

THE NEW SUBJECTS OF CRITICAL PSYCHOLOGY (a view from England)

Hook, D (ed) with Mkhize, N, Kiguwa, P, Collins, A (Section eds), Burman, E & Parker, I (Consulting eds) (2004) **Critical Psychology**. Cape Town: UCT Press.
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This text is the kind of critical psychology book many of us have been waiting for. It aims to combine teaching with research concerns, to work within psychology while also referencing social, historical and political research; and to draw together a group of contributors who write from many theoretical and methodological perspectives. The book also provides the chance for a wide audience, in and outside psychology, to learn from South Africa's own intellectual approaches, which deploy critical-psychological traditions that have developed in the North, but that are crucially and increasingly informed by South Africa's own history of struggle, the continuing legacy of apartheid, and the "new" South Africa's contemporary position within Africa and the world. Books with pedagogic as well as research aims are difficult to produce, especially when they are interdisciplinary, jointly written, and theoretically ambitious. Since there are few such books, they will always produce a feeling in readers that some issues have been neglected and others overemphasised – the burden of expectation carried by these texts is heavy. Yet in the South African context, and perhaps in many others, this is exactly the kind of book that psychologists should be writing.

The book moves from an initial theoretical section, through a section on the South African context, to a concluding "practice" section. The "theory" section begins with Collins's overview summary, followed by Hook's "basic coordinates" of critical psychology chapter, which defines critical psychology as an "approach" or "orientation" towards "relations of power" (p11) Mkhize's subsequent chapter on African writers' formulations of "self", an interesting and non-essentialising treatment of "African worldview" and its interrelations with northern psychological perspectives, moves in the next chapter into a consideration of Bakhtin's dialogical selves and life-authoring, that might have helpful applications in many other settings where psychology is called on to address disadvantage and disempowerment. These two chapters are followed by two more twinned chapters by Hook, on Fanon's work, first in its more political context and then in relation to psychoanalysis. This is perhaps a more lengthy treatment of Fanon than would be expected in an introductory text, but it is rightly argued that his work has

been underused in critical-psychological work based in the south. These chapters lead into Parker's consideration of a wide span of psychoanalytic ideas both within their psychological and their South African contexts. Hayes's chapter treats the history of interrelations between marxism and psychology, which has a specific South African significance; Shefer then reviews a range of psychological and feminist takes on "gender" and sexuality, ranging usefully wide in the later sections of the chapter. Hook contributes two chapters that conclude the section, on Foucault's genealogies of power, particularly power that constitutes the pre-psychological and psychological subject; and on Rose's Foucauldian account of the governmentality, and self-governmentality, of subjectivity, both with some South African examples.

There is a lot of theory in this volume; the section takes up nearly half the book. In justification, theory is presented as "resource"; the chapters do indeed provide explication as well as criticism and debate, giving useful introductions to many key perspectives. The "theory" emphasis is also warranted (p1) by an initial Foucault quote on thought as the "perilous act" in which we must, first of all, engage - but the quote begins, "thought is no longer theoretical" ... Is such a large chunk of mostly fairly traditional, if "critical", theory, necessarily a "perilous act"? At times, the size of this section seems more an attempt to accommodate all significant and relevant theoretical perspectives. This inclusiveness is, indeed, valuable; but it cannot deliver the relatively homogeneous critical-psychological framework that the book promises several times at the start. Indeed, these promises seem themselves to stem from rather variable premises. I would have preferred the divergences to be acknowledged out loud, rather than to have to "read" them from what each chapter does not say about the others. For participants in an integrating dialogue, the theoretical perspectives reference each other rather little. It would have been interesting, for instance, to have the writers on Fanon, psychoanalysis, feminism and marxism respond to Mkhize's chapters on African-centred psychophilosophies; or for the chapter on Bakhtin to engage in some "dialogue" of its own with Foucault and Rose.

The most obvious divergence for me was between those chapters centred on critical psychology as "examining the ways in which existing (psychological) knowledge is organised" - to quote Collins's introductory summary (p2), and those that concentrate on applying other organisations of knowledge to the "psychological" field- though all the chapters do some of both. A book such as **Changing the subject** (Henriques et al, 1998) was more able to focus both approaches on a single object, the subject-in-question, as indeed was Fanon, writing about colonial subjects. This book, whose object is, perhaps, postcolonial subjectivities, seems to oscillate more markedly between the two in this section; perhaps it is the insistently doubled, knowing status of its "object" that accentuates such shifts. However, it also seems at times as if some implicit differences in the writers' conceptualisations of "power" are associated with these oscillations.

In the other sections, such contradictions became less problematic as they are more concretely and pragmatically worked through. The "South African context" section begins, after Kiguwa's overview, with her own very thorough writing of feminist theory from a variety of backgrounds into South African contexts, accompanied by a comprehensive table of "schools of feminism"; as with many pieces in this section I found this difficult *not* to read as theoretical work, especially in its concluding emphasis

on particularism. Sigogo and Modipa provide a South African-centred account of how to develop “community psychology”, a discourse with its own critical history but one that is sometimes limited in its analysis and effects. Campbell's chapter develops the notion of a really “critical” health psychology, drawing on the work of Freire on collective action and Bourdieu's notion of social capital, and explaining the limits and possibilities of such work in a South African HIV prevention and education context characterised by high prevalence; stigma around HIV and sex work; alcohol sale and use; fatalistic attitudes; poverty, and lack of medical and employer commitment. Duncan, Stevens and Bowman provide a detailed account of psychology's explicit and implicit involvement in South African racisms, contextualising this within the broader history of racialised psychological thinking and then exploring the possibilities of South African psychology moving out of these frames. Finally in this section, Ratele provides a very readable account of the US black psychology of for instance Nobles, White and the Clarks , and of resistant work from within (South) Africa, such as that of Manganyi and Mama, which function here as critical alternatives to the white western psychology that, unquestioned, forms most South African psychologists, and to South African psychology's more obviously racist history – or, as Ratele puts it, which work as a “coming in”. Ratele extends this trope to a more general demand that South African psychologists refuse marginalisation and generate their own ethical “psychology of universals and particulars” (p413), a programme that resonates somewhat with Gilroy's (2004) recent work on “conviviality”. This is one of my favourite pieces in the book; an exemplary instance of travelling theory – and it ends with an appropriately imaginative reading list.

In the third, “practice” section, given an overview introduction by Mkhize, practical applications of theoretical perspectives receive more sustained consideration - though again, distinctions between this and the previous section are sometimes blurred. First, van Vlaenderen and Neves provide two chapters critically discussing the possibilities and difficulties of Vygotskian Activity Theory and Participatory Action Research in relation to specific research projects, pieces that also usefully outline debates around “development”; then Gibson and Schwartz return to community psychology with a critical psychoanalytic address to the emotional dynamics of its initiatives. Wilbraham uses a South African media text on health and sex education directed at parents, particularly mothers, “*let's talk about it*”, to point up the significance of public language understood as Foucauldian discursive practice - and in the process sets out much of the significance and range of discourse-oriented approaches. Macleod develops a meta-account of the power of research, taking apart the implications of different psychological methods for politics, interrogating reflexivity in relation to race and examining the tensions between cooption and marginalisation that critical-psychological researchers face. Kasese-Hara puts notions of both personal and socioeconomic “development” in conjoined question, addressing a process of “double oppression” in which “forms of financial and cultural oppression and/or marginalisation go hand in hand” (pp556-7). Foster closes the book with a consideration of liberation psychology that outlines domains of domination, forms of resistance, theorisations of oppression and struggle, and the history and possible futures of liberatory psychology, particularly in South Africa.

You would not expect this to be a traditional textbook – critical psychology is not a traditional textbook subject, and the book's South African origins and focus mean that it has concerns other than those of the standard mainstream psychology primer.

Nevertheless this is a book that tries hard to make itself accessible and useful to readers who may be exploring the field for the first time. Most of the writing is clear and persuasive, despite its multiple authors. The first half, providing a general introduction to theoretical perspectives, is perhaps where inconsistencies of writing styles and conceptual interests are most noticeable. The book seemed to hang together more as I progressed through it. Perhaps, too the patchwork of styles and concerns is a little harder to negotiate in the theoretical sections. Throughout the text, there are good and relevant images, though the print colour sometimes makes them under-emphatic; generally useful chapter-end questions; tables helpfully summarising diverse positions on issues; apt marginal glosses or simplified versions of textual arguments; and text boxes, providing background or examples, or summarising relevant debates not dealt with in the main text. In the early “theory” chapters these text boxes sometimes give the feeling of a text arguing with itself, and I would have preferred such arguments to be spelled out rather than conducted covertly through these format differences. Mostly, though, the different textual forms successfully offer routes into reading a chapter’s issues differently. Despite all efforts at transparency, this remains a book to be worked at – but the different modalities of argument provide different ways to start working that will suit different readers.

This book cannot provide the integration that the “textbook” genre aims for, and this is not a bad thing, except insofar as undeliverable promises of coherence are made. Without them, the absence of some early theoretical concerns later in the book - for instance those of Mbiti, Ngubane, Bakhtin, Fanon, and even, to some extent, Foucault - or the absence of key ideas from some later chapters, those of Freire, Mama and Vygotsky, for instance, from the earlier sections - would be less noticeable. There are some omissions, though, that seem to stand out: The South African Constitution famously guarantees the rights of citizens regardless of sexual identity, yet sexuality is treated almost entirely as a heterosexual condition in this text; and African literature, and social theory developed within the South generally, seem rather under-utilised in the book’s arguments.

I think the book works best if you start out, not as if you are going on a quick and failsafe trip from critical-psychological theory to practice, with it as a handy pocket guide; but rather if you set out on an excursion through the fields of critical psychology, with the book as a kind of portmanteau companion, a large and perhaps slightly unwieldy carrier of many perspectives, held together with difficulty – and some firmly knotted but fraying conceptual string – during its travels, sometimes threatening to burst apart, with recalcitrant topics and ideas occasionally falling out or making closure difficult. The result is that, rather than the book flattening itself into homogeneity diversity, overcomes integration at points, and this is by far the preferable direction for such a text to take.

REFERENCES.

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