kingdom. He is Secretary of Manchester Psychoanalytic Matrix and Managing Editor of the Annual Review of

Critical Psychology. He is a Fellow of the British Psychological Society and the Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce. Some of his latest texts are: (a) *Revolutionary keywords for a new left* (Parker, 2017); (b) *Handbook of Critical Psychology* (Parker, 2015a); and (c) *Critical Discursive Psychology* (Parker, 2015b).

The following interview was carried out on the 10th of July, 2017, just after the Discourse Unit Global Seminar, witch gathered almost 100 academics from more than 30 countries, in order to discuss and create collaboration on topics such as discourse, research, language, subjectivity, and practice. The central topic of the interview was the psychology training process.

## Interview

*— You both have different trajectories. So, it would be very interesting to start the interview by talking about how and why you have chosen to be trained as psychologists. Could you tell us about the training process? How was it back when you were students?*

**Ian Parker –** For me it was complete chance. I started my first degree in Botany and Zoology at University. I only started that degree because I was doing very badly in high school and there was a new biology teacher which introduced the subject of botany. I then did the botany and zoology exams in technical high school and went to university after working for a few years. I did very badly in the exams at university!

*— So, that's why your degree includes botany…*

**Ian Parker –** I did very badly at those exams and had to choose a third subject. I chose psychology which I had never heard of and knew nothing about. I thought it was quite good fun and wanted to know how it worked.

*— Why fun?*

**Ian Parker –** Because you did experiments on people, and the experiments were completely stupid and irrelevant to peoples lives. But I knew that when I started the psychology course that psychology had an influence and power over peoples lives; to diagnose people and determine their lives trajectories. I wanted to know how psychology functioned. So, I chose to do a psychology degree instead. I then started another course at another University, and started to study psychology in 1978. So, it was complete chance!

*— These ideas might be also related to your Marxist trajectory up to that moment, right I remember once you told this very funny story about a colleague that told you that it was a mistake to be trained as a psychologist, that you shouldn't be engaged in such a bourgeois discipline (laughs).*

**Ian Parker –** (Laughs) That's right, but they said that to me after I said I was interested in studying psychology. So, there was a contradiction between the Marxism and the psychology. I then had to find the way of making the connection. One way of making the connection was to understand how psychology operates as a form of ideology.

The connection between the theories of Marxism and the theories in psychology was a much more difficult one to make. I only started to make those connection over the next ten years.

**Erica Burman -** My education trajectory was rather different. It was all about gender and class, really. I was a high achieving girl in an all-girls school and it was presumed I would go to university, at a moment where the government was supporting young people to study in higher education. That's very important because it's very different now.

**Ian Parker –** It's very, very important because there were grants available for students to study at university. If there had not been grants I would not have gone to university.

**Erica Burman –** So, these grants paid for the tuition and paid also a bursary for the student. So it was presumed that if you were clever enough you would go to University for the most people. I was not sure what to do, psychology was a new subject, it was not a school subject, it was a new subject at Universities, and new to be thought about.

**Ian Parker –** That's right, we never had psychology at school. Never, never heard of it.

**Erica Burman –** So it was very new, this psychology at school. I decided, I thought about lots of things and I thought that psychology would combine everything in a way and the degree I took was developmental psychology with cognitive studies, graduating in 1981.

**Ian Parker -** So you saw psychology as a kind of a worldview?

**Erica Burman –** I saw it as combining all the philosophical and the conceptual issues that I thought, obviously, were important. It was a joint degree, very particular. Sussex University, at that time, had different kinds of psychology and the developmental psychology was mainly in cultural studies, in the school of cultural and community studies. In social sciences, it was joint with cognitive studies. It was at a particular moment in Anglo-American psychology where developmental psychology and the post-information processing models that led to artificial intelligence were actually very close. The whole idea of using the computational model to refine the theories we used to think about human thinking and human models of developmental work were overlapping. It was before the division in artificial intelligence between human and computer modeling and expert systems, whereas expert systems gave up the idea of having any relationship with any ideas about how people think and just tried to do the job as efficiently as possible. So, for me, that was how I came into psychology. And the kind of psychology that you found, Ian, was the one we made fun of, as being stupid and all the social psychology experiments…

**Ian Parker –** Oh no! It wasn't social psychology specifically, all of psychology.

**Erica Burman –** So, I spent a brief moment being quite committed to psychology in the scientific approach.

*– So it was a serious matter for you than?*

**Erica Burman –** But the good thing was that I also had been taught compulsory courses on philosophical thinking, and philosophy of mind. Actually, I think they were the most useful parts of my degree. I was taught by very well-known theorists, like Margaret Boden, who was very engaged in artificial intelligence, in a way that I am not now.

I became very impressed with how stupid computers were. So, I became progressively disillusioned with the psychology side of things as I finished my degree and I started to think about what I was going to do. So, I went straight from school to university. It was only Sussex that had these kind of joint degree and specialized in different kinds of degrees in psychology, which they don't have anymore. Then I didn't know what to do, and, by accident, got a doctoral place.

— *It's interesting because you started psychology either because it was fun or because it combined issues you considered important, but you were both disappointed with the discipline very soon. Still, you both continue to study Psychology. Why was that?*

**Ian Parker** — I was just thinking that maybe a common thing between Erica and me, in our experiences, is that Erica had another philosophical theoretical perspective in her degree, to think about psychology, like philosophy of mind, and what I encountered in my psychology degree was another philosophical theoretical perspective from the work of Ron Harré and speech-act approaches. So, in both cases, there was a way of stepping back from psychology and conceptualizing the problems with it, and looking at alternatives.

— *So, you had contact with these authors still during your training in Psychology?*

**Ian Parker** — We had lectures about these people, yes, we did. Harré did visit Plymouth Polytechnic, which is where I ended up getting my first degree in psychology, in my final year. So, we had that exposure.

— *So this was a link for you to continue in Psychology…*

**Ian Parker** — Yes, and I'm not sure whether it was a good or a bad thing to be honest, because it kept me in psychology. You see, I could have developed a critique of psychology which I had from the beginning, maintained that critique from the Marxist perspective, but these other paradigm revolution critiques from linguistics provided a way of staying in psychology and doing something critical inside it with qualitative research. It was good for my career, but it kept me inside a discipline that was deeply problematic. I don't know if it was the same with you Erica. It became the solution, but I still stayed in it in some way.

**Erica Burman** — It was a very strange process in my case. I started the psychology degree because I was interested in lots of things. And at that time degrees in nursing were beginning but my head teacher thought it was a too low-status thing for me to do. Then at the end of my psychology degree one of my tutors, at some point, said I should think about doing a PhD, a thought that had never occurred to me. Then, I applied for a PhD place in Sussex, but they said they didn't have any funding and I didn't know what I was going to do next.

— *Ian had this link with the critical perspective within psychology and you were disappointed with psychology as well, Erica. Did you have this link with critical authors as well? Did you do your PhD, so that you could follow these critical perspectives?*

No, I don't think so. I think that my critical orientations were developing separately. I became more engaged with some feminist debates. I had an experience of being quite severely sexually harassed in the final year of University, which was awful but also quite politicizing. It was also a moment when feminist debates were starting to acknowledge different minority positions. Second-wave feminism[1] was fragmenting into different kinds of feminisms and I became involved with the anti-racist feminist mobilizations while I was at Sussex. I, then, came to Manchester and took up a doctoral place and the politics seemed quite separate from psychology at that point. I suppose I found out more about politics. I had already become quite cynical about the politics of Universities from my undergraduate experiences. Some individuals were very supportive but there was a failure of the institution. So, I started to take questions of sexism and harassment seriously. That, for me, as someone from a context where I had been used to occupying a position of privilege was transformative. I think I was a little individualist in many ways, but that really turned me into a feminist, although it wasn't an immediate effect. So, through the process of my doctoral studies, I became more politically engaged, more engaged with other movements. The politics of psychology was something that I made the connection with only later. I think I had some suspicions about the limits of psychological explanation already, but it was only through the process of my own struggles that I could try to find a project that I thought was worthwhile and invent methodologies that seemed appropriate, and not do things I didn't want to do, and then seek for the kind of theoretical frameworks and the debates that were starting to happen with what was called post-structuralist theory and psychoanalysis.

**Ian Parker** – I think, in a way, those other frameworks, so-called post-structuralism, were a gap some way: a gap between the political level and the personal level. The nature of that gap had been addressed or had been made visible to both of us in different ways by feminism, by the second-wave feminism through the 1970's. Such movement was organized around the slogan "personal is political", at this ways in which how it works isn't only though the huge structures of patriarchal oppression but also through everyday interaction, a privilege that men have of having control of situations, dominating a conversation, determining the agenda of meetings, down to the ways in which men and women feel about themselves, how that subjectivity is structured. So, the personal level reflects and maintains, actually, those political processes and that is something that Marxism should've been able to address.

– *It was not at that moment?*

**Ian Parker** – For me, it was something that Marxism should've been able to address but it didn't, because socialist feminism was starting to appear within the left.

– *How did feminism start to take part of your trajectory? I can see this is a common part of both of your trajectories. Erica was telling about the personal experience at the same time with the debates that were arising…*

**Erica Burman** – I was very excluded and felt very alienated from most of the feminist debates that were happening in Sussex University because they spoke to a generalized women's experience that wasn't my experience, at all. So, it was part of the privilege

of white western women positions and experiences that didn't speak to me. My point of entry into feminism came at the point in which that feminism was fragmenting because I became feminist as a Jewish feminist, coming from a minoritised position. The fragmentation of feminism into feminisms acknowledged the different experiences that different women in different contexts had.

**Ian Parker** – For me, it comes in because I was involved with Marxist politics at a moment where feminism was starting to appear inside Marxist politics and inside Marxist organizations.

*– As a critique of Marxist approaches?*

**Ian Parker** – As a critique of the most economically reductive and patriarchal form of Marxism. Not always as a critique of Marxism as such, sometimes as a way of questioning Marxist practices, adding in another dimension to Marxism. Feminism was visible there at that moment and you couldn't ignore it and some of the Marxist did try to ignore it and they tried to write it of as a pretty bourgeois kind of individualism or something, but it appeared for me at a moment, that was exactly at the moment when I started getting involved with Marxism, so it became part of my Marxism. I can't think of Marxism without feminism. It doesn't make sense to me.

*– Feminism was trying to address oppression and inequalities through different concepts, right?*

**Ian Parker** – Yes, through different concepts that address the level of personal experiential relationship to capital exploitation and to systems of power. So, feminism opened up a question and I suppose the feminism appeared as something that forced the question, but feminism as such didn't have all the answers either. So, I think that is why these frameworks, such as Foucault, Derrida, the poststructuralist so-called stuff, started to come in with concepts that would help us to make those connections and theoretical conception.

*– How was your experience in the doctorate, Erica?*

**Erica Burman** – To be honest, I started a doctorate and I got stuck after doing the first year. The first year my doctorate was linked to a project about microprocessors, that we now call computers, in education and I did some experiments. Then, my supervisor and I realized, at least he was able to recognize that, he didn't understand what I was talking about when we had our meetings.

**Ian Parker** – So it was good practice, in terms of training, on his part it was good practice (laughs).

**Erica Burman** – Yes. He then invited me to find another supervisor. I had been about to give up, but I was attending lots of different courses including one on gender and sexuality ran by Elena Lieven, and in the psychology department in child development. I was learning a lot, but it didn't add it up to for me, and I was moving in a whole different set of directions. I changed supervisor and then I did start to do some work on Piaget and age, with a link to concepts of time and development (in the broadest senses). Age was a very social concept and it was a very small part on his book on time, which was

otherwise talked about in terms of logical relations of succession and duration. I then, at another point, got completely stuck because I didn't know what to do with the material. I had spent time in schools, I had interesting conversations with children, I moved away from Piaget's clinical interview.

*— You started to criticize the dominant Piagetian perspective, during this process as well?*

**Erica Burman** – I did, and I was also very impressed by it. I think there is a lot more going for it than Anglo-American traditions usually acknowledge. I, then, spent a period of time not sure what I was going to do. I volunteered with Mind², I applied for jobs as a support worker, which I didn't get. I really had a crisis about what kind of work I was going to do. Through a series of coincidences, I got involved in organizing a workshop with Ian at Manchester Polytechnic and then I was invited to apply for a job at Manchester Polytechnic, which I got. So, it's as accidental as that. One moment I thought: Should I try to train as a clinical psychologist? Do I really wanted to do this? Should I train in social work? Should I do this? Should I do that? I could've gone in a whole range of directions, but, in the end, I happened to be in a position which I was invited to apply for a job, which I got…

*— That was before you finished your thesis?*

**Erica Burman** –  It was well before I finished my thesis, although I had the three years of working, my funding had finished, but I hadn't completed that process. It was only after I had done the first two years of teaching when they advertised a new post, I applied for it and they said I had to commit to finishing my PhD, and I then thought I would really have to do that, and I did. In fact, I found the experience of having to prepare lectures incredibly helpful for curing writers` block. When you have to write and have to produce stuff, and have to reconcile with the disappointment and the imperfection of what you produced, and you have to submit it by a deadline. That was what enabled me to finish. So, I started at my PhD full time and I finished it very part time, partly because I had to, in order to keep my job.

**Ian Parker** – I had my PhD before I got my job at Manchester Polytechnic.

*— You finished your PhD and then you got the job?*

**Ian Parker** – That's right. Some of my experiences are different from Erica. I think she had this push for writing for having to prepare the lectures, but instead, in my case, the key experience was the experience of being involved with political organizations. The training that we had was political education, inside left organizations, which included training on how to go to a meeting with a group of comrades and intervene in the meeting. So certain people would be told "you speak about this, and you speak about that". There was a kind of push to speak and to intervene and to argue, and I think I treated conference papers and seminars presentations in that kind of way.

*— More than teaching?*

**Ian Parker** – Yes, because it was before I did any teaching. I hadn't done any teaching and I had no idea how to teach. So, the push to write came from preparing and arguing and treating academic conference presentations as if they were political intervention, and in some way I imagined that they were political interventions. Using Foucault to talk about power in a psychology conference was a political intervention.

*– And, of course, you keep thinking like that now…*

**Ian Parker** – Yes, I can't stop thinking like that.

**Erica Burman** – There are a couple of general points I want to make. You can see how it was a succession of accidents. Now people sometimes say to us "How did you do this, or how did you get to that?", and it couldn't be planned!

**Ian Parker** - If we had planned it, it wouldn't have happened, because you know what conditions were and which we were, responding moment by moment to different commands, either from the institutions, invitations or suggestions.

*– I think in both cases you were very committed to different social arenas, Marxism, Jewish feminism and all this discussion. So, the training process itself wasn't something that led you to this kind of job or trajectory.*

**Ian Parker** – I think that's something that you recognize in some of our PhD students that want to come and work with us. They are pushed someway, something in them are pushing them to speak about issues in psychology or education and it comes from another sphere of life, and I think that's what attracts us to take on those students.

*– Very interesting! And which were other social movements and political arenas you were both involved with at that moment?*

**Erica Burman** – While I was not doing my PhD, I was getting involved in various political movements at the time and it was a moment when there was a lot of mobilization against nuclear armaments, during early to mid 1980s. In fact, the psychology department at Manchester University was very involved in the anti-nuclear movement, and were formulating and publicizing some of the arguments for the European anti-nuclear movement. That's when some connections between psychology and environmental issues were being formulated. In that sense, the link with the psychology was there, but at the same time I was involved in other debates that were happening around. As a culturally--identifying Jew I found much in common with debates emerging from other feminists from minority backgrounds. I also got involved with anti-Zionist movements and debates that were happening within the feminist movement but were about distinguishing anti--Zionism from anti-Semitism and challenging Semitism as it appeared in the form of Zionism as well. I got involved in publishing and editing, politically, before I had ever written or published anything academically. In that sense, I actually had the experience of watching a book, which I was the publisher of, being printed in Manchester Free Press. Such process brought another kind of perspective to the business of writing and publishing, seeing the importance of writing to another set of audiences and being involved from another position. So, whereas Ian became more politicized before he studied psychology, in my case, it came along the way.

*– Given the British empiricist tradition and context, what reflections do you have in relation to your training process in psychology? As far as I can see, it was quite insufficient for the amount of experiences you were having. You were way beyond this training process in order to produce something. I want to understand how you think about the training process itself.*

**Erica Burman** – I think we continuously reflect back on our undergraduate and postgraduate training. At the time we did our doctorate, it was not a regularized training. I think, as we encountered people from other countries, and we had students visiting from other countries, we became more and more aware on how inadequate, how particular and partial, in the sense of coming from a very particular position, the British undergraduate psychology was. We encountered people from Spain, people from Barcelona and so on, realizing that psychology was so different in other countries! We didn't know quite what the alternatives were, so it took some work to find out about that and I think that it's hard for British undergraduates to know that there is anything different in part because they have little or no exposure to non-English sources. It takes some opportunities to know people from other countries, from non-English speaking countries, to become aware that there are other possible psychology traditions.

**Ian Parker** – I think the fact that we didn't have any specific qualitative research training in our postgraduate degrees in psychology meant that we had to search across the social sciences for different methods that would be useful for us.

*– Oh, so you were not trained as qualitative researchers during your degree?*

**Ian Parker** – No, neither of us had qualitative methods in our undergraduate degrees. In my undergraduate degree, I discovered interviewing research very later on and that I could use some of that in my undergraduate dissertation. It was in a very *ad hoc* way. In my postgraduate degree I had no research methods training, I had to attend other conceptual philosophical courses outside the University, but we had no qualitative methods training.

**Erica Burman** – It didn't exist.

**Ian Parker** – It didn't exist. In some ways it was a good thing because it meant that we had to puzzle apart the research ourselves, and when we found other people that were doing that kind of thing we really valued those networks and it was in those networks that Erica and I met each other. Now, there is a danger that with the research methods training, the qualitative methods become framed itself as simple empirical methods. It becomes part of the empiricist apparatus, because there are so many different qualitative methods, as if there is a complete palate, a complete array of methods available for students to choose, as if they could simply take it and apply.

*– Yes, a very instrumental perspective.*

**Erica Burman** – With my exposure to finding out about Piaget`s approach and having to understand and situate it, at the same time, there was also the rise of the feminist research methodology discussion.

**Ian Parker** – They were coming in from outside psychology, and for me they were coming in from other methodology, sociology and sociology of science.

**Erica Burman –** Yes, in the University of Manchester where I did my doctorate, we had discussions across disciplines (at least I mobilized to form a feminist research group, and made some longlasting friendships), so the question of qualitative methodologies, for me, was always linked to feminist research and was inter-disciplinary. We were, at the same time, Ian and I, involved in various psychology networks that were emerging of postgraduate students. We were trying to do non-traditional doctorates, that were not quantitative, not using statistics, which were more philosophical or qualitative in some form and trying to find ways to support and legitimate that. Discursive work was starting to emerge and there were discussions happening in and around about how to sustain that work, finding supervisors who would allow us to do this, or which places were stopping people. Gradually, people began to finish their doctorates and gain positions. It remains a very similar situation now: most departments can tolerate one or two qualitative researchers, but rarely more, even though qualitative research has become inscribed in the British psychology curriculum.

*– Bringing the discussion to present day, if we think about the British University now, there are many students from around the world, so this international arena is set in a sense, and at the same time qualitative research has proliferated a lot, but also in a problematic way. Do you think it has advanced, in the sense of overcoming difficulties, or is it even more problematic today with the intensification of neoliberalism? How has it changed from thirty years ago?*

**Erica Burman –** Originally qualitative approaches in psychology were presumed to be critical interventions, and they did do that work. And they were often treated in a very hostile way. As qualitative research has become more accepted it has also been recuperated. Then, it became part of the neoliberal success story and has been added to a range of approaches that are acceptable.

**Ian Parker –** The appearance of international students in different departments in Britain, since this is the context, is very contradictory because on the one hand, yes, you have students coming from different contexts, but those students are undergraduate students, they are not coming from different traditions. They are coming into psychology to learn about psychology. They come to learn about psychology here and how it is thought here, and this is happening at the very same moment as positivist psychology has become more powerful internationally around the world. They don't really bring alternative perspectives.

*– What about the PhD students?*

**Ian Parker –** It's different with PhD students, because they have been exposed to different training in psychology and I think they are the ones we have really learned from, and that continues to be absolutely crucial for our work. It is crucial in two ways: one, the things we learn about as these students bring new perspectives, and, two, in the way that they break the isolation we felt as being stuck in Britain, and being told that what we did was not really psychology. It becomes clear that British psychology is very quiet, it is not a dominant paradigm, it is very specific and limited to the political-social context in Britain.

**Erica Burman –** We found we were more intelligible and had more interesting conversations with the psychologists from outside Britain.

*– Has the psychology training process changed much since then in Britain?*

**Erica Burman –** There have been lots of changes over the years. The curriculum has changed, now we have state licensing; psychologists are recognized by a professional council (the Health Professions Council). Not academic psychologists, but so-called professional psychologists (clinical, educational, counseling occupational, forensic, sports, and health psychologists). It has created a crisis of identity for the British Psychological Society, as now the British Psychological Society is a scholarly society and there is another body that psychologists and other health professional belong to, and rely upon for their professional status. What that has done is define psychology as one of various health professions, in a way that Ian describes, a certain scientific instrumental kind of profession and every country has their own version of this. The whole training process has undergone a lot of development over the years, while in Europe we have the Bologna agreement[3] which is making the process of training as a psychologist more similar to the British process, in terms of shortening the undergraduate degree.

*– Is that related to practice too? I think there is an important difference between the psychology training process in Brazil and the one under the Bologna agreement. It seems to me that practice is detached from basic psychology degree.*

**Erica Burman:** One of the interesting effects of neoliberalism, and changes in higher education, is the increasing bureaucratization of ethics, so that in many undergraduate courses doing any kind of direct work with a human being is impossible. It can't be done in social work, education… When we were teaching we were making great efforts to set-up placements, or direct contact with services as part of the undergraduate course. That would now be impossible.

**Ian Parker –** I would see those attempts to setup placements not as placements to make psychology students, to practice psychology. But the connection to practice I was interested in the undergraduate degree was in evaluation as a way that services operate. Not enabling students to practice but enabling students to think critically about practice. I don't think the connection with practice at the undergraduate level is necessary. I think that it simply gives more opportunity for people who have practice in being psychologists, who are trying out being psychologists on other people in the outside world. I think it is a bad thing overall.

*– You are talking about the standardized practice of psychologists, right?*

**Ian Parker –** I am simply saying that I am not in favor of encouraging people to work with psychologists and practice in other people.

**Erica Burman –** No, no, no. We actually structured assessment requirements so that students engaged with services, not to evaluate how good they were but to situate how that service worked and to offer some kind of critical perspective on the function of those services. Not all students got that, but some of them did.

**Ian Parker –** That's what I wanted, and that's what you wanted as well.

**Erica Burman –** I think that was a valuable thing to do. If they went into working as a practitioner of those services, unless they had some kind of critical perspective, they

would never have had the opportunity to think about what does a counseling service do, where does it sit within another range of services and how does it work.

**Ian Parker** – I think the key point for me is that some progressive people in psychology see placements as being an intervention that would enable psychology students to understand how psychology works in the real world, and they assume that is a good thing. I do not think that is a good thing. I do not want to encourage undergraduates to start putting their sticky fingers in other people lives.

– *Don't you think it is also possible to have a critical practice in the training process?*

**Ian Parker** – I think you would need a completely different kind psychology degree. Perhaps it wouldn't be a psychology degree, in order to do that. The problem is that, at the moment, there is an increasing specialization, a diversification of practice and methods in psychology, in such a way that every kind of puzzle about ethics and practice is anticipated within the curriculum, so that every critical move is also anticipated, and they have to configure themselves within that broader program. The psychologization that is happening in society isn't only a psychologization in society, it is a psychologization happening within the training programs, so as the students start to think critically about what psychology is, their very mode of thinking critically is absorbed into the apparatus.

– *And what are your thoughts on the future of the psychology training process?*

**Ian Parker** – I'm not very optimist about the blueprints of the future, but I can think, as Erica said, about the way that spaces for critical always exist and could exist. One of the way that those critical practices could be opened up was through some of the undergraduate students working with the postgraduate students. One of the aspects of Discourse Unit I think was very important in the early years is that it started as a support group for undergraduate students but when we started to have postgraduate students, during their PhD, we continued having undergraduate students working with us. That became more of an exception in the later years, but it was very important as a moment that some undergraduate students wanted to learn from the postgraduate students and had a context to think critically about what they were doing.

**Erica Burman** – They were always people from different departments…

**Ian Parker** – Yes, Discourse Unit has never solely been concerned with psychology, we had social workers, education people, nurses.

**Erica Burman** – The Discourse Unit started off as a safe space, a space for people to be welcome, originally undergraduates, doing qualitative work, and people would come to talk and work with us. They knew we were doing interesting work, and they would like to be involved with it.

– *What is the role of the relationship between teachers and students, as well as supervisors and supervisee in the critical approach you are engaged with?*

**Ian Parker** – One way to answer this question is to think about how people come to work with us. Sometimes, people would approach us and say they want to work with a critical approach or a Marxist approach, and ask us what projects we had. But what we

are really interested in is when someone came to us and say they want to work on some approach we know nothing about. I did most of my research precariously through supervising students and participating someway in their research practice, and I want them to bring something new that I could learn from.

— *Like a partnership?*

**Ian Parker** – It's not an equal partnership, but in some way yes, a partnership.

**Erica Burman** – I have an awareness of the challenges and struggles, and as an inevitable component the risks, given how close I was to not complete my degree, of the burden it is to holding that commitment. We've both seen many people that never finished their doctorates and how hard it is. In that sense, it is a very big responsibility supervising someone. I want someone to do a project they are very committed to because I think it is part of what enables them. A political commitment can be part of what we look for and enable in a project. I agree with what Ian said about learning from people. I feel I don't have to know very much about what they are going to do, I learn about the topic through and with them. I need to have enough of a good relationship with that person to feel I can support that person. The project feels worthwhile if I can see what it would do for that person.

**Ian Parker** – We know what a PhD looks like, and we know the variety of waves a PhD can take. I think that is what we learned from our experience, that there is not a fixed approach. We have an understanding of what the range of possible forms are, that could be a PhD, and we are able to guide that. But the content? If we knew what the content was we could write it ourselves. I think the idea of a PhD having a certain form and shape is linked with a production mind, the mass production PhDs. It's connected with a different context today in some Universities. PhDs students take it for granted.

— *That is very important indeed. And what about the undergraduate students?*

**Ian Parker** – One thing is that they have a sense that the methods they are using have to be assembled by them, from the array of different possibilities, has to be put together by the student. Qualitative methods are not cook books, they are not formulated plans that one can apply. An important part of the undergraduate view is that in the final year of study, there is an element of presentations to a group of second years students about the projects they want to do. The second-year students could see the range of different ways of approaching the third-year project and it is not accidental that during that time many more undergraduate students were inspired to carry out qualitative research projects. It challenges the traditional empiricist research, it was more collective in the critical sense.

**Erica Burman** – As well as having the third-year students present to the second-year students, some of the third-year students addressed the second-year students about their projects…

**Ian Parker** – At times, they talked about the difference between different supervisors so it made visible different kinds of research supervision practice, which was very important.

**Erica Burman** – We always say that you can't do discourse analysis on your own and the act of having to work with others and justify, coordinate, debate challenges the

individualism of psychology in the very form of the teaching assessment process. Over the years it becomes increasingly difficult to get students to talk to each other about their work. Even when I helped set up a feminist research group, one of the difficulties was to get the members of the group to talk to each other in detail about their research because they were worried about sharing. We see this very much with undergraduate and postgraduate students. Of course, it is very difficult to talk about your work, that's one kind of problem. Undergraduates have become increasingly fiercely competitive, worried about showing each other their work. Trying to mitigate that dynamic is important. I think this is part of the answer of the question about the role of supervisor or teacher, that is to mobilize and support the relationship between students.

**Ian Parker** – There is one more aspect of this which I want to mention, which is that we work together in Discourse Unit, but we were very careful to not simply mark and double mark each other's work because it would have been perceived as the two of us being in control of the process and simply agreeing with the mark and validating what each other was saying. That perception would not have been the reality, we do argue. We made great effort to involve other people from the department in close supervision in marking the work we supervised. Discourse Unit was often perceived as being Erica and Ian, as being the organizers, but the practice of Discourse Unit and in qualitative research necessarily involved networks of other staff and I think the learning process can only happen this way.

**Erica Burman** – There were other things we could rehearse. When we started to train people and in the early days of interviewing students, we would ask why they wanted to study psychology and they would answer that they wanted to understand themselves. It shifted to wanting to help and understand other people. From there, it shifted to how they wanted to do things to people.

– *This is the majority, isn't it?*

**Erica Burman** – It moves on and now I think they don't interview undergraduates and I don't know what the answers are now, but we would typically encounter undergraduate students who had lost the sense of why they wanted to study psychology, and they were terribly disillusioned. The students had a sense and could remember why they wanted to study psychology at some point.

**Ian Parker** – Well, some of them. All of this process that we are talking about is minority of the students. Most psychology students were instrumental, want to do things to other people and want to have a career or to be…

**Erica Burman** - …highly paid.

**Ian Parker** – We could never force people to this approach and whenever we talked it was always to a small group. We taught large classes, but our arguments were directed to a very small number of students who would be listening to us and taking the arguments seriously. It was those students who we work with. So, all of this entered a context where… We fail most of the time.

**Erica Burman** – The social political context was one. The other issue about teaching in a polytechnic was that we were employees of the local authorities and it was at a moment where there were lots of policies promoting the entry of non-traditional students,

women students, black students. It meant that there was more of a critical constituency in the student population because they had life experiences that did not correspond to the traditional model.

— *This wouldn't happen in the national perspective?*

**Erica Burman** — In those kind of colleges and Universities, not in the more elite ones. In the context where people were supported to study and didn't have to pay to study. One of the transformations we immediately saw as the student fees and tuition fees were introduced[4] was that those populations of students were starting to disappear from our classrooms. So yes, we were always only speaking to a minority of students, but that minority that were open to thinking critically was getting smaller as the student population was getting younger and from more privileged backgrounds. That is the situation now here in Britain.

— *As it's getting more and more expensive to study?*

**Erica Burman** — Only students from middle class backgrounds can afford to come to University now and they are worried about the amount of debt they are accumulating. So, they have to think very instrumentally about a particular direction in psychology and getting a particular kind of job and this starts to work backwards to inform what they think they should do in their projects, so that will make it more likely they get in the clinical psychology course (since most of them want to study clinical psychology and this is the only professional doctoral training that is — currently — state sponsored). Those critical spaces are only ever operating in relation to other kinds of social political contexts.

— *It's interesting because in a certain point, going backwards, you said both of you were only able to study because you were funded somehow. So maybe now if you were students you wouldn't do psychology or study in University.*

**Ian Parker** — No, we probably would not study in University. Class is one of the important dimensions here but there is always a basis of resistance that students in middle class background can consider, so that they notice the way they are represented in the media. We have the dimension of class, but there are always spaces for different kinds of critical reflection in psychology. I think what was crucial then was the intersection of those different types of excluded people and minority experiences speaking to each other and that these experiences can be generalized, that they could learn from each other. What they have in common is the nature of alienation and exploitation in capitalist society.

— *Thank you very much!*

## Endnotes

1     Second-wave feminism can be understood as a period of feminist activism originating in the early 1960s in the United States, focused on acknowledging women's experiences and positions as (in Simone de Beauvoir's words) a 'second sex'.

2     Mind is a British mental health charity. At the time Erica worked there it ran as a federation of autonomously run organisations. Manchester Mind was a campaigning group.

3     The Bologna Agreement is a series of ministerial meetings and agreements between European countries to ensure comparability in the standards and quality of higher-education qualifications.

4     Student tuition fees, and an associated (US-style) Student Loan system were introduced under the Labour (Blair) administration, which were then tripled by the next Conservative coalition government.

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