

Children and the politics of psychological practice in South Africa

Book review

Dawes, A & Donald, D (eds) (1994) **Children and adversity: Psychological perspectives on South African research**. Cape Town: David Philip.

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This book fulfils many functions at the same time. Not only does it provide a sustained focus on the problems and questions posed by supporting children's development in South Africa, but in so doing it also offers a vital perspective on the dominant approaches to developmental psychology. Each of the fourteen chapters follows a common structure which moves from general analysis of key concepts and methods to consider their relevance and applicability to the South African context. It is this sustained superordinate analytical stance which provides coherence to what is otherwise a very varied book, with chapters ranging across topics as diverse as the relation between health and and psychological development (Kalsvig and Connolly), street children (Swart-Kruger and Donald), the emotional impact of political violence (Dawes) and child sexual abuse (Levett). More than this, the discussion of South African research and the particular questions posed by the project of making psychology "relevant" and transformative in moving beyond the ugly shadow of apartheid carries both a specific, and general, set of lessons about the politics of psychological practice. Given this dual address and effects, as structured by my perspective outside South Africa, I will concentrate on the relevance of this book for an international as well as South African audience.

In the first place, the focus on South Africa prompts a careful re-reading of the existing psychological literature. With research paradigms developed and defined largely in relation to western overdeveloped populations, taking as central the issues emerging from the South African context reveals the partiality of the supposedly general Anglo-US and European models. Key tenets of this generalised model fragment under this post-colonial gaze. One of the foremost of these is the characterisation of childhood as a period of innocence and vulnerability. As Dawes and Donald point out in their Introduction, and as is taken up in various of the chapters, the dominant representation of childhood innocence arises as a result of the abstraction of children from social

contexts and relations. This works to deny their agency, coping strategies and active engagement with the socio-political circumstances they inhabit.

In particular, Dawes, chapter on the emotional impact of political violence challenges assumptions that exposure to, or participation within, political violence will inevitably cause psychological damage. Indeed, participation in group activity organised according to a coherent ideological or religious framework is implicated as a protective factor from, rather than exacerbation of, damage. Similarly, Levett invites us to move beyond the current, but really quite recent, moral outrage over child sexual abuse. Rather than presuming that women will be irreversibly psychologically damaged by abuse, she suggests we need to attend to the ways women and girls deal with and interpret these experiences. While this echoes the current shift of research from a discourse of "victims", to one of "survivors" in portraying the experience of women and girls who have been abused, Levett takes the bolder step of suggesting that attending to particularity of cultural contexts and meanings may require us to revise our understandings of child sexual exploitation. These two very different topics converge in a critique of the diagnostic category of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, as static, decontextualised and ultimately pathologising. Rather, "resilience", is the analytic term which emerges from these perspectives as in need of development and investigation.

As the editors point out in their overview and is developed elsewhere, adversity is treated as a social construct. Acknowledging this should not be seen as absolving us from theorising what meanings particular events and situations hold for children, families and communities, but rather it identifies the necessity for such work. Similarly, this position is regarded as highlighting the need for politically committed research oriented to intervention. In this sense, the book steers a careful course between the dangers of a spuriously generalised universalism and an empty cultural relativism. This issue is taken up explicitly in the Introduction and is dealt with in relation to the topics of specific chapters. Commonalities over geography and across historical and political contexts cannot be assumed, but are not ruled out. Thus in Chapter 2 the case for adopting North American standards of nutrition is critically argued through by Richter and Griesel and the measure retained. In Chapter 3 the concept of culture, itself comes in for analytic scrutiny by Lidell and colleagues. This cautions against assumptions of homogeneity within groups and as remaining constant across changing historical and political conditions. Throughout the book there is a welcome vigilance and critique of research subscribing to the racialised categories produced by the apartheid regime. This can take varying forms: of failing to comment on differences structured by differential treatment, or alternatively through providing no rationale or explanation for retaining racist classifications on the basis of ethnic group differences.

The general questions posed for policy interventions are usefully theorised in Gilmour and Soudien's analysis of how educational measures designed to promote equality actually maintain inequality by failing to theorise the role of the education system within structures of institutional discrimination. Here equity emerges as the goal rather than the more liberal, individualistic concept of equality. The latter, in aiming to make the rights and facilities of the elite available to all, ignores the structural inequality of starting points. This debate has been played out in Europe and the US in terms of the reformism of "equal opportunities" and multiculturalist policies, and the more radical claims made for antiracist approaches. It is to be expected that such distinctions and effects may assume quite a different form in a context where the historically disadvantaged and disempowered black communities form the majority population.

Indeed Donald's chapter on special educational needs provision questions the appropriateness of western models, and calls for preventative work in South Africa that acknowledges the legacies of apartheid in producing the educational disabilities of so many black men, women and children. Consistent with his constructivist framework, Donald calls for qualitative, case study research as the most fruitful way forward, as underscored by Swart-Kruger and Donald's later chapter on the conceptual and methodological challenges posed by working with, and for, street children.

However, the project of searching for the universals as well as particulars of development is not abandoned. Rather, this is treated as necessary but not assumed as a given. So, the chapters on the effects of poverty (Richter), child psychopathology (Robertson and Berger) and political violence (Dawes) make cautious parallels, as well as disclaimers, over the relevance of research from other countries. Consistent with the balanced and reflective ethos of the book, both the current approaches to research, positivist and social constructivist, are shown to be equally vulnerable to the problems of universalism and relativism. In particular, they share a reluctance to deal with questions of power. While for positivists this arises from a view of research as a neutral and value-free enterprise (which thus masks the institutional power relations it perpetuates), social constructionism can lapse into a liberal model which treats differences as separate and equal rather than, as in the case of apartheid, as constituted in relation to practices of systematic discrimination and inequality. I found the treatment of relativism both informative about the South African context, and of general applicability.

The broad perspective of the book is facilitated by subscription to life span, life events and ecocultural frameworks. This allows the bio-medical approaches (in chapters on health, nutrition and psychopathology) to sit alongside the interpretive and qualitative studies reviewed elsewhere (and including some useful detailed accounts of previous unpublished research). Nevertheless, there is an uneasy pluralism that, although a strength and strategic expression of a particular moment, and movement, in developmental psychology in South Africa, is also a little beguiling. However, notwithstanding the strong case made for this, and despite tantalising glimpses of social constructionist and discourse work here and there in Dawes and Donald's own chapters, it is the positivist work that dominates the book. Only Levett's chapter takes this as a primary theoretical orientation and develops its conceptual and political consequences. Perhaps this disjunction between narrative and research report highlights the future direction South African psychologists will take. While the tensions between these models deeply divide psychologists in the US and Europe, it is refreshing to see the case made for a strategic and politically-united synthesis here.

On a more critical note, given the emphasis on intersecting dimensions of subjectivity and inequality, it is surprising that gender issues receive little sustained attention in the book. This no doubt arises as a reflection of the general tendency in psychology to treat childhood, and children, as gender-neutral or gender-free. But this reinstates a masculine-oriented model, as is betrayed by the admission in the chapter on street children that, because girls get caught up in prostitution networks, these are almost entirely boys (this picture is also reproduced in other countries). With the exception of Levett's chapter, gender issues are touched on only obliquely in discussions of the prevalence in South Africa of female headed households and the difficulties

encountered by mothers in disciplining their sons who, within traditional practices, cannot be gainsayed once they have achieved manhood. Once again, this is a reminder of the limits of abstracting the study of children from cultural and familial milieux. The challenge remains of theorising the intersecting and power-charged dynamics between age and gender relations, as well as the racialisation of gendered identities (cf Gilroy, 1993; Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992).

A useful challenge to the European and US research paradigms emerges from the chapters on socio-moral reasoning (Dawes) and racism and group relations (Foster). The findings that children who have experienced the horror and injustices of political violence are not devoid of moral principles nor any less committed to notions of justice are a welcome counter to moral panics in the West over the "effects" of exposure to violence (whether in films or real life). Once again, the concept of resilience is crucial, and rather than making simplistic generalisations or extrapolations from ambiguous or value-laden diagnostic devices, careful attention to test materials and particular circumstances is called for. Similarly, Foster's chapter reviews how South African research on race and identity, both reflects and then highlights the limits of the European social identity paradigm. In this, he reviews the changing discourses which have structured both black identity, and the research investigating it - from the "damage" model of the 1950s, to the victim-blaming of the 1960s, to the more current drive towards denying differences. The experimental procedures of forced choice of "raced" dolls, taken as indicators of racial identity and preference are correctly considered to produce "exaggerated, decontextualised, reified and overgeneralised" (p231) claims. The futility of divorcing psychological preoccupations with identity from political and economic conditions is forcefully demonstrated.

In terms of aid and development programming, the book underscores the general theme arising from interdisciplinary work on children in developing countries that psychological welfare is not supplementary or sequential, but is integral, to child survival. Correlatively, poverty, nutrition and political instability take their toll on psychological development, and the fact that the "effects", may not be quite as doom-laden or irredeemable as has been portrayed does not make the early chapters of this book any less sobering. Rather, the combined impact of this book is to make clear that there is much greater scope for positive intervention in all areas than has sometimes been assumed. This is a hopeful and important position.

Overall, this is a bold and optimistic book. It starts from a clear acknowledgement of the historically compromised position of psychological research and practice, both in South Africa and elsewhere. But, notwithstanding this, it highlights the positive role that psychologists can play in building a just and equitable society through shouldering this responsibility rather than denying it. In this, it is both a reflection of the progressive work of South African psychologists and a tool for further development. It is also a vital example of the kind of committed, but rigorous and analytical, psychology that psychologists all over the world can learn from.

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