Deconstruction reassigned? ‘The child’, antipsychology and the fate of the empirical

Benjamin S Bradley
Charles Sturt University, Australia

Abstract
I approach the achievements of Burman’s Deconstructing Developmental Psychology (DDP) by contrasting them with: (a) the (non-)‘deconstructive’ work of Foucault; and (b) Burman’s other critical writings. Questions are thus raised about DDP’s stance to antidevelopmentalism, antipsychology, deconstruction and the cultural specificity of critique, thereby accentuating the significance of DDP’s commitment to feminism. Following consideration of DDP’s status as commodity and textbook, I vex the issue of ‘evidence’ for the central claim in DDP, that developmental psychology (negatively) affects the lives of women and children. I conclude that DDP’s key antipsychological contribution is best conceived as having constructed an Other of critique that is far more imposing than the academic sub-discipline of ‘developmental psychology’ that it ostensibly addresses. In this way, developmental psychology becomes just one part of the (sub)culture(s) that sustain it: hence the futility of setting up developmental psychology as the ‘cause’ of deleterious ‘effects’ in the surrounding culture. Beyond this, the second edition of DDP hints at a new role for empirical research when discussing psychologists who work to advocate the rights of children, women and the oppressed. I argue that such political aims are best realised when research with children is framed as an ethical, not an epistemological, practice.

Keywords
antipsychology, deconstruction, developmentalism, developmental psychology, Foucault, politics

Corresponding author:
Benjamin S Bradley, School of Psychology, Charles Sturt University, Panorama Avenue, Bathurst, New South Wales 2795, Australia.
Email: bbradley@csu.edu.au
But even the apparatus of deconstruction, including deconstructing developmental psychology, presumes the structure it sets out to dismantle. It is thus covertly dependent on, or even maintaining of, it. (Burman, 1998a, p. 224)

Like the child it studies, developmental psychology demonstrates an adaptability that renders attempts at exhaustive critique futile. (Burman, 1997, p. 135)

**Overt design**

As an approach to establishing its contribution, I would like to weigh three fateful decisions that helped define Erica Burman’s (1994, 2008a) *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology* (DDP; referring to Burman, 2008a), and, due to the book’s lasting influence, how the project of deconstruction has (and might) subsequently come to be understood in the behavioural sciences. First is her decision to dub the manifold critiques her book embodies as ‘deconstructing’, despite her already-well-rehearsed reservations about deconstructive approaches. Second is DDP’s presentation of deconstruction as a method or set of techniques, without intrinsic cultural or historical specificity. Third is its focus of these critiques on ‘developmental psychology’ (DP) in such a way that the larger quarry, psychology itself, might appear to escape attention.

DDP presents itself as a textbook, designed to be read alongside and against more traditional developmental(ist) texts. The ordering of chapters loosely follows that of standard textbooks. Hence, as in traditional primers, DDP starts with infancy and ends with moral development, and deals along the way with attachment, cognitive and language development, Piaget, Vygotsky, and Kohlberg. I say ‘loosely follows’, but this only underlines that, both in the nature of the narrative and in more non-standard sections and chapters, there is an unwavering innovation of perspective. DDP’s (p. 292) commitment *not* to ‘abstract the individual from social context, [nor] to render class, culture and gendered positions as merely supplementary attributes to, rather than as constitutive of, the developing subject’, gives it a coherence that no standard developmental text can rival. After all, by eschewing all political analysis, standard texts have to accept all-comers on their own terms as *scientists*. This makes for intellectual incoherence because textbook authors are constantly juxtoposing incommensurables: cognitivist accounts of language development jostle social accounts; temperament theories face off against attachment; biologism sits cheek by jowl with environmentalism. Meanwhile, what does give standard texts commonality – their appeal to the ‘grand narrative’ of development (Walkerdine, 1993); their ‘methodological individualism’ (Lukes, 1973); their child-centredness; their biologisation (Morss, 1990); their supposed universality – remains off the record.

DDP’s (p. 301) strong critical programme means it consistently relates each theory or study to the cultural and political roles played in ‘the regulation and control of individual and family life’. Readers thereby gain twice over. They get an engaged street-wise insight into the defining academic studies, ideas and professional practices that help construct children’s worlds, *plus* they are viscerally
challenged to acknowledge ‘how inequality and differential treatment on the basis of class, culture, gender, age and sexuality permeate the deep structure of developmental psychological practice’ (DDP, p. 301). Furthermore, this approach means that DDP integrates thinking from a far broader base within the social sciences than any other DP textbook.

From ‘deconstructing’ to . . . Foucault?

The book has a great handle. But a book is always a compromise formation, condensing several more-or-less-harmonious forces. The title-word ‘deconstructing’, in particular, will doubtless have been heavily over determined: by the ambitions of Routledge for the book; by considerations of alliterative euphony; by surrounding moves in critical psychology; as well as by the author’s intellectual, professional and political investments and cautions; not to mention the need fairly to capture the spirit of the book’s contents for prospective buyers. Note here that both editions place themselves in a sequence of books which, by 2008, included: *Deconstructing social psychology* (Parker & Shotter, 1990), *Deconstructing psychotherapy* (Parker, Georgaca, Harper, McLaughlin, & Stowell-Smith, 1995) and *Deconstructing psychotherapy* (Parker, 1999; see DDP, pp. 1–2). Clearly, there was a lot of ‘deconstructing’ going on in Lancashire in the 1990s. Why? And to what did the term refer?

Burman had seriously questioned the project of deconstruction prior to penning DDP. She had contributed a somewhat jarring tailpiece to *Deconstructing social psychology*: ‘Differing with deconstruction: A feminist critique’ (Burman, 1990). While prefacing this essay with an appreciation of deconstruction’s ‘progressive possibilities’, her over riding concern was ‘the approach’s inability to ally itself with any explicit political position; and following from this, a deliberate distancing and “deconstruction” of any progressive political program’ (Burman, 1990, pp. 210–211). In fact, ‘for deconstruction to join forces with feminism and socialism would be to prioritise particular [progressive] textual readings in a way that is utterly antithetical to its intent. . . . [This] rules out building a feminist or socialist politics into the deconstructive enterprise’ (Burman, 1990, p. 211). From here, given Burman’s career-long commitment to feminism, calling DDP’s critiques ‘deconstruction’ looks a puzzling move. Unless, that is, we recognise that a keystone of the book has been its tacit *reassignment* of deconstruction, the better to serve the feminist cause.

I say ‘tacit’ because, although DDP has an impressive breadth, it almost entirely eschews discussion of the intellectual adventure formerly known as deconstruction. There is no exegesis of deconstruction. Derrida is never mentioned. In fact, the d-word hardly figures, excepting four or five mentions in the book’s first and last few pages. From these, we are led to conclude that, for DDP, deconstruction has morphed into a ‘method’ or ‘process of critique’, a set of ‘strategies’, ‘a mode of analysis which invites scrutiny of the limits and presuppositions that have guided research’ in which ‘discourse is seen as constitutive of and linked to practice, hence it is possible to theorise psychology’s relationship to social practices as both
reflective and productive’ (Burman, 1990, p. 208; see also Burman & MacLure, 2005; DDP, pp. 1, 292, 300).

In this light, what does DDP’s project have to do with what would be called deconstruction in Paris, say, or in other academic disciplines? This is a tricky one. DDP never dallies with meticulous readings of a given text, nor does it seek to expose and play off the elisions, aporia, antinomies, hierarchies and tensions within that given text in order to expose architectures of presence the text might otherwise have produced, unlike Derrida (e.g. 1978; reading Freud, 1925). For DDP, ‘deconstruction’ is most akin to a discourse-based social constructionism, with a Foucauldian twist. Deconstruction’s five most promising attributes are, says Burman (1990, pp. 208–210): theorising psychology’s relationship to social practices; making psychology more relativistic by highlighting the historical variability of discourses; highlighting the multiplicity of positions afforded by competing discourses and their contradictory effects; introducing a politics of subjectivity as mediated through cultural forces; and, ‘when Foucault’s...work is brought in, [deconstruction] provides a description of power’.

Is it a problem here that Foucault was never a practitioner of or enthusiast for Derridean deconstruction, and never used the d-word to describe what he did? In fact, Foucault vituperated deconstruction. He had a vicious stoush with Derrida over Derrida’s ‘deconstruction’ of a passage in Foucault’s (1961) book History of madness, after which they did not speak for years (Peeters, 2013). Burman (1990) may be thought to have finessed this point by interchangeably using the words ‘deconstruction’ and ‘post-structuralism’ (plus ‘Foucauldian’ and ‘postmodern’; see Burman, 1998a). However, both Derrida and Foucault adamantly rejected descriptions of their work as ‘post-structuralist’.

Note that Burman was far from alone in identifying Foucault’s work as ‘deconstruction’, or in merging deconstruction with post-structuralism when critiquing psychology (Sawyer, 2002). Not only were there texts like Parker’s (see above), but we find Walkerdine (1984, p. 194) ‘deconstructing the power–knowledge relations central to the production of the object of developmental psychology’ in a way that draws heavily on Foucault but nowhere on Derrida. Nor had this ‘Foucauldian’ approach to deconstructing (developmental) psychology escaped criticism (Hepburn, 1999; Morss, 1992, 1996). However DDP drew on the debates of its time and place. Hence it is all the more valuable to reconsider it as representing a broader context, as I show.

Is the notion that DDP ‘deconstructs’ DP a misrepresentation, then – not only of what Burman does in DDP, but also of work by Derrida, whose defining conceptual arsenal (unlike Foucault’s) did not include power-knowledge or the production of subjects or the idea of discursive practice, and of Foucault too, who – however user-friendly his conceptual arsenal – did not ‘deconstruct’? Apropos, Burman’s (1998b) collection Deconstructing feminist psychology appears partly to have been a response to this point. Although viewing deconstruction as a politically regressive form of ‘liberal pluralism’ (Burman, 1990, p. 215; see also Hepburn, 1999), in DDP (1994) deconstruction is ‘made over’ so as to be of service to feminism. This make over seems to have provoked an early reaction from feminist
psychologists themselves. Thus, Burman (1998b, p. vi) starts *Deconstructing feminist psychology*, with an acknowledgement: ‘to the participants at the 1995 Women and Psychology conference at Leeds, UK, for powerfully showing me why we both need, and need to deconstruct, feminist psychology’. Introducing the volume, she goes so far as to include one quotation from the ‘great white master’ himself, albeit prefaced by frowns and caveats:

> Given its bad press, and reactionary use in some contexts, it is worth noting how deconstruction has been defined by the supposed originator of deconstruction, Jacques Derrida:

> ‘If then it lays claim to any consequence, what is hastily called deconstruction as such is never a set of technical procedures, still less a hermeneutical method operating on archives or utterances in the shelter of a given and stable institution; it is also, and at least, the taking of a position, in work itself, toward the politico-institutional structures that constitute and regulate our practice, our competences, and our performances.’ (Derrida, 1992, pp. 22–23; cited in Burman, 1998c, p. 10)

This point of Derrida’s runs directly counter to DDP’s (and Burman’s more general) approach, however, where ‘deconstruction’ is very much identified as a generic ‘method’ or set of analytic ‘strategies’ that can be applied to discourses and knowledges willy-nilly (DDP, p. 301). Perhaps it is as well, then, that neither this point, nor Derrida, nor *Deconstructing feminist psychology* get a mention in DDP.

Treating ‘deconstruction’ as an all-purpose tool-set also effectively disappears the fact that, whatever labels we attach to them, both Derrida and Foucault wrote what they wrote as part of specific, substantial, focused projects and programmes that intentionally set out to unsettle the discursive and institutional formations that dominated the cultures in which they worked. To the best of my knowledge, Derrida never addressed the edifice of contemporary psychology *per se*, and even less so the place of childhood and patriarchy therein. But Foucault did, and in a way that contrasts markedly with, and hence casts in perspective, the achievement of DDP.

**Long live (developmental) psychology?**

For his doctorate, Foucault researched the philosophy and history of modern psychology, and his first career-jobs were lectureships in psychology. His doctoral work yielded two books, known in English as *Mental illness and personality* (published 1954) and the monumental *History of madness* (published 1961; first translated in abbreviated form as *Madness and civilization* (1973)). The latter not only secured his reputation, but furnishes the *sine qua non* for comprehending his subsequent intellectual trajectory. Foucault revised his first book in 1962, retitling it *Mental illness and psychology*, to take account of the insights embodied in his *History of madness*.

Foucault’s vision of the pre-modern history of European systems of ideas saw the Enlightenment’s elevation of Reason as having a well-acknowledged and
publicly lived night-twin: the truth of Unreason or Folly. Prior to the Age of Reason, it was widely understood that only through free access to Unreason could humans plumb the truth of their worlds. Contemporaneously with the French Revolution and its onslaught on religion, a shift occurred such that the free play of Unreason began to be perceived as a threat to rationality, ‘a silent invasion from within, a secret gap in the earth, as it were’ (Foucault, 1962, p. 126). Unreason grew to be ever more unspeakable, unknowable and hence unacknowledged, except as a to-be-hidden scar on the would-be flawless face of rationality. This shift was marked by a series of transitions, both in language – from Unreason, to madness, to illness, to mental illness (Foucault, 1962, p. 131) – and in the treatment of ‘the mad’, who were now increasingly separated from ‘normal’ society and sequestered in asylums. ‘The whole epistemological structure of contemporary psychology is rooted in this event’, wrote Foucault (1962, p. 123). Psychology was born as the thin tissue of arrogance, cruelty, forgetfulness and moralising self-deception that constitutes the confrontation of knowledgeable expert rationality with the mad. Hence, ‘psychology can never tell the truth about madness because it is madness that holds the truth of psychology’ (Foucault, 1962, p. 124).

Childhood is integral to modern psychology’s emergence; ‘Madness is childhood’ (Foucault, 1973, p. 252). Childhood’s status for modern rationality is as a reminder of, regression from or reversion to something lesser, more primitive than itself. Rationality is the fully developed form of the human, and, like scientific truth at its best, it is timeless. The mad are the less developed, the under developed, the time-bound and, hence, the childish. However, as Foucault (1962, p. 132) observes, if ‘infantile behaviour’ has a ‘factual irreducibility’ in the pathology of the mad, it is principally as the patient’s ‘refuge’ in, or ‘denunciation’ of, a society that has already cordoned off a quarantined domain for ‘the past’, a cordon which the adult ‘cannot and must not cross’. Here is the relevance of education, of Rousseau and Pestalozzi:

The whole development of contemporary education, with its irreproachable aim of preserving the child from adult conflicts [legal and political responsibility, sex, drugs, violence, paid work], accentuates the distance that separates, for a man [sic], his life as a child and his life as an adult. That is to say, by sparing the child conflicts, it exposes him to a major conflict, to the contradiction between his childhood and his real life. (Foucault, 1962, pp. 132–133)

Furthermore, the world a culture constructs around childhood and education is not a world that is projected directly, our world, with ‘all its conflicts and contradictions, but [one that is projected] indirectly, through the myths that excuse it, justify it, and idealize it in a chimerical coherence ... in its education a society dreams of its golden age’ (Foucault, 1962, p. 133, my italics). So, we get the Romantic developmentalism of modern psychology, where ‘heaven lies about us in our infancy’ (Bradley, 1989a, 1991).

For Foucault, the crucial background to the birth of psychology is the conflict between the ‘archaizing character of the institutions’ constructed for the child (including the temporalising concept of development itself), ‘in which the society
hides its dreams, and the conditions it creates for adults, in which its real present, with all its miseries, can be read’ (Foucault, 1962, pp. 133–134). And it is this tangled coupling of madness with childhood that gives a new and distinctive prominence to patriarchy in the emergence of ‘mental illness’, and, hence, in psychology: ‘The entire existence of madness, in the world now being prepared for it, was enveloped in what we may call, in anticipation, a “parental complex”. The prestige of patriarchy is revived around madness in the bourgeois family’ (Foucault, 1973, p. 233).

Notable here, in a way that is as relevant to Freudianism as to feminism, is Foucault’s proposal that ‘childhood’ and patriarchy are intrinsic to the emergence of the whole ensemble of psychology, not just being a preserve of one sub-discipline: DP. Both the character of, and the need to import into psychology a concept of, a temporalised development (with its mimicry of evolutionary ‘stages’; Morss, 1990) are essential to Foucault’s treatment. Psychology’s developmentalism is the product of the imperative for adults to guarantee their rationality by retrospectively writing into nature adults’ no longer ‘being childish’ (mad, irrational). Foucault’s account even gives specifications for how science (rationality) will construct its knowledge of ‘the child’, or, more precisely, ‘project its reality’ onto childhood: as an indirect justification for, or idealisation of, adult society, aglitter with ‘chimerical coherence’.

Foucault (1962, p. 124) ended his analysis by looking forward to the day that, in our search for truth, humans ‘will be able to be free of all psychology and be ready for the great tragic confrontation with madness’. While this may seem a little too utopian – or dystopian – for some, Foucault’s work does cast DDP in a variety of new perspectives. First off, his analysis of psychology is highly specific to a given era (post-1789) and culture (French/European), and illustrated by detailed historical evidence. This evidential specificity allows Foucault repeatedly to contrast the treatment of the mad and of childhood across different cultures (e.g. the USA, Japan, Indonesia) and eras in his discussions to underline the specificity of his account. For example, ‘one understands that fixations and pathological regressions are possible only in a given culture’ (Foucault, 1962, p. 133). In his analysis, contemporary psychology is just one of the ways by which humans may relate to themselves. There have been and therefore can be many others. The toolbox of strategies used in DDP, in contrast, appears far less specific with regard to time and place...and evidence (see later). And (Hence?), DDP cannot help appearing generic and globalisable (e.g. DDP, p. ix), much as this may discomfit its author (e.g. DDP, p. 10).

This leads to a second point. The target of Foucault’s critical history is psychology tout court. Childhood, development and patriarchy turn out to be integral to his argument. But what he has to say about them is said to cast light on the constitution of ‘modern’ psychology as a whole. In DDP, matters are otherwise. DDP (p. 11, my italics) strongly insists that it is ‘a contribution to DP’. What it wants is (just!) for DP to be more reflexive and engaged with theoretical, ethical, methodological, epistemological and political concerns. The book certainly walks this talk. But, perhaps partly as a consequence of its (publisher’s?) ambitions to be used alongside standard textbooks in otherwise strait-laced, professionally
accredited degree courses in DP, DDP does not tackle a set of higher-order issues that otherwise implore critique.

Most obviously, DDP does not push far into critiques of developmental explanation (e.g. Morss, 1992, 1996; Selby, 1993; Walkerdine, 1993), and so, significantly, fails to differentiate child psychology from DP (see conclusion below). Nor does it offer an integrated critique of psychology *per se*. Hence, there seems to be nothing to parallel the kind of analysis Foucault (1962, p. 125) provides of the way concepts of childhood anchor and thus help to create the ‘alienated madness’ that is psychology. Nor is there any specific theorisation in DDP’s treatment of *why* psychology itself needs to construct visions of the child and her world. In its second edition, DDP gained a chapter which highlights the way accounts of ‘the inner child’ idealise childhood, and both editions make other passing references to ‘idealisation’ (e.g. of motherhood and family life). But, in contrast to Foucault, there is no sense that this kind of dynamic might be constitutive of the ‘childhood’ psychology constructs, and hence reflective of psychology’s specific conditions of possibility. Instead, standard sociological concepts are invoked – power, patriarchy, ageism, individualism, scientism, classism, racism, sexism – just as they might be in any other sociology of cultural production, whether of mathematics or horror films (e.g. Bloor, 1991; Creed, 1990). The specificity in DDP comes not from an integrated vision of psychology and the place of childhood and patriarchy therein, but from its energy of language, its breadth of reading and the often non-standard topics and examples brought in (graffiti, child-killing, immigration procedures, etc.). Thus, while Foucault’s analysis is explicitly antipsychological, and implicitly antidevelopmental, DDP seemingly does not engage at those levels. Rather, DDP’s stated ambition is that, with its aid, DP should flourish all the more vigorously (cf. first epigraph):

This book…should also be considered as a part of developmental psychology… I do not claim that we should dispense with development, nor surrender claims to development. Rather we need to be vigilant about the range of intended and unintended effects mobilised by claims to development. (DDP, pp. 11–12).

**Differing with herself**

Read DDP against or alongside Burman’s *other* publications on ‘the child’ and ‘development’, and one quickly concludes that amongst the most incisive critics of the book is Burman herself. To put it perhaps over simply, by taking Foucault as heuristic counter-case, I have raised questions as to whether the ‘reassignment’ of deconstruction as an unspecified/generic critique in DDP is: *not* deconstruction; so generic as to be implicitly globalised; pro-developmental; no challenge to the over arching project of psychology itself; and not scrupulously focused on the analysis of texts in the way that ‘the supposed originator’ of deconstruction was – that is, Derrida, a thinker whom it sidelines. For corroboration, we need only turn to writings by Burman (i.e. other than DDP), and we find her staking out
positions that are explicitly: critical of the globalisation of developmentalism (and so, by implication, globalised critique; see Burman, 2008b, 2010a); antidevelopmental (Burman, 2010b, 2013); antipsychological (Burman, 1996a, 2010b); paying close attention to texts, and, indeed, identifying ‘childhood’ and ‘child development’ as being ‘texts’ (Burman, 1996a, 2010b); and quoting Derrida precisely and copiously (Burman, 1998c; Burman & MacLure, 2005). 3

How to view DDP against these other Burman writings? One answer: as a tradeable commodity. When compared with its close relatives, DDP is an extremely successful book. DDP has more citations on GoogleScholar than all the other members of the Deconstructing X series put together (where X = Social Psychology, Feminist Psychology, Psychopathology, Psychotherapy: 1333 vs. 966; on 18 May 2014). But, at least by the time the second edition came out in 2008, Burman had developed a variety of positions that could not easily have been absorbed into DDP without unsettling or even dismantling her book’s manifest rationale: to supplement standard DP texts. Commercially, the book could not have been written in an antidevelopmental, antipsychological way without vacating its unique and successful marketing niche. DDP is designed as a textbook, complete with ‘Further reading’ and ‘Suggested activities,’ which, if it were/is to be recommendable in accredited or ‘service’ psychology courses, must needs ‘contextualise,’ and thereby ‘contribute to’ standard (textbooks on) DP.

Is this a sell-out? Not necessarily. Whatever Foucault’s work (and the non-DDP Burman) can be used to show, one thing remains unchallengeable: the book’s political commitment, most prominently, to feminism. 4 A notable absence from the book’s contents page, which broadly follows the usual sequencing of chapters in standard textbooks, is a chapter on gender (DDP, pp. 7–8). The question of gender is too central to DDP for ‘gender issues’ to be corralled into one chapter. Gender is the backbone of the book’s project. Women predominate the book’s readership (psychology students are predominantly women), as carers of children (highly feminised, whether at home or at work), through the academic maternalisation of the child’s ‘environment’ (Bradley, 1991), in the broader cultural construction of ‘the child’, and as central to the international variability around family life. Thus, while one can quibble about calling DDP’s style of critique ‘deconstruction’, no one can doubt its political investment.

Rather the reverse. For example, where DDP is not ‘deconstructive’, this is arguably a consequence of its feminism. DDP’s critiques may not link directly to the ‘notoriously inaccessible’ oeuvres of Derrida or Foucault (Parker et al., 1995, p. 131). They are rather forms of what Parker, Georgaca, Harper, McLaughlin and Stowell-Smith (1995, p. 3) call ‘practical deconstruction’, that is, ‘attending to politics and power when you do a critical reading, and thinking through the effects of your critique on institutions and forms of knowledge’. Practical deconstruction (of psychopathology in Parker et al., 1995, p. 132) is also defined as ‘a pragmatic engagement with the different struggles against traditional clinical [in DDP, read “developmental”] notions’. And here lies DDP’s strength. Given that the politics and power that surround and constitute DP are above anything gendered, DDP gives a unique road-map across many disciplines to pragmatically engaging with
the different feminist struggles with and against developmental notions of child and childcare, and, hence, an invaluable ‘leg-up’ into feminist praxis, and critiques engaging with the socio-politics of childhood.

Further, the very idea of producing a politically critical textbook can be seen as central to DDP’s feminism (and, perhaps, to its antipsychologism; see later). While research is widely assumed to be the alpha activity within the academy, there are good arguments for seeing teaching and learning as more important to political radicalisation. Research publications are often expensive, specialised, difficult to understand and, hence, rarely read. So, as Squire (1990, p. 77) argued in her important paper ‘Feminism as antipsychology’, it is ‘through education practices in general, rather than just through reading and writing psychology books and papers, that feminist psychology education can currently reach the most people’. Furthermore, (multi-cultural women) students, if given room and resources, are often better positioned – as ‘outsiders’ looking in, as diverse in background – to critique the discipline of psychology in terms of gender, class, sexuality and ‘race’ than their psychologist-teachers, feminist or not. Given the importance of teaching to the success of feminism in psychology, Squire (1990, p. 77) bemoaned the dearth of psychology textbooks with more than a ‘patchy... awareness of feminist issues’, a dearth she predicted would be long-lasting. DDP (1994) deliberately filled that gap.

The fate of the empirical

Although Parker and Burman (1993, p. 160) agree that, in psychology, ‘empirical studies are necessary... to check theories against the world’, the critiques constituting DDP have a troubled connection to what most psychologists would call the empirical domain. For example, near its outset DDP (p. 14) notes that most accounts of child development ‘take Charles Darwin as the author of the first child study’, going on:

Not surprisingly, Darwin’s interest was in the relative contribution of genetic endowment and environmental experience – identifying the characteristics that differentiate humans (and human children) from animals, placing great weight on human ingenuity and creativity, especially as exhibited in language.

Two things to note here. First, if one has read Darwin’s (1877) brief article on his baby son, DDP’s gloss is unrecognisable. The terms ‘genetic endowment’ and environmental experience’ are 20th century coin. Darwin mentions neither ‘relative contributions,’ nor ‘human ingenuity and creativity’. Most of his paper describes early emotional expressions, and, to a lesser extent, his son’s capacities for sensation, reason, communication and moral sense. While he does talk of some early expressions as likely to be ‘instinctive’/‘inherited’, this is because his aim was to show the close similarities, not to ‘differentiate’, between infants (there is no mention of post-infant ‘humans’) and animals. Development from ‘animal-like’ expression in the newborn to the toddler who reasons, shows shame,
uses language and so on is designed to yield a strong and visible analogy (not a homology; contra Riley, 1983, pp. 44–45) for how ‘the several mental and moral faculties of man have been gradually evolved’ (Darwin, 1874, p. 194).

Not surprisingly, in light of such errors, we do not find DDP citing the paper by Darwin (1877) it is supposedly summarising. Instead, it refers to not one, but three, contemporary books to back its claims (Riley, 1983; Rose, 1985; Walkerdine & Lucey, 1989; see DDP, p. 14).

All three of these books are critical analyses of psychology or DP. And this is a clue. For, as we read on, we find that DDP’s *modus operandi* is to construct an integrative politically nuanced overview of others’ ‘critical’ (and therefore largely sympathetic to DDP’s aims) commentaries on particular aspects of DP. This twice-removed approach to critiquing DP produces some distinctive effects.

The first is DDP’s swelling air of certainty about what DP ‘is’. As when unique human portraits are successively superimposed, there is gradual reduction to a single generic ‘face’, so, as more and more critical commentaries on DP are absorbed into DDP’s meta-narrative, the target of that critique blurs into a virtual monolith. Admittedly, DDP shows a tendency to construct a unified object from early on. Thus, ‘taking a broad look at twentieth-century Anglo-US and European psychology’, the late 19th and early 20th centuries were ‘motivated by questions drawn from evolutionary theory . . . to evaluate the role of heredity. But, from the 1920s until approximately the 1960s, behaviourist ideas shifted attention away from genetic endowment to environmental history’ (DDP, p. 32). Regarding the first claim, one wonders who and what counts as DP? Were Freud’s seminal essays on narcissism, screen memories, infantile sexuality, the Wolf Man and Little Hans merely ‘evaluating the role of heredity’? As for the 1920s–1960s, this ‘behaviourist’ period includes all the key anti-behaviourist works of Piaget, ‘the name most associated with developmental psychology’ (DDP, p. 241), and Vygotsky, plus key anti- and non-behaviourist publications by the Harlows, Bowlby, Winnicott, Klein, Isaacs, Lowenfeld, the Murphys and so on.

But the unification of DP into a (politically suspect) ‘essence’ grows the more pronounced as DDP progresses towards establishing its central claim: ‘the [often negative] impact of developmental psychological research on families’ (DDP, p. 103). Rhetorically, referring to ‘DP’ as a unified object helps establish an authoritative general critique. Acknowledging exceptions would only weaken the narrative. However, given the real diversity of DP (after all, Burman defines *herself* as a ‘developmental psychologist’; DDP, p. 11; 2010b, p. 9), DDP’s essentialising commentary quickly becomes contradictory. For example, quoting Lewis (1982) on fathers, DP’s ‘failure to provide a gendered analysis of family relations’ is explained as ‘part of the legacy of ethological observation as the main research method in developmental psychology’ (DDP, p. 165). A few pages later, the way the research practices of ‘the “discipline” . . . both reproduce and obscure social inequalities’ is explained by the way ‘investigation . . . in developmental psychology has been structured by the technology – of testing . . . the demand to provide standardised, quantifiable measures’ (DDP, p. 176). Is research in DP
‘mainly ethological’ or ‘structured by’ psychometrics? It cannot be both. For good measure, between these two quotes, DDP (p. 171) cites McKee (1982) in damning ‘the widespread use of survey methods [in]...developmental psychological practice’ as over simplifying social life. And we do not hear a word about longitudinal methods (traditionally the hallmark of DP research), or experiments (the shibboleth of scientificity in psychology)... Direct engagement with research is rare in DDP. The book mostly relies on the varying levels of engagement the critical commentaries it narrativises have with empirical studies. Thus, echoing Singer (1993), we are told that it is only in ‘a recent research trend’ (i.e. DDP, p. 125; Keller, 2003) that parents are ‘position[ed]...as worthy informants of their own theories of development’. Courtesy of Singer (1993, p. 436), DDP (p. 125) here overlooks a well-established tradition of research on parental beliefs that spoils its portrait of an arrogant (m)other-denying DP that is ‘more expert than parents’ (e.g. Goodnow & Collins, 1990; Sigel, McGillicuddy-DeLisi, & Goodnow, 1985). Likewise, research on language learning is critiqued because it ‘divorces language learning from...everyday caregiving contexts’ (DDP, p. 192). This criticism is even applied to ‘early diary studies [which also] isolated the objects of study from their everyday contexts’ (DDP, p. 192). Evidence? A quote from a cross-sectional video-study of 63 infant–mother dyads by Hoff-Ginsberg (1991) which is neither a diary study nor ‘early’. Here, such classic work as that of Brown (1973) and Bloom (1970) is entirely passed over so that a unitary DP can be portrayed as ignoring ‘everyday contexts’. Ironically, the path-breaking findings made by Brown and Bloom depended, precisely, on observing children in ordinary family activities to show how toddlers’ extra-linguistic grasp of everyday contexts allows them, at different times, to load a variety of specific senses into such grammatically underdetermined utterances as ‘Mommy sock’ or ‘No soap’. Beyond this, we have free-standing unqualified (e.g. DDP, p. 90) references to, for example, ‘the escalating rates of sexual abuse’, with no supporting evidence, no gesture towards problems of collecting data on this topic, nor to any time frame (Escalating over what period?), nor to a location (Child abuse where?), nor to who is being abused (the implication is: just girls).

The problem of evidence becomes most acute when considering DDP’s (e.g. p. 232, my italics) central claim to have shown ‘how DP...[has] consequences...for how parents and teachers and children may experience themselves and their relationships with each other’. There are many statements of this kind. Thus, we are told that, ‘until recently, most developmental research conformed to dominant familial assumptions. This...gave rise to suspicion as to whether gay or lesbian couples could be adequate parents.’ To claim that most developmental research has ‘conformed’ to dominant family assumptions is unconvincing, especially when so under-qualified.6 But, moving on, where is DDP’s evidence that DP has ‘given rise’ to the suspicion that gay couples are inadequate parents? Surely this is even more implausible. You only have to turn on your local right-wing radio shock jock or surf religious fundamentalist TV to hear gays being cast as inadequate parents. Did this discourse really originate in DP?
DDP poses in various more-or-less-causal ways the relationship between psychology and the larger culture (see my italics below). For example: ‘If DP’s earlier formulations fitted well with the conceptions of the liberal subject of bourgeois capitalism, more contemporary conceptions can be said to coincide with neoliberalism’ (DDP, p. 99). Later, DP ‘both contributes to and reflects dominant assumptions’ (DDP, p. 117). Elsewhere, we hear how DP: has ‘impact’ on families (DDP, p. 103); ‘informs…systems of evaluation and intervention around children…[that have] real effects’ (DDP, p. 126); and has, as ‘a consequence…[a] welfare discipline that blames difficulties on either child or family, or both, and fails to implicate the wider social forces which construct and maintain the child’s relations within his or her family’ (DDP, p. 126).

Clearly, evidence that supports DP having consequences for families, children or the ‘welfare discipline’ will be very different from that needed to show coincidences or reflections between DP and the wider culture. One-eyed empiricists apart, it would be extremely odd if there were not commonalities between DP and the (sub)culture(s) that sustain it. Both share the same language and basic concepts, for starters. And funding bodies increasingly expect psychologists to be accountable by focusing their research on pressing social problems ‘in the national interest’. The idea that DP causes problems for the broader culture is far more confronting.

So, what evidence does DDP bring to support the claim that DP has (negative) consequences in the broader community?

Mostly, the evidence is in the form of discursive implications, not empirical findings. It consists in drawing parallels and/or making or quoting conclusions from critical commentators’ arguments about DP. For example, ‘developmental psychology’s failure to provide a gendered analysis of family relations has been cited as contributing to a failure to attend to the role of gender relations within adult partnerships (in terms of their impacts on children)’ (DDP, p. 165, my italics). Here, an overview of research by Lamb (1997) is referred to in a government paper that used it to help justify an index of child adjustment which assumes ‘father involvement per se improve[s] outcomes [for] children’ (DDP, p. 165; see also Featherstone, 2006, p. 303). If, as DDP does, we take Featherstone’s word for the harm done by Lamb’s chapter, we are assuming that: (a) the index would not have included father presence as a ‘good’ if Lamb’s overview was not available; (b) once this index is put into practice, more children will be harmed by being left in father-present families from which they would have been better removed than will have been protected by implementing this item in the index; and (c) a scale which did not valorise father involvement would have had better effects. But neither Featherstone nor DDP offer evidence to support these assumptions.

The nearest DDP gets to presenting evidence directly to support its central claim is in two places. The first is a discussion of the death of an eight-year-old African migrant in London, Victoria Climbie, at the hands of a great-aunt and her partner (DDP, p. 92; Rustin, 2004). The second is an interpretation of transcripts from educators’ case conferences about ‘problem children’ (Burman, 1996b). Both discussions underline the difficulty of drawing the kind of causal arrow that DDP’s central claim hypothesises. This means that what DDP appears to be impugning is
not so much DP, but a nexus of psycho-social discursive practices which permeate DP but also extend well beyond it, hence the impossibility of drawing a clear line between DP as ‘cause’ and its ‘effects’ in the surrounding culture.

In the Climbie case, reviews suggested that had the child been non-migrant and/or white, social workers would have been more likely to read the girl’s behaviour and situation as dangerous and so would have removed her in time from her abusive relatives. The only connection of DP with this case is in the implication that the social workers at fault must have studied some DP, yet DP did not protect them against making this (racist) error in ‘cultural reading’.

In the educators’ case conferences, the links to DP are also tenuous. The use of phrases describing ‘problem’ teenagers as ‘playing to an audience’, needing to get a ‘positive image’ and doing work ‘about identity’ is seen as instantiating a ‘developmental’ discourse ‘that interpreted problem behaviour in terms of developmental life stages such as “adolescence” and associated age/stage-related concerns such as “showing off to peers” and “testing out boundaries”’ (DDP, pp. 233–234). However, talk about ‘showing off’, ‘playing to an audience’, ‘identity’ and ‘image’ can hardly be seen as the exclusive originary preserve of DP research. According to my dictionary, ‘show off’ was current in 1693, and ‘playing to an audience’ is at least of Shakespearean vintage. Such terms are given weight by psychological research, but the interplay between DP’s jargon and common parlance, cultural history and the discursive practices that structure all these things is surely hardly summarisable as unidirectional cause and effect (e.g. Gergen, 1973; Joynson, 1974).

To conclude: Breaching the last bastion

A curious defeatism shadows Burman’s stance to DP. She is fighting valiantly, but it sounds like it is in a losing cause. DP is simply too strong, a ‘last bastion’ of modernism; exhaustive critique is ‘futile’ because it ‘covertly maintains’ what it seeks to deconstruct (Burman, 1997, p. 135; 1998a, pp. 211, 224). I beg to differ, on two grounds.

First, the success and lasting appeal of DDP attests to the durability of the political conditions from which it emerges. Its greatest originality and distinctiveness was, and is, its unswerving focus on exposing the then-and-still-contemporary fate of entrammelled women and children, and other oppressed groups. Here, we might say, is DDP’s ‘big’ Other, dialogue with which structures any truth the book’s language holds. To all appearances, however, DDP is responding to a quite different target, DP. Inevitably therefore, at least according to Lacan’s (1981, pp. 106ff; see also Bradley, 2010) theory of inter-subjectivity, an element of ‘misrecognition’ attends the way the book imagines its more overt target, or ‘little’ other (Lacan’s ‘objet petit a’).

Every genuine reading is a misprision that, to be fruitful, has to be inflected by the reader’s unique psycho-cultural situation, needs and preoccupations (Bloom, 1975; Derrida, 1987). This, as I have tried to show, is clearly the case with DDP, which reads DP according to ulterior purposes, in a way that at first appears to
homogenise, suppress and distort many aspects and elements of what might other- 
wise pass as the facts of and about ‘developmental psychology’. However, as the 
book’s narrative progresses, its antagonism to the hollowed-out and straw-mannish 
version of DP that DDP’s reading initially constructs fills out and deepens to 
engage with a far more imposing antagonist. At the same time, the cultural reson-
ances and resources of the book’s language grow richer. (In Lacan’s (1981) terms, 
the book moves from the empty towards the full word.) As it does so, the object of 
the book’s discourse is transformed from a straitened cardboard cut-out of male-
stream science, into a much more prepossessing entity that finds itself symbolised in 
socio-cultural phenomena and events extending far beyond the confines of profes-
sional psychology. By the time we arrive at book’s end (DDP, p. 303) and hear the 
statement, ‘exploitation and oppression suffuse the structure of DP. Our task 
is to deconstruct it’, the DP at issue has grown and changed to comprise a 
Hydra-like complex of scientific, pseudo-scientific, socio-legal, institutional, 
multi-professional, conversational and interpersonal practices that draws in films, 
research studies, ethnographies, graffiti, TV programmes, murder, self-help books, 
newspapers, government instruments, textbooks, degree courses, advertisements, 
embodied responses, subjectivities and private reflections.

This broadening of target makes DDP’s first breach in the bastion of academic 
DP because, as I propose, DDP’s true if implicit Other is just what makes it the 
kind of antipsychological plastique that Squire (1990, pp. 79–81) envisioned. DDP 
has created as the object of its critique an assemblage that draws in anthropology, 
literature, current events and popular culture alongside DP research. In so doing, it 
effectively questions the timelessness and universality of DP knowledge. It diversi-
fies the critical repertoire of feminist and radical psychologists and hence gives 
them better chances of success, and it ‘throws doubt on psychology’s claim to be 
the ultimate source of knowledge about the human subject, by refusing to respect 
its boundaries’ (Squire, 1990, pp. 80–81).

My second conclusion relates to the fate of the empirical in DDP. DDP’s main 
claims remain largely implicative or perhaps ‘idealistic’ (i.e. without aspiration to be 
evidence-based; cf. Gutting, 1994b). Yet, there is one notable difference between 
the first and second editions: the insertion in 2008 of the qualification ‘until 
recently’ (or synonym) in various sections critiquing empirical research that, in 
1994, were blanket dismissals put in the present tense. The change seems 
to have been brought about by Burman’s more recent enthusiasm for the 
‘new discipline’ of ‘child rights and childhood studies’ (e.g. DDP, pp. vii, 299; 
see also James, Jencks, & Prout, 1998). Regarding this change, we should recall 
the extreme distrust with which empirical research, as having any kind of ‘last 
word’ in settling disputes, was viewed by politically motivated critics of psychology 
in the 1990s (cf. Fine, 2012). The second edition of DDP strikes a slightly different 
note in this regard. And this is important, because if there is one thing that would 
prevent DDP having any impact ‘inside the tent’ of academic DP, it is an airy 
dismissal of the pertinence of empirical research to debates about children.

Post-DDP, and extrapolating this hint of a change in attitude, how 
might ‘empirical research’ be reworked in a way that would both value the need
rigorously to check speculations, opinions and theories ‘against the world’ and to progress ethical, moral or political causes? DDP might be recruited to address this question in two ways. First, DDP’s (p. 299) new-found enthusiasm for ‘childhood studies, devoted to the understanding of children and childhoods’, connects with the importance of making a distinction between *DP* and *child* psychology (a distinction that DDP otherwise muddies).

It is perfectly possible to study children and childhood without making any developmental assumptions, and many psychologists have been doing this for decades. For example, one may research day-care to test what effects it has on later ‘outcomes’ for the child. Or one may research day-care to work out how best to make the day-to-day experience of infants and their caregivers as rich and fulfilling as possible (Bradley & Sanson, 1992). Unlike the former approach, the latter has nothing to do with what DDP (p. 182) calls ‘the developmental myth: which sees what comes earlier as causally related to what comes later’.

Critiques of the empirical cannot dodge the repercussions of their own rhetoric. If one is going to argue, for example, that ‘developmental psychology plays a key role in the legitimation and perpetuation of…dangerously limited and sometimes plainly false conceptions of childhood’ (DDP, p. 296), one is likely to be taken as implying that there has some way of establishing ‘true/r’, less-limited conceptions of childhood. Hence, we find DDP (pp. 82, 87) reasoning the need ‘to distinguish between fantasy notions of children and childhoods and the actual lived experiences of real children’. Likewise, if scientists are said to have foisted their own views of childhood onto parents and children (e.g. DDP, p. 125), then politically progressive researchers should get down to disinterring parents’ and, in particular, ‘children’s own views’ (DDP, p. 174), shouldn’t they?

This is more easily said than done, not only because every method DP uses has drawbacks, but because any attempt to ‘voice’ children’s views is compromised by the asymmetrical power–knowledge relations between adults and children (Bradley, 1989b), and between scientists and layfolk (DDP, pp. 120–121). This problem is especially acute when the children whose ‘views’ one is eliciting are too young to speak (Elwick, Bradley, & Sumsion, 2014a). ‘OK’, one might retort, ‘perhaps all psychological research is irreducibly rhetorical, especially when dealing with children (DDP, p. 42), but that’s no reason to avoid it!’ In this vein, a key role for research in politically progressive and feminist psychologies might be to produce empirical data that furnishes new signifiers in struggles to unsettle currently oppressive, or, better, to establish emancipatory discourses and practices within DP (in its broadest cultural sense).

Some parts of DDP, particularly those advocating James, Jencks and Prout’s (1998) approach to ‘child rights and childhood studies’, seem to be consistent with this tack. But other parts of DDP (e.g. pp. 67ff; see also Burman, 2008b) argue trenchantly that children’s rights discourse is unhealthily infected by developmental assumptions and that these undermine its emancipatory intent, not to mention the child rights movements’ other ills (Pupavac, 2001).

An alternative is to frame the practices of observational research with the very young as ethically rather than epistemologically constituted. The children’s rights
movement has increasingly generated epistemologically conceived studies aimed at unearthing new knowledge about ‘children’s perspectives’ on the world, what children themselves think and experience, ‘children’s own views’ (DDP, p. 174). Yet, there are inherent impossibilities or aporia in one person definitively discovering what someone else experiences. These are at their starkest in the limit-case of researching the ‘views’ of pre-verbal babies (Elwick et al., 2014). Nevertheless, following Levinas and Derrida, as others, infants make profound ethical demands on those who genuinely encounter them if settings can be devised which afford such encounters (Bradley, Sumsion, Stratigos, & Elwick, 2012; Critchley, 1996; Elwick, Bradley, & Sumsion, 2014b). While their epistemological yield may be inconclusive or even undecidable, such research-encounters earn a different kind of value by unsettling adult researchers’ assumptions or evoking embodied responses that pose new possibilities for ethical reflection, so opening up new ways of ‘going on’ with the very young. In this way, researching with children becomes party to Derrida’s project of deconstruction, by grounding itself in a justice rooted in experience of the undecidable (Elwick et al., 2014a). Thus, the quest for justice becomes the wellspring of research findings, where ‘to be just’ is more fully to own ‘one’s infinite responsibility before the singular other as something over which one cannot ultimately decide, as something that exceeds my cognitive powers. It is such experiences of justice that propel one forward into politics’ (Critchley, 1996, p. 35).

Acknowledgements
The author thanks Jane Selby and Bill Green for their helpful readings of this article and to its three anonymous reviewers.

Notes
1. It may be thought odd that DDP omits from this series the edited collection Deconstructing Feminist Psychology (Burman, 1998b), but see below.
2. Historians have widely asserted that Foucault was a ‘bad historian’ whose histories fly in the face of empirical evidence. Gutting (1994a, 1994b) argues, however, that Foucault did not construct ‘empiricist’ histories of the kind that depend on support by facts. His historiography was ‘idealist’: he used facts and events to illustrate his arguments. This was because his focus was less on reconstructing ‘what really happened’ in the past than on exposing the contingency of the conditions of possibility for to-be-deplored aspects of the socio-intellectual reality that obtains today.
3. Though Burman and MacLure (2005) quote Derrida copiously, and in a highly nuanced way, their chapter is split into halves. The first was written by MacLure (‘Key concepts of deconstruction’), the second by Burman (‘Stories from the field’). All the discussion of and references to Derrida are in the first half of the chapter.
4. Despite the potential lead that the comment about patriarchy that I quote from Foucault (earlier) might give to feminist critiques of psychology, Foucault himself can hardly be claimed as either a feminist or a critic of patriarchy (though see Diamond & Quinby, 1988).
5. Of these, only Riley discusses Darwin’s work on infants!
6. At first sight, most experimental research on children, at least on perception, sensation and cognition, makes no ‘familial assumptions’ – unless taking place in a
desert-islanded university laboratory is seen as somehow conforming to such assumptions.

7. See endnote 2.

8. For example, in 1994, DDP (p. 69) stated: ‘most developmental research conforms to dominant familial assumptions’ and so on. Since 2008, DDP (p. 111) states: ‘until recently, most developmental research conformed to dominant familial assumptions’ and so on.

References


**Author biography**

**Benjamin S Bradley** is Foundation Professor of Psychology at Charles Sturt University in Bathurst, Australia. He has been researching infancy for 40 years. His current research on babies extends into day care setting findings made with Jane Selby, Cathy Urwin and Michael Smithson: that even in the first year of life, babies have the capacity to act as members of groups. He currently has a Fellowship at the Cambridge University Library, researching historiographies and manuscripts relating to a new book, *Darwin’s psychology: His vision, its fate and its future*, due for publication by OUP in 2017. Previous monographs include *Language and the dissolution of individuality* (1984), *Visions of infancy: A critical introduction to child psychology* (1989) and *Psychology and experience* (2005).