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Child as Method

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This interview is a slightly modified transcript from the fifth Psyche Talk, hosted at the Department of Communication and Psychology at Aalborg University, October 22, 2025. Psyche Talks are hosted as biannual events, where prominent psychological researchers are invited to discuss fundamental questions about the nature and subject matter of psychology through an interview-based format. The focus of this interview is on Child as Method and how it has emerged from the work of critically engaging with developmental psychology through a feminist lens. In this interview, Erica Burman (Professor of Education at Manchester University) is interviewed by Noomi Matthiesen (Associate Professor of Educational Psychology, Aalborg University).

Noomi Matthiesen: Thank you so much, Alfred, for the introduction. Thank you everybody for coming and online as well. And thank you, Erica, for taking the time to talk with us today and in the last couple of days.

Erica Burman: It's a pleasure to be here. Thank you so much for inviting me.

Noomi Matthiesen: Great. So, let's just dive right into it. I wanted to start by discussing your highly influential book, *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology,* which was published in 1994, the first edition, and it's coming out soon in its fourth edition, now more than 30 years later. I wanted to ask you to start by reflecting on why it both was and still is important to deconstruct psychology in general but also deconstructing developmental psychology in particular.

Erica Burman: Yeah, thank you. Well, I wrote *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology* at a particular moment and actually struggled with the title initially. It's

probably fair to say but it was at a moment when there was a lot of deconstructing of psychology going on, with the rise of a British, specifically British, kind of critical psychology current. So, there was deconstructing social psychology, deconstructing psychopathology, deconstructing psychotherapy, etc., all kind of emerging. And in the end, I settled with, under some pressure actually, the title *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology*, because I think it isn't a formal deconstruction. It's really a feminist critique of the functioning of developmental psychology. But as the editions have rolled on, I've felt it appropriate to sort of be more explicit about the how, or in what sense it is a deconstruction and what a deconstruction is, without going into a huge theoretical treatise about that. So, yes, it's very much an enactment of the outcome of a deconstructionist project of questioning the assumed truths. The commonsense assumptions that get sort of reified into some kind of specialist expertise, that we peddle back to people as psychologists, and that is the basis of our claim to some kind of expert status. Yeah, does that kick us off a bit?

Noomi Matthiesen: Yes, great. Do you want to reveal what were the other choices that you had that you wanted to call the book? Do you remember?

Erica Burman: Can I remember? Yes, it was Decoding Developmental Psychology. I think I've felt aware that it was less a Derridian deconstruction than a Foucauldian critique. And I think that whole... It's probably fair to say that that the whole movement into discourse, into deconstruction, while there was a sort of wider kind of critical movement emerging in psychology, it was really feminists who got into discursive critiques initially as a way of destabilizing the received norms, assumptions and truths of psychology, and showing how they are arbitrary, contingent, and the effects of certain regimes of truth that rely on prevailing power arrangements.

So... Although discursive approaches then sort of flourished and flowered as a separate arena, and even a branch of particularly social psychology, I've never been a social psychologist, but I am a sort of discourse analyst. It was really the feminist engagement that kind of… We knew that we needed these kinds of ideas to do the critical work that we needed to do.

Noomi Matthiesen: Yes. And you started your academic trajectory at the University of Sussex, where you, as an undergraduate, studied developmental psychology and cognitive

psychology. And, as far as I've understood, it was inspired by Jean Piaget. Could you tell us a little bit about in which ways Piaget has formed your thinking and how you moved into discursive psychology?

Erica Burman: So, my degree was in developmental psychology with cognitive studies. It was called cognitive studies, and they were essentially two different streams. In fact, I for developmental psychology. I was in a School of Cultural and Community Studies. I think these schools no longer exist but cognitive studies was in the School of Social Sciences, so in some ways it was like a joint degree with two separate streams.

In other ways, it was at a particular moment when, I guess, Piaget was in his heyday in Anglo-US psychology. And what was going on in cognitive studies, which was what became artificial intelligence, was a whole philosophical movement of using computer modelling as a methodological device, as a heuristic, to try and model ideas about how humans think. So, it was before there was a division between human computer modelling and expert systems. Now AI is expert systems. It doesn't try to think like humans do, although it probably does much more than we think it does, because of who programs it.

So, I went into it, into that project of studying psychology, and developmental psychology in particular, with a very kind of naive idea that this would answer all my questions. I didn't quite know what to study, but this looked like it would answer everything or, you know, be a way of engaging my very diverse interests. So, what I got out of it, I mean, I had some excellent teachers to whom I'm very grateful, both in developmental psychology, like Julie Rutkowska, who is a cognitive scientist too, and Stephanie Thornton, a cultural psychologist as well. But really the cognitive studies group had attracted a number of philosophers, and it was really that introduction to philosophical thinking that was most transformative for me. And, you know, discussions about epistemology, and materialism, and reductionism, and all these things that we actually need, as psychologists, to have some grasp on to evaluate the status of our theories.

So, Piaget was there. I did a little experiment for my final year project on a conservation task. But also, as I then read more deeply and started a doctorate at Manchester University, engaging more deeply with Piaget's ideas, I suppose it was an opportunity to discover and engage in the whole problem of cultural reception and translation of a particular body of knowledge. I mean, I finished as an undergraduate as a sort of signed-

up dialectical psychologist informed by Piaget (with the work of Klaus Riegel). And in a way, this was my discovery of some kind of sociological theory, and I was impressed that Piaget was not a psychologist, but an epistemologist and a sociologist, and that's something we rarely hear about. But he is. I mean, certainly his sociological writings, he wrote several books, were not translated into English until much, much later on (see Piaget 1995). So that whole question of what version of Piaget came to be canonical in the sort of Anglo-US textbooks, it became an interesting question in cultural production, and in the way in which we need to critically evaluate how we come to know what we know, and what is available and what isn't. I was fortunate as a doctoral student, to then work with someone who had quite close connections with Geneva, and I visited the archives and came across some of Piaget's untranslated early writings on narrative. My own doctorate was a sort of taking up Piaget's ideas about age as a very social version of notions of time, which he writes about a little bit in *The Child's Conception of Time*.

I ended up, well, I was going to say interviewing, but actually inviting children, little children, to tell me stories about their worlds. And then I generated, in schools, lots of material that I didn't know what to do with and then had to become a discourse analyst of some kind, before discourse analysis existed, and invent some ways of analysing this kind of very interesting but rather obscure text.

So, yes, the child, children's ideas about age, was my way in to thinking about the social conditions in which categories like adult and child emerge and are made sense of by us, including by children. So, Piaget is a sort of backdrop, I mean, in a way, I remain a Piagetian, and I think that Piaget's psychoanalytic heritage is something that's important to remember. He did train as a psychoanalyst. He had an analysis of some kind. He didn't really practice much. His sister was also a psychoanalyst. I think what I was impressed by was the methodological intervention he made of interviewing children and exploring their views that he discusses in the first chapter of *The child's conception of the world*....

And so that whole issue of the way in which Piaget became inserted into dominant forms of psychology, particularly developmental psychology, with notions of testing, and "does this person have or not have a particular concept?". You know, it was very evident to me that was a total misrepresentation, for very significant reasons. So, again, it's a kind of initiation into the sociology of knowledge production, and some kind of critical theory

about that, that I suppose… I gained. I retained some kind of affection for some of those ideas, but obviously there's a lot of problems with Piagetian theory too.

Noomi Matthiesen: Great. Yeah, so a lot of your, well maybe all of your work, has addressed this question that you describe here as the categories, that emerge about adults and children, and by deconstructing them showing how they become reified, and how psychology informs them. Now, you've described yourself, at least in some of your work, as an anti-psychologist, and I wondered if you'd elaborate a bit on that?

Erica Burman: Well, I think I have to be an anti-psychologist in the sense of being a critic, from within psychology, challenging what psychology currently is and does. In that sense, I would be an anti-psychologist, because I think psychologists need to try and challenge and undo what is done in the name of psychology. I'm not an anti-psychologist in the sense of denying the relevance and importance of the domain of the psychological, but I think we have to radically reconfigure that in the light of a critical reconsideration of the role of psychology in everyday life now: why and how it has become as dominant as it has, what forms it has come to take, and what functions it serves in late capitalist, you could say racial capitalist, societies. So, in that sense, I would say the anti-psychological aspect joins with a range of other critical psychological projects. I think the main thing is really to say that I'm an anti-developmentalist in the sense of the particular functions that developmental psychology seems to have come to play. Maybe I overstate it, because it's what I've been involved with, but the way in which understandings of development and change get projected onto psychology, psychological models in general, models and then models of individual psychology, and then models of child development, in a series of very strange, not clear, and fallacious moves, has to be unpicked. They come to be very powerful in national and international policies and practices, as well as in the ways in which developmental psychology, in particular, has come to permeate in such widespread ways into a range of social practices: social care, social work, education, health care, and so on.

So, when I first started teaching, I arrived as a very young lecturer, very signed up to some sort of theoretical critical ideas. But and then I, as I'm afraid in the UK often happens, you're not given a gentle landing when you start a new job, you’re just given everything to do. I was working in an institution that had not only a psychology degree,

but lots of other professional trainings, in which there were courses for health visitors that had something about, you know, infant and child development, midwives, nursing degrees, which were quite new then, undergraduate degrees, and pressure on nurses to get degrees. So, they were rather unwilling students. They had to get a degree to keep their job. There were also social work students, youth and community work students, as well as all the s undergraduate core courses including developmental psychology. And it really was those mature, professional students who taught me, you know, the relevance and significance of why we need to be critical of those models. I mean, they were not convinced by the kind of stuff that I was supposed to teach them, and try to teach them, and I had to learn very quickly from them and with them. So, in that sense, yes, it was it was that confrontation with practice. I'd had some engagement in practice, you know, practical arenas, but not that much. But from those students, their scepticism, their telling me that this didn't meet with their experience, that this isn't what happened in their daily practice lives, that showed me that huge gap between the theory and the practice.

Now, that's not to say that psychologists are responsible for every misrepresentation of their models and theories. And there is a whole kind of cultural-political process in how theoretical ideas get popularised. On the other hand, some psychologists and psychoanalysts, it needs to be said, think about Winnicott and his radio broadcasts, who were very actively involved in promoting their own theories and trying to be influential in public policies. So, and certainly UK psychologists feel that they're very neglected and would like to be much more consulted and have a much bigger role. I'm someone who's, you know, kind of shied away a great deal from making any pronouncements about policy because of my worry. I mean, that's turned out to be quite a well-founded worry about how what you say gets turned into something that the politicians and the media want to hear, irrespective of what you actually say. So, there is scope, I think, for psychologists to be anti-psychologists.

Noomi Matthiesen: Great, thank you. So, I wanted to dive into one example that is particularly prevalent in practice in a Danish context, which is attachment theory. I think attachment theory is almost running rampant at the moment and gaining momentum, particularly within some of the fields that you mentioned, midwives, the health nurses, but also within education, early education in particular. It's kind of gaining complexity and legitimacy as well by latching on to neuro-discourses. I don't know if it's the same

kind of dynamic that's going on in the UK, but I wondered if you would reflect a little bit about why there seems to be, at this specific point in history, and in these political times, particularly fertile grounds for attachment theory and a sort of potential new alliance with neurosciences?

Erica Burman: Right. Well, that's no small topic to take up, is it? So the whole question of the rise of attachment theory and how it aligns with what we might say is neoliberalism, that is, the state rolling back on its commitments to supporting families and communities, the private, increasingly atomistic, models of the individual, the entrepreneurial active citizen, the discretionary state support based on proving yourself to be productive. All those sorts of things we know as part of the global conditions of our lives. The intense scrutiny of family relations rather than wider social and material conditions. It's obviously cheaper to try and adjust families, or politicians seem to think it would be, than to actually invest in making the conditions for people's lives much more supportive, for bringing up children and thriving families and communities in general.

So, I mean, attachment theory is quite a good candidate in some ways, because it's the sort of, it was always a hybrid model. You know, Bowlby always felt himself to be kind of quite isolated and marginal and not really accepted as a psychoanalyst. I think that was correctly so, because he wasn't really signed up to some of the key tenets of psychoanalysis, in the sense of a commitment to the notion of the unconscious, and also around the driving significance of sexuality. Both of those things are notably absent in attachment theory. He was trying, he was impressed by that link with science and some kind of scientific legitimacy. So, attachment theory was certainly important in the reform of childcare and hospital care of children. I really don't want to deny the significance of attending to the importance of relationships and continuity of relationships. And, you know, if you've seen those films about a four-year-old going to hospital, they are deeply distressing to see, and there's undoubtedly some clear truths about some of that work.

So it's like a case example of the translation of theory to practice, though, because the argument that Denise Riley makes in her book *War in the Nursery*, which is as much a discussion about competing feminists' agendas around demands for child care, as it is also an analysis of the complexity of the relationship between theory and practice. Certainly, in the UK after the Second World War, the argument that had been made was

that attachment theory was responsible for women being forced out of the workplace, turns out to be a little more complicated than that. The conditions in which women were working were not good. Some of them were actually quite happy to take up positions as full-time carers of children, and there's a whole kind of class dimension of different working class and middle-class feminist demands around childcare versus the right to able to be with your children. Working-class women have not had that opportunity available to them so much. So, it's a complicated story, and the role of attachment theory in it, in terms of public policy of state provision of childcare, which in the UK is appalling, you know, appallingly little provision. Unlike I think here in in Nordic countries, yet it is not as direct as some conspiracy theorists would say.

Having said that, clearly the theories do have some wider political effects. And attachment theory, at a moment in psychoanalysis where some psychoanalysts, people like Peter Fonagy in the UK, were worried about getting squeezed out of the domain of psychotherapy provision, or mental health provision, and started to get into all the neuro stuff. I think the relationship between attachment theory and… I mean some of it is deeply disturbing. The idea that you could put a pregnant woman in a FMRI scanner and predict what kind of mother she is going to be is horrific, deeply oppressive, because we know that there’s all kinds of assumptions of which kind of women are assumed to be better and worse kinds of mothers, from particular class backgrounds, particular racialized backgrounds, etc. So, that kind of move towards the neuro from some of the psychoanalytic theorists and practitioners alongside psychologists and others, was kind of tactical, an attempt to try and prove legitimacy. Peter Fonagy thinks he's saved psychoanalysis. Some people think he's completely lost psychoanalysis, and it remains a debate. But I think I was talking a bit about this yesterday, wasn't I?

The ways in which the claims about neuroscience and brains and so on seem to have, at least in UK public policy, reached a sort of peak in the mid 2010s to 2015. And what I... I may not be up to date, but what I've seen in subsequent policies is a sort of pedalling back on some of the claims around neuroscience. And we know that the neuroscientists deeply contest some of the claims that are made for their science, and demonstrate instability, provisionality, and arbitrariness of a lot of the interpretations that are made.

So, what I notice now is that there seems to be some kind of obligatory mention that has to be made of the neuroscience. But actually, the connection and relevance to the particular claims that are being made at the level of the psychological are very unclear. I mean the corollary of that is, you know, I'm also very persuaded by the kind of arguments made by people like Jan de Vos, who's saying that psychologists should be very wary of this move to gain legitimacy through these claims to neuroscience, because it eclipses the domain of the psychological.

Why do you need psychology if you can just read things off brains, you know, neurons firing? And I don't think those strategies have been thought through very clearly, because it's a very reactive and responsive domain. And politicians, who work in a parliamentary cycle of five years in the UK are only interested in quick fixes, and something that sounds like it will do something. They're not committed to thoroughgoing theories, except that, in terms of mental health provision, they want cheaper fixes than something psychoanalytic. So, there is a crisis, and remains a crisis in more long-term psychodynamic types of approaches to mental health support. CBT, cognitive behavioural therapies, which are increasingly manualised and probably chatbot provided very soon, are, you know, it's a genuine risk to psychologists' jobs, and possibly to psychology in general.

Noomi Matthiesen: Well, there was a bit of hope on the way in your narrative, I suppose, but yes, it is very complex. And I wanted to move from here into some of your newer work. You've been developing what you've termed *child as method*. And I wanted to give you some space to unfold what child as method is, and how it emerges from the work that you have been doing, and also how it differs from the previous work you've been doing.

Erica Burman: I'll just mention one more thing about attachment theory before we talk about child as method, if that's okay.

Noomi Matthiesen: Yes, please, go ahead.

Erica Burman: Just a reflection that, you know, it's kind of with a heavy heart that, through three editions of *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology*, the reviewers' comments have always come back saying that we need more, we need more critical work on attachment theory. And it's, yeah, it's hard to see its continuing grip. But perhaps not, perhaps it is also understandable. I think it's also important not to misunderstand the

impulse to want to care for and support for children, even as we also have to, I mean, there is sort of wonderful critiques emerging. There are some very interesting critiques that are continuing to emerge about the cultural assumptions underlying the model, the sort of Global North/Global Minority kinds of norms and assumptions that inscribe apparently universal global models, and so on. So, I think that there's certainly more to be able to say, as well as sort of more empirical work on children learning and growing together in groups, rather than in mother-child dyads, and all of that sort of thing. But, yes, it's kind of, I haven't got to the chapter to revise for the fourth edition yet, and I'm trying to think about what I need to do. I'd appreciate advice about what now needs to be included. But it seems to me that some of the old arguments still have to be said, as well as the new ones. And that means that that chapter gets bigger and bigger. And I kind of resent its space in the book, but it seems to me that it's important, and it seems to be necessary to do that.

Noomi Matthiesen: Yes, absolutely. And I think that, at least in a Danish context, there's some interesting stuff going on, where it's developing, looking more into not so much the mother-child, but also trying to look at father-child, but also the pedagogue-child relationship. But I think it still maintains this very sort of dyadic understanding of relationality. And it connects to this risk discourse. So, it has a very static idea and a very instrumentalized understanding of the care-relationship. So the risk discourse means that it's very connected, I think, also to early intervention practices.

Erica Burman: Yes, risk, vulnerability, resilience, all of those are highly recast as individualised kind of models. Resilience wasn't about individuals in its initial formulations, and that goes alongside all the kind of changes in our structure of our economies, into the rise of emotional intelligence, emotional labour, sometimes mistakenly called cognitive labour. But the whole post-industrial service sector emphasis is on the capacity to relate, and the exploitation of what were, culturally speaking, feminine relational skills. So, yeah, it's a complicated field for everyone to navigate. And then there is the transformation of capital and gender relations, and the outsourcing of our production manufacturing processes to the Global South, and all of the issues that arise with that.

Yeah. That's in child as method too.

Noomi Matthiesen: Yes, let's move on to child as method.

Erica Burman: So, the question is: what is it? Right. What is Child as Method, and why?

So, yeah, having kind of spent time deconstructing, hopefully deconstructing, developmental psychology, and then in that process, becoming powerfully impressed by how the arguments about the problems with the concept of development resonate across different levels or domains, I found myself drawing on post development critiques: critiques arising from postcolonial studies, from economic models of economic development, as well as exploring how the resonance between models of individual development and international development particularly is. I mean, there's so much wonderful literature about all of this now. And then, kind of explicitly in my book *Developments – Child, Image, Nation*, moving into pressurising further the role of the figure of the child in age and developmental, in development policies, in exploring the positioning of women and children, which we might go on to say more about, I suppose. And then in those policies and practices, I sort of arrived at Child as Method through a fairly indirect route. There was never a plan.

Through an engagement with the writings of Frantz Fanon, and through an engagement with particularly Kuan-Hsing Chen's book *Asia as Method*, which has quite a deep engagement with Fanon, as well as offering three particular analytical strategies. I mean, this is a postcolonial study, cultural studies text written about Taiwan and about Asia as a unit of analysis, as a way of overcoming some of the kind of blind alleys of that had occupied postcolonial studies too. But it's not a text about children at all but it gave me some tools to think about. He talks about the need to do a process of decolonisation, and that has happened in most places, but not all, even if we also have a recolonisation going on in lots of ways. And this is inspired by Fanon too. De-imperialization is his second strategy. So, the attention to the subjective, which comes from Fanon, although it is also a political affective construction. So, both the coloniser, historically, and the colonised, have to do some subjective work to decolonise themselves. We might say now, to undo some of the impact on their understandings of themselves, some reflexive work. And it's on the part of both parties, the historically colonised and the coloniser. And the final analytic kind of frame he talks about is to De-Cold War. And in 2010, the relevance of that may have looked, although it's certainly inscribed on the history and geography of

Asia very clearly. But the relevance of that turns out to be so prescient, actually, in terms of the current re-Cold War that we are witnessing now, the impact of the Cold War and it’s continuing reverberations. I think that's something that we're not really taking seriously enough. And in a sense, perhaps I'm jumping ahead, but my engagement through the shared interest in Child as Method with the *Cold War Childhoods Project* that Zsuzsa Millei and others have formulated - Zsuzsa is in the University of Tampere now, but originally from Hungary - was very instructive.

So, Child as Method is inspired by *Asia as Method,* and also another book, *Border as Method*. It aims to be an intervention in a number of different directions. Partly, it's an insistence on the significance and relevance of thinking about how we understand children and childhood, and notions of the child, which unfortunately, is often the child, rather than *a* child or children in general, how they, the much neglected role they play, but often in unexplored and constitutive ways in wider critical social theory and practices.

And reciprocally, it's also an invitation to us in psychology, in education, in childhood studies, to bring those wider critical social theory debates into our thinking about children and childhood, and not reproduce that effect that's so attached, unfortunately, to the figure of the child, of looking like it's something separate, and functioning as often a device to strip away the social and the political, in the kind of emotional traction that the figure of the child holds and has come to acquire in modern, Global North imaginaries. So, it's an intervention in both directions. And from there, it's very much as with Kuan-Hsing Chen's *Asia as Method,* it's a sort of a method in the sense of focusing on offering some strategies. But it's really an analytic framework from which particular inquiries can be generated. So, it's not a metatheory or a total theory or model. It's a heuristic, if you like, to inform and guide particular kind of projects and inquiries.

Noomi Matthiesen: Thank you. And will you elaborate a bit more about the role of Fanon, in *Child as Method*?

Erica Burman: So, Fanon has been important in its elaboration as an important touchstone that brings the attention to, obviously, the attention to questions of racialization and legacies of colonialism. But beyond that, Fanon's own thinking as a psychoanalytically informed psychiatrist, mental health practitioner, and a theorist, and a revolutionary, creates an insistence on the attention to the specific, concrete, material,

social conditions of people's lives. And that is why Fanon's is now acquiring much more engagement in terms of his philosophical contribution to existentialism and phenomenology, and why some key philosophical critics and theorists are calling for further attention to his ideas as offering a kind of more embedded analysis of the field, and of its construction of the subjectivity of the individuals than even say Foucault. So, in that sense, Fanon is there as both a proxy for, and an index of some kind of critical social theory that informs the understanding of the nature of the social within which constructions of childhood emerge.

Fanon's writings also became an arena, a corpus of material in which I then, taking someone who was politically aligned in nonnormative ways let's say, as an anti-racist, as a decolonial critic, as a revolutionary, found that his constructions of childhood became a matter of interest for me. I wanted to see, you know, in what ways were they any different from the prevailing constructions of childhood that are around anyway. Of course, he was a man of his time, and there's many reproductions of them. But also, then, as quite a delimited arena in which to look at what the range, what a specific range, of constructions of childhood, or figurations, or whatever you want to call them, tropes, how they, how they compose a field of ways of thinking about children and childhood and how they work together to compose that field. So, it became a kind of opportunity to explore what does childhood do, or the claim to childhood, and with what political effects? So, *Child as Method,* it needs to be emphasised that it is about children, but it isn't only about children. And every time you name, as we know from Foucault, from any discursive approach, every time you name a specific entity, you're also constituting other entities and parties around it. So, it's also as interesting to look at the domains and arenas in which claims to childhood do not appear or arise, and also where they appear in quite hidden or implicit or apparently marginal ways, and to think about the significance of that. So, Fanon is there, I mean, remains a kind of key sort of intellectual resource for me, even as other people are taking *Child as Method* in lots of other directions.

Noomi Matthiesen: Great. So, Fanon was a psychoanalyst and a revolutionary and looking at your work, both as a critical theorist, but you're also an activist, and I thought, well, that makes sense that Fanon would be attractive to you. So I wanted to ask you a biographical question about how you would describe your intertwined development as a critical theorist and as an activist?

Erica Burman: As a critical theorist and as an activist… Well, I think the activism, you know, in a sense, I feel that I had little choice as a, the granddaughter, great granddaughter, of immigrants to the UK, growing up in quite small Jewish community. I think I always had a sense of being invested with a political project of some kind, whether I liked it or not. So, I bring that sense of minoritized positioning, and that structured my engagement with feminism, because it was only really as a Jewish feminist that I felt able to engage with feminist movements as I encountered them, particularly as a student.

So, I mean, I was sort of an intersectional feminist before the word was really in circulation, and that remains very important. I was really quite an ordinary, diligent undergraduate student. I wasn't politically engaged, particularly, and it was really later that I became more actively involved, partly as a feminist critic of psychology, as I became more aware of the permeating androcentrism and misogyny and all the rest of it, as well as heterosexism, that informs psychology, obviously not only psychology, but we're talking about psychology today.

And so, I mean, I was fortunate to be doing this at a moment when there was a critical movement emerging of other critical psychologists and feminist psychologists, from whom I've benefited enormously. We started to mobilize and organize together. We formed a campaign to get some representation and legitimacy and acknowledgement of feminist work within the British Psychological Society. And although the wider organization was called *Women in Psychology*, it kind of got eventually sort of collapsed into the bit that was within institutional psychology still. It remains an important intervention, even if, because this was psychology and not, say, sociology, we couldn't name it a feminist psychology section of the British Psychological Society. It had to be named after a domain of study. And the psychology of women section arose, which is now the *Psychology of Women and Equalities*, was one of the of the better candidates of the names, I can tell you. So, I didn't play a major role in all of that, but I was a part of that. And in that sense, you learn activism on the job, don't you?

I was involved in Jewish socialist campaigns and demonstrations as well. Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982, and I was part of some protests around that, and emerging discussions around criticisms of Zionism and the alignment of Jewish and non-Jewish people with Israel, the Israeli state, which remains so relevant now. Also, as a doctoral student in

Manchester University, I found that most of the psychology department was running both the national and the European anti-nuclear movement. And, I don't know, nuclear war well, seems even more of a threat now than it did then, actually. So, there was a lot happening to be a part of. So, how much have I answered that question?

Noomi Matthiesen: I think that's a great answer. And I wanted to follow up by asking, because I know you're a trained and licensed group analyst, could you tell us the story of why you went that way and what it helps you with these transformative actions that you are engaged with?

Erica Burman: Well, the decision to train as a group analyst came about through, I mean, for us in British psychology, psychoanalysis was a sort of a key critical resource. And it's a statement that I put *in Deconstructing Psychology* that psychoanalysis is the repressed other of psychology. That's actually a claim I've had to qualify quite considerably, because in some parts of the world, psychoanalysis is the main form of psychology and indeed has been very oppressive as well, particularly in Latin America, although there are great radical currents of psychoanalysis as well.

Psychoanalysis was one of the key ingredients in the resources we were drawing upon to critique the rational, unitary subject of psychology. And it's there in the book that was very key to many of us at that time called *Changing the Subject*, that brought ideas of Foucault and Lacan and Derrida, in a sort of more amenable package, if you like, but it's still not an easy book, to bear upon the problems that we grapple with in psychology and what the problems are of the prevailing models of the individual, including the child. And I suppose I was part of a sort of a latecomer to quite a significant trail of academics who also became interested in psychoanalysis as a practice, not just a critical theory. And as it so happened, just kind of round the corner from where I was working, there was a psychotherapy service that had some lovely open seminars. And it must have been a very different time in National Health Service, because they used to have discussions where they'd sort of apply a bit of psychoanalytic theory to a film.

So, I kind of got to know them, and I was also involved in a group called Race, Culture and psychotherapies alongside this, where as a someone with academic skills, and this group was run from this psychotherapy service, it was quite a significant intervention in the National Health Service locally, to focus on and explore questions of culture, class

and gender, but principally culture and race, and racialized assumptions in models and practices, and what kind of changes need to be made conceptually and theoretically. So, the engagement happened, alongside that opening relationship. I became very involved in designing some small studies and writing about, documenting innovative practices around first language psychotherapy provision and critically reflecting on changes and modifications to practices. So, I was part of those discussions but also helping sort of legitimate them through publications. And then I was able to practice under supervision with a couple of patients and clients. And over time, I felt drawn to doing an introductory course in group analysis, which was enormously challenging and fun.

I did it simply as sort of a taster, and I had no idea that I would then train. Although other people who were doing it, who were healthcare workers or psychiatrists, psychologists, clinical psychologists, they clearly were thinking about that they wanted to move on to train. Some years later, after my own analysis or psychoanalytic psychotherapy for a few years, which is a prerequisite to be able to train as well, I decided to train. And the rationale for why group analysis is really that it was the kind of psychoanalysis that had an explicit social and political theory, a social theory of the psyche with an emphasis on that sociality.

So the sociology, if you like, for group analysis comes from Norbert Elias, who was connected to the Frankfurt School. And other key figure in group analysis Foulkes, he also had some relationship with Frankfurt School before they all had to leave Germany as Jews, those who could get out, and came to Britain. It was in Britain that group analysis kind of began, with experiments in working therapeutically in groups. But group analysis isn't only a therapeutic approach. So, it's a methodology that has a connection, really, with *Child as method*, if you like, as well as the connection around a social theory of the psyche. And although, decades on, I can see a lot of problems with the gap between theory and practice in group analysis, I could say a lot more about that. Still, I think it's an underexplored resource. It's a challenge to the individualism that structures our understandings of mental health practices.

I principally work now on a counselling psychology programme, but most of them never do any, or well do very little, group work. When they do it's sort of psychoeducation groups. I mean, if you read my book on Fanon, there is a bit of group analysis in it. I

couldn't stop myself. I think there's a great deal, in general, that those kind of understandings of groups and institutions can gain from other kinds of traditions. So, I'm currently editing a special issue of *Group Analysis* with colleagues, Suryia Nayak, that will be on 'Fanon now', bringing the tradition that he was trained in of institutional psychotherapy, and thinking about what relevance and contributions it could have for a more explicitly politicized understanding of how the social and political shapes the individual. But one key thing about group analysis is that it's not about adapting people to groups or making groups work better. Groups pose questions of authority and democracy. Power is always in the foreground, including the power or powerlessness of the conductor, because you're there in the group.

So, yeah, you can't avoid confronting those questions. And so now I've lost my thread, but I think what it aligns with Fanon's understanding, is attention to the specific role and understanding of the individual subject, alongside an elaborated theory of how the historical, cultural and political conditions create the context and conditions for someone's experiences. The challenge in group analysis is not necessarily to make you better, but to help you understand your own relationship with groups in a better way. And I mean, I think personally it's made me a little bit more robust in my dealings with groups of various kinds. And even though I don't practice, I don't currently run therapy groups, I certainly am in a lot of groups, I work with a lot of groups. And the institutional framing, the understanding of institutions, which isn't specifically group analytic but would include that, is, of course, vital. You know, how do we survive just the huge number of dysfunctional organizations and institutions that we're in, and understand what impacts those organizational and institutional dynamics have on us?

Noomi Matthiesen: Lovely. I wanted to pick up on, what you said about group psychoanalysis not being about adapting to the group. I wanted to ask the question of normativity. So, both as a group therapist or psychoanalysis, as an activist and in your theoretical work, you are clearly committed to creating social change and emancipation. And you do this by, and I quote here from an article you write, that *Child as Method* is informed by Foucauldian, feminist, postcolonial thinking that treats norms as objects of suspicion, to be highlighted and critiqued rather than reconstructed.

So, I wanted to ask about the tension that is embedded in this sort of deconstructive approach to norms, because change would always require norms, or new norms. And you also have this nice discussion with childism where you say, well, childism is very committed to certain norms and certain values and so on. Could you tell us a little bit about your thoughts about this tension between deconstructing norms, but also the possibility of new norms arising that could be more emancipatory?

Erica Burman: Well, obviously, as an activist, I'm inspired by both reacting against something and struggling for something. But, again, I think the thing about being suspicious of norms comes from the engagement with psychology, where apparently benign norms can turn out to be so oppressive. And deconstruction as a project, I mean, it isn't non-normative, but it's less committed to those norms. Foucault and Derrida, for them, Marxism was very much a part of the assumed landscape of their writing, for example. And so, even if Derrida is taking things apart and exposing implicit norms, it doesn't mean that there aren't any at all. But he's kind of pushing back, keeping them at arm's length. And I think we have to do that. And Foucault, of course, famously said, to envisage another world is to sort of, well I can't remember the exact quote - you probably all know it - is to foreclose what the future could be. And these are lots of discussions about that and the possibility of doing that. But on the other hand, I think in a discipline like psychology, it's important to be relativist, to kind of take some distance from those norms, even as you also, you know, once you've done that sort of exploration, you can then come back in with that sort of, well, could it be better to look at it in this kind of way? There's no view from nowhere. We always bring perspectives, standpoints, commitments, and there's no harm in having to critically consider those and review those too. But I think the key thing is sort of thinking about, at what point you are taking that relativising move, and at which point you're making the normative judgement.

Clearly, one reason why I was uncomfortable with *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology* is that I'm being very normative in the judgements that I'm making about the damage that developmental psychology does, or rather that is done in the name of developmental psychology. And I knew I was quite vulnerable to that charge, because it's basically a feminist critique and so clearly informed by certain kinds of commitments, even if, well, you know, I would want to critically review and consider what that means, and what those commitments are.

So, yeah, we could take an example from another domain. Years and years ago, Ian Parker and I organised an event. It was in the early days of the Hearing Voices Movement in our university. We had a psychiatrist speaking, we had somebody who heard voices speaking, all about their theories of what hearing voices, or auditory hallucinations, the names are significant, of course, etc., mean. We also had a cognitive behavioural psychologist, a shaman, a spiritualist, an evangelical Christian, for whom hearing voices is mandatory, you know, for religious practice. So, you had all these different accounts, with all kinds of different meanings and consequences, of what hearing voices means. That was a massive relativisation of a highly stigmatized positioning of hearing voices within our psychiatric systems, especially at that time. And that didn't mean that I didn't have some views about which of those accounts was better than another, but to juxtapose them alongside each other was profoundly destabilising to the prevailing power relations of psychiatry in particular. So, in that sense, I think we have to think about at what point do we need to open up those norms for critical scrutiny, and at what points do we pin them down?

Returning to your question, I think the kind of childism work is really important, it's really valuable. The law is all about norms, and John Wall is a legal theorist. So, I mean, that makes sense. But... as we know from the kind of critical debates around the Convention on the Rights of the Child and so on, those norms have to be critically revisited, because they often have other kinds of effects that are exclusionary and marginalising. So, yes, it's both a genuine problem, the question of the normative, and also, I suppose, a non-problem for me.

Noomi Matthiesen: Right. So, being mindful of the time, I want to move to the last question, so that there is a bit of space for comments and questions. I wanted to ask about what is the next step for you? Are there tensions within your own work that you want to explore further? Is there something in the world, a problem, that you want to address and orient yourself towards?

Erica Burman: Well, goodness, yes. Yes. Let's change the world. I wish I had more time to be more actively engaged in many of the campaigns and organisations. But in terms of my intellectual trajectory, I feel there's another *Child as Method* book in me, or various papers I'm kind of... I want to write or have written in some form. So, I'm probably going

to explore where *Child as Method* takes me, alongside the sort of inspiring engagement from other people who are taking it in lots of different directions.

There's this fourth edition of *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology* that I feel obliged to produce. I don't think I'll do a fifth. I will hand over the mantle to some dedicated people if they really feel that it's necessary. Of course, I would hope that it wouldn't be necessary to deconstruct developmental psychology anymore, but it doesn't look like it's going away anytime soon. The questions of development remain very important. You know, what do we mean by development? My thesis was about time, change and development, and all those questions about teleology, or not. And, we can't escape those questions, I think.

So, I have small projects that entertain me, like my Found Childhood project of taking pictures and analyzing them. I want to spend more time with those pictures and write things about them. And, like any other academic, I probably would like to try out other kinds of writing. But there's lots of things to do. I'd like to... I am a yoga teacher by training, and there's lots of other things that I want to devote my time to.

But principally, I think I'm interested in seeing where all these different ideas and currents go. I mean, back in the early 1980s, I went to a conference in Cambridge with Judith Ennew, Jo Boyden, Allison James, Alan Prout and others. It was one of the beginnings of this so-called *new sociology of childhood*. And there I was. I don't know how I got to hear about it, maybe I had some contact with Jo about one of her articles, or Judith. And it was like... a developmental psychologist, you know [makes gesture of horror]. It's so interesting to see the way the cycle, the pendulum, swings backwards and forwards around the same set of problems about the relationship with developmental psychology or with norms. Within childhood studies, as every new discipline or sub-discipline, it reproduces a key set of debates that run and run and run. And I hope that, as psychologists, we can play some role in those important debates, that respond to and take up the current challenges. Yeah.

Noomi Matthiesen: Wonderful. Thank you so much. And, Alfred, will you help us open the floor for some comments or questions?

Question 1 being asked from the audience: Well, first of all, thank you for the talk. Very, very interesting. I suppose I would have a small question about... You just talked

about both the role as a theoretical thinker and psychologist on which, and your role as an activist. And these two roles clearly have a distinct relationship. But I'm curious of how these two should, *if* they should, how they should be separated and how you manage these two roles kind of as the same person, of course, but also independently.

Erica Burman: Shall we collect a couple of questions?

Noomi Matthiesen: That's a good idea. Are there any more questions? There's one up there.

Question 2 being asked from the audience: Okay. So, I am curious about often, in research settings or in psychiatric settings, there's a use of diagnostic tools. And so, because I was recently in this training, and I was quite stunned that there's, at least in this new diagnostic tool, there's an assessment of personality pathology, this diagnostic tool, there's an assessment of normality. And so, when you're doing this interview, you can choose what is the "normal" kind. And so, I was quite struck by this, because this is something that's gonna be implemented in clinical settings, psychiatry, and so on, to determine if somebody has a personality disorder. I'm curious about how could we use, what way could we use these kinds of global tools to actually understand or assess disorders? And if you have any ideas about what it means to have the "standards of normality"?

Erica Burman: One more, yes,

Question 3 being asked from the audience: First of all, I just want to thank you for being here. I've always been compelled by this idea of anti-psychology. I have to be careful of what I'm saying right now, I can see a few of my professors' faces here. I wanted to address what you touched upon briefly. I mean, this notion of normativity done in the name of developmental psychology, or psychology in general. And I was wondering, from your position, as an anti-developmentalist or a feminist, if you could conceptualize some of the critique that there's been on this notion of maternal sensitivity. And if, you have any thoughts on, I don't know, solutions maybe to this particular theoretical and political stigmatization problem. I hope that makes sense.

Erica Burman: Goodness, yeah, excellent questions. I don't really have answers, except to say thank you for raising them, and I hope you take them up.

I think we all have to be activist academics, really, we have no choice. We are always positioned, and we have therefore responsibilities, especially depending on the privilege of one's position. Perhaps I'm in a position now of relative seniority, where I can afford to be a little more candid than people in more junior positions. That's important, to help support others, to both understand that, you know, some people may not be able to as explicit or frank as I now feel able to be, or perhaps always did. In a way, I'm fortunate that I benefited from people supporting that position, and that's very important and very helpful.

I think one can be an activist academic, or an academic activist - no, I prefer activist academic - in lots of different ways. And one of the contributions that I feel that we've been able to make as feminists in psychology is to deconstruct, to take apart, to offer an informed, critical analysis of some of what's wrong with what goes under the name of the everyday practice of psychology, whether explicitly or implicitly. That owes a great deal to our specific academic expertise, which is helpful. Just as it can also be helpful, as an academic this, unfortunately, reproduces the hierarchies of knowledge and legitimation, but sometimes still to document good activist practice that demonstrates alternatives to some of the mainstream ways of doing things.

Actually, the empirical projects that I have been involved with often seem very far away from the kind of interests I've been talking about today, but in practice, they became very connected, for example, around domestic violence support for what we then called minoritized women and children, from what we would say now probably from the global majority, in terms of working across different kind of racialized, minoritized groups, and also crossing the black-white divide in terms of the UK context. It feels like there are lots of ways to be an activist academic. Some of that depends on your interests, your position, and your expertise. It might be a theoretical contribution; it might be a very practical one. Having moved from a psychology department into education, I had a little identity crisis, and I learned a great deal about lots of different ways of models and theories, and ways of doing things as well, and that people are doing amazingly interesting work.

So, are they separate? Well, they're partly separate, but historically, biographically, and personally, inevitably connected. Of course, the knowledge that we have comes from somewhere too, and we can bring that critical understanding to reconsider what our

curriculum should be, to try and decolonise the regimes of knowledge that count and are drawn upon. I think we can make some interventions, or we can do some damage limitation, and I think we should try and do that. That's a should. That's a normative statement.

I asked a global... I don't know what to say about this assessment that you're talking about. But what it brings to mind is that study from... You probably all know it. It's an all-social psychology text, Broverman et al. from 1970-something. I can't remember whether it was psychologists or mental health practitioners of some kind, had to classify a normal healthy man, a normal healthy woman, and a normal healthy person. Guess what? The normal healthy woman came out as more pathological than the normal healthy man, and “the person” sort of more like the man. And I know that study's been subject to lots of critiques and so on, but it clearly says something, and we could amplify that in relation to class and race, etc.

So, claims about the normal, and, you know, that's where, as social scientists, we have an understanding of the misapplication of statistics to psychology, and we have an opportunity to try and challenge and unhinge some of the multiple meanings of the term “normal”. I think we need to have another conversation about what this assessment tool is, and who's using it, how, and why. Just as we need to be critical about the rise of psychology in everyday life, its popularity, and the way in which governments turn to psychology as a sort of an answer to problems that don't require... well, it might require some kind of psychological response, but clearly much more than that. We need to be critical of the globalisation of the mental health industry, the rush to diagnose, all the previously undiagnosed depressions and all pathologies in the rest of the global South and instead reverse that knowledge hierarchy. Without essentialising indigenous cultures and knowledges, we should understand that there are many other resources around for thinking about what we understand as either wellbeing or distress.

But that won't help the question of standardisation. That's where I suppose, we as critical psychologists have to ally with other professionals, it might be mental health or social workers or elsewhere, to think about other ways of supporting people to live good lives together. I don't know what else I can say about that.

Maternal sensitivity. Well, I think you answered. You clearly have some ideas. I mean, the question around why the focus on mothers, what does it mean to be sensitive. and what assumptions inform those models is already present in the way you couched the question, the class and cultural assumptions. Over the last two days, I've been hearing about some of the kind of debates happening here in Denmark, as I also know elsewhere in Nordic countries, as also in the UK, around the grounds on which children are removed from mothers, from parents. It is obviously a very key issue. I suppose, from a *Child as Method* perspective, just thinking about this now, taking a step back, I kind of think, well, why are we only talking about maternal sensitivity? What about societal sensitivity?

What about, you know... I mean, I worked in a building, a university building for a long time that had signs up saying, "Children are not allowed here". We have to kind of be prepared to step back and ask the sort of big, or perhaps stupid, questions to open up the prevailing frame for critical re-evaluation. We will find allies on the way if we do that. For a long time, I wasn't considered to be a developmental... well, I don't think many people consider me to be a developmental psychologist, even now, though I would claim I am. I think it's important to maintain that claim. But we do find allies on the way from a range of places, whether it's in other disciplines, outside the university context, in practice, in community settings and amongst activists.

Noomi Matthiesen: Great. Thank you so much.

Erica Burman: Thank you so much for inviting me and your questions, comments and reflections. It's been a very inspiring and thought-provoking few days for me. So, I really am glad and grateful to meet new colleagues, and I hope we'll continue some of the conversations in the future.

Noomi Matthiesen Absolutely.

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Erica Burman is well known as a critical developmental psychologist and methodologist specialising in innovative and activist qualitative research, about which she has lectured all over the world. She is author of Developments: child, image, nation (Routledge, 2020, 2nd edition), Fanon, education, action: child as method (Routledge, 2019), Deconstructing Developmental Psychology (Routledge, 3rd edition, 2017, 4th edition in preparation), and Child as method: othering, interiority and materialism (Routledge, 2024).

Erica's research has focused on critical developmental and educational psychology, feminist and postcolonial theory, childhood studies, and on critical mental health practice (particularly around gender, cultural and decolonial issues). Her recent work addresses the connections between emotions, mental health and (social as well as individual) change, in particular as anchored by representations of, and appeals to, childhood. She has co-led transnational research projects on conceptualising and challenging state and interpersonal violence in relation to minoritised women and children, on educational and mental health impacts of poverty and 'austerity', on superdiversity and 'traditional' Muslim healing practices. She was a co-investigator on a crossnational project exploring postsocialist childhoods. Recent collaborative projects include the PACCT (Pakistani Community Calls to Action) Project, a community-based advocacy project which grew from the racializing and racist state responses to a local minoritised community during the Pandemic, and on conceptualising solidarity and collective action between community, university and state actors. She sees debates about children and childhood as central to current theories and practices around decolonisation, as indicated by her current work elaborating what she calls 'Child as method'.

Noomi Matthiesen studies the normative cultural practices and conditions of care in families and welfare state institutions. She is particularly interested in how the history of psychology has co-constituted these norms and practices. She explores this empirically in the encounters between families (parents and children) and professionals in welfare institutions (teachers, pedagogues and social workers). Her work focus' primarily on families in vulnerable positions, including refugee families and families under investigation for potential forced removal or forced adoption of the child(ren).