

Essential psychology?

Book review

Coleman, A M (ed) (1995) **Longman Essential Psychology**. London: Longman.
12 volumes.

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At last, a textbook with a different look! My shelves are crowded with complimentary copies of introductory texts, all American, each more glossy than the last and between their large, hard-covers, simply more of the same. The **Longman Essential Psychology** series appears enticingly different: twelve very short (approximately 100 pages) volumes in bright, soft-covers and inside, surprisingly, text - the written stuff rather than diagram after diagram and a plethora of full colour photographs. The separate binding of each volume allows for the purchase of just that "part" of the discipline which interests. This is a big plus in that very often a prescribed text contains much which is of no direct relevance to a course.

As a jaded teacher of first year psychology, I found these obvious differences in approach refreshingly promising. The layout is simple and appealing and the editor has done an excellent job of creating continuity of style and difficulty level across very many authors. Students have the opportunity to read leading figures in their specialist areas directly, (e.g. Argyle on social psychology, Eysenck on personality, Sternberg on intelligence, among others). The introduction to each volume succinctly charts the territory to be covered and creates a frame for reading. Another key feature of the text is a well compiled glossary for each volume.

The "essentials" identified for the series quite closely reflect the chapter headings of any other introductory text: biological aspects of behaviour, sensation and perception, learning and skills, cognitive psychology, individual differences and personality, developmental psychology, emotion and motivation, abnormal psychology, psychological research methods and statistics, applications of psychology, and controversies in psychology. The range of content thus offers a comprehensive introduction to the discipline as it is most widely taught. The last title "controversies in psychology" provides for topics not traditionally addressed and it is instructive to note what finds its way into this basket: parapsychology, hypnosis, gender issues, psychology and the law, and health psychology. The last two issues receive double treatment in the series, being dealt with in the applications text as well. The first two are probably still considered by most to lie at the (unacceptable) fringes of the discipline,

but it is remarkable that at the end of the twentieth century gender issues should be relegated to this marginal position.

However, the aim of each slim volume to present the best current thinking about a particular topic means that the series provides a useful introduction to the broad range of psychological topics. Indeed, having read through the series as a whole, I gained some sense of where the discipline is at in a variety of fields which I would not ordinarily read. Assuming that beginner readers are precisely that, “beginners”, in a field in which they will continue to read, there are extensive references provided at the end of each chapter, facilitating routes into the field. Most often, introductory texts seem to be written with the expectation that students will read no other psychology. Sadly, for the majority of first year South African students this assumption is probably accurate! My most serious reservations, therefore, arise in thinking about the series in relation to introductory teaching purposes in the South African context.

My concerns are two-fold: 1) the accessibility of material, 2) the epistemic parameters which inform both the form and content presented. In other words, my engagement with the texts as an educator led me to question how (and whether) my students would be able to learn from these texts and what kind of psychology they would come to learn through this series. In short, I believe the answer is that beginner South African students would encounter substantial obstacles to learning and the reward for their struggles would be a disjointed, disparate sense of the discipline. The original publication of the material was in encyclopaedic form as the Routledge **Companion Encyclopaedia of Psychology** and this condensed quality lingers in the new format. For experienced readers of psychology the absence of detail and quick reference feel of the text provides a good introductory guide to developments in adjacent fields. However, for beginners (students) who do not have a general preunderstanding of the discipline, the series may offer a less than appropriate starting place.

Accessibility needs to be considered firstly in relation to the thorny issue of “relevance” which permeates much educational debate in South Africa. While learning must be about coming to know that which is unfamiliar and as yet unknown, making this possible entails a careful shifting between the known and the unknown, both in terms of content and form (Craig, 1992). I think that this balancing act will remain the South African teacher’s problem should s/he choose to work with the Longman series. The attempt to create “student-friendly” diversions is uneven in the series, probably for no other reason than that the various topics more or less lend themselves to these attempts: it is more difficult to create relevant links to the study of biological behaviour than to social psychology. However, the silences of the text in other instances speak more loudly: the question of “race” and IQ is afforded only a single paragraph in the biological text and the chapter on prejudice and intergroup conflict in the social text leaves pertinent questions about the interface of the political and the personal, unraised. These are questions which are so evidently significant in our context and it is this sense of emphases, rather than a simplistic “relevance”, which I think would create connections for learner-readers. The frequent references to similarities (or differences) on the two sides of the Atlantic, make it quite clear who the envisaged readers of the series are and, while it is imperative that Africa learn from the best of both Europe and America, I found myself annoyed at the lack even of an acknowledgement that the world’s horizons extend south and east!

Second, accessibility is a matter not just of content, but also of form or style. American introductory textbooks tend to solve this problem by creating cinematic texts quite atypical of academic discourse. The Longman series avoids this pitfall. Illustration (both written and diagrammatic) is kept to a minimum and clear, courier-font text is presented in short but substantial chunks. However, my initial relief at this “cleaner” textual style was, however, not sustained through all twelve volumes and I suspect that my growing boredom with the format is probably a better indicator of students’ reactions. While I am of the opinion that students learn to read by reading (Bradbury & Griesel, 1994), there is a substantial educational demand placed on introductory materials to “hook” students into the reading process. Most South African students are not just beginning the reading of psychology but, indeed, beginning *READING*. This means that the text must engage them in a way that will allow them access to previously closed worlds (Gadamer, 1975; Ricoeur, 1981).

One of the greatest difficulties that students encounter in entering the new world of psychological study is coming to terms with the highly disjointed and disparate nature of the discipline. To the extent that this is an “essential” characteristic of psychology this need not perturb us and, perhaps, some would argue that fragmentation is a postmodern positive! However, from an educational perspective, I would argue that these disjunctures need to be highlighted alongside an explication of the kinds of connections which we, nonetheless, make in creating sufficient coherence among the diverse “stories” to identify them all as “psychology”. The series lacks this kind of overarching framework.

There are resultant overlaps: for example, Piaget appears in three texts (developmental, cognitive and even, uncharacteristically, in the text on individual differences and personality!); the concepts of “social loafing” and the notion that expressions of emotions might be universal, and the empirical studies which support these ideas, appear in both the emotion and motivation text, and in social psychology. It is appreciated that the intention is for texts to stand alone and that few readers will read the series as a whole the way this reviewer did. However, the texts do employ a substantial referencing system to other more detailed or complex texts and, similarly, some *internal* cross-referencing need not negate the possibility of reading a single text in isolation. The (true!) tale of a student who encountered a reference to Darwin in psychology and again in anthropology and assumed “they must be brothers or cousins”, should alert us to the educational problems of un-sign-posted overlaps.

There are also gaps: I found the degree of detail supplied in fields which are not my direct interest (e.g. biological, abnormal, learning and skills) sufficient, but was highly sceptical that there was sufficient coverage of cognitive issues for even a first year course to rely on this text alone. I can only assume that this unevenness of response would be reversed for those who teach in other areas. Similarly, I found the research methods text too “thin” to enable me to follow the logic of various quantitative methods (to “teach” myself as it were). Qualitative methods received no more than a “nod” and this bias permeates the series as a whole: I encountered the word “meaning” only once, two thirds of the way through the text on emotion and motivation! The most critical caveat, in my view, is the absence of a historical sense of the discipline. This concern is not met by the brief historical overviews offered at the start of particular texts (e.g. learning and skills, developmental psychology). Broader epistemological parameters are not addressed, e.g. the relations between, for example, behaviourist and

psychoanalytic approaches or the empiricist-rationalist debate that underpins much of cognitive psychology and are, hence, obscure for the beginner reader. Neither does one gain a sense of why each of these fields of psychology have developed, in response to what kinds of questions about human life. This sense of the evolution of the discipline is imperative for the development of a critical engagement with psychology.

In the end, the series offers new packaging of the old “essentials”. The freshness and flexibility of this new format offers a welcome and easy reference to adjacent fields for more senior students. However, the entry level student may require more coherent guidance in the initial negotiation of a discipline that remains essentially fragmented.

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