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Progressive psychology and the question of race

Book review

Manganyi, N C (1990) **Treachery and innocence: Psychology and racial difference in South Africa.** Johannesburg: Ravan. ISBN 0-86975-419-X.

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This book opens with and has as its raison d'etre an important challenge to progressive psychology. Manganyi notes that progressive South African intellectuals "are wedded to questions of class" (p1), and argues that racism "continues to be the Achilles' heel of the discipline in South Africa" (p1). He argues further that black psychologists are marginalised even within progressive psychology.

The challenge, especially given when time it was written, is both timeous and clear: can progressive psychology afford to continue ignoring the issue of race and racism within its own ranks? The introduction holds the promise of a trenchant and refreshing critique of a progressive psychology rather too comfortable with an inclusivist nonracial ideology which can easily be used (by whites in particular) as a means of ignoring the obvious and critical factor of race within professional psychological interactions. Psychological practice and the production of psychological knowledge must, if we take psychology seriously, be informed to a degree by the personal and sociopolitical context of psychologists. In South Africa, this context must include the lived experience of racism and racist ideology. Progressive psychology in South Africa has to a degree colluded in a peculiarly antipsychological dismissal of this context in favour a crudely materialist position. This position may, from certain perspectives, be more accurate, but at worst it may delegitimate the ways in which people understand their own lives. Manganyi's response is clear and direct: "In spite of the enthusiasm of those who may choose to see a lack of familiarity with Marx and Engels in this study, I am guided by my life experience, which has been mediated more profoundly by race than by class." (p1).

Manganyi's introduction, then, sets the stage for a book of central importance for South African psychology. It is a great disappointment that this is not the book promised. The major reason for this is that of the eight chapters of the book, six have been published elsewhere previously. This in itself would not necessarily a problem, but the chapters do not cohere into any sustained argument. It is fascinating to see the juxtaposition of different of Manganyi's arguments in different chapters, and it is exciting to have placed before one evidence of a sweeping intellectual range which can

encompass psychoanalysis and biography, Erikson and Vygotsky. But though we have notes towards the development of the central argument, we are not afforded a full exposition of it. Perhaps Manganyi is asking the reader to be more active in making the links between arguments separated by different periods and influences in the author's work. Even if this is so, more of a sense of how the text coheres would have been useful.

In the context of the primary reservation I have about the book, it is probably not surprising that the chapters I felt to be of most central contemporary relevance were the two which have not been published before. I shall deal briefly with each.

The chapter on public interest psychology and clinical practice in South Africa paints a bleak picture of the theoretical aridity of mainstream clinical psychology in this country. The racism that is part of the history and contemporary functioning of psychology is rapidly exposed when one examines the experiences of black clinical psychology interns in their hospital year. Manganyi reports on the frustrations of black interns at being denied access to facilities, including office space in which to do their work. One trainee makes the telling comment "The handymen are given a better deal than we are given" (p91). Behind this observation lies the weight of a system of socialisation which has no trouble finding space for a black handyman but which for obvious reasons resists, in the most concrete way possible, accommodating a black psychologist.

Manganyi links this experience of racism on the part of black psychologists with the marginalised position of psychology relative to psychiatry. The fascinating argument of a direct connection between the experience of black psychologists in particular and the inferior status of psychologists in general in the psychiatric milieu could be more fully explored. It is surely no coincidence though that the lower one is on the professional ladder that descends from psychiatrist through psychologist and social worker to psychiatric nurse, the more likely one is to be black, female, and poor. The concatenation of professional hierarchy with broader socially oppressive categories of race, gender, and class clearly needs further exploration in the mental health field in South Africa, and Manganyi has begun to show the way.

The chapter throws up interesting contemporary speculations. By 1991, when this volume was published, many hospitals were racially desegregated, and discrimination on the basis of race officially unacceptable even to the National Party. It would be interesting at this time (and especially in the short period since the book was published) to explore the ways in which black trainee psychologists' experiences have and have not changed since the earlier and more obvious days of grand segregation. The extent to which experiences have not changed could be attributed not only to enduring racism but also to the enduring situation of interprofessional discrimination and the marginal position psychology has allowed itself to take up relative to medicine.

The final chapter of the book poses a question related closely to those of the chapter just discussed. How does one "create one's own capital" in a psychological sense? Drawing heavily on Soviet materialist psychology, Manganyi argues the case for a "psychology of and for practical life". This psychology, he argues, will free psychologists to work with the everyday problems and concerns of the majority. It will also help psychology to free itself from the restrictions of a narrow medicalised view of its own

sphere of activity and influence, and enable it to enter more fully the worlds of labour, the courts, and health in general. He ends the volume with the uncompromising and clear message to the future of psychology in South Africa: " ... what really counts is power. Political and economic power can be appropriated by force, if need be. But the power called knowledge and skills cannot be appropriated in this manner. Knowledge has to be earned." (p132).

Perhaps the greatest contribution of this book is its clear and unapologetic engagement throughout with the project of earning knowledge. It is a disappointing book in that much of it is prepublished material assembled in a way which lacks a clear coherent thread. But, on the other hand, the serious involvement of each chapter, and the final chapter in particular, with complex issues in psychological theory, leads the reader to the encouraging conclusion that South African psychology is intellectually alive.

This is a book which throws down the gauntlet in many ways to progressive South African psychologists who may ignore or hide from view issues of race. It is a book which challenges the implicit anti-intellectualism of the worst of South African "community psychology". Most importantly, perhaps, it is a book which reads like a set of notes towards a more complex, coherent and sustained account of the issues Manganyi raises. This account, we may hope, will appear in Manganyi's next book - one which will return to the greater coherence of some of his previous books, but with engagement in contemporary issues introduced in the present one.