CRITICAL PSYCHOLOGY FOR SOUTH AFRICAN TRANSFORMATION?

Fox, D, Prilleltensky, I & Austin, S (eds) (2009) **Critical psychology: An introduction** (Second edition)**.** London: Sage. ISBN 978-1-84787-173-2. Pages 470.

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The launch of the Apartheid Archive Project fifteen years after the end of apartheid in South Africa is a fitting time to reconsider the role of psychology in the social and political history of the country. The book **Critical psychology: An introduction** provides an opportunity to revisit key critiques of the discipline of psychology, whilst perhaps more importantly for a South African audience, to consider their relevance across geographical and political contexts. The book draws together the ideas of a wide group of writers, many of whom have been central to the development of critical psychology internationally. As such, they reflect on debates and ideas that, over the past fifteen years, have shaped how psychologists have critiqued their discipline and, for South African psychologists, tackled post-apartheid social issues. There is no doubt that psychology was used in the service of apartheid ideology. However there have equally been pockets of resistance by psychologists who have attempted to critique, rethink and at times, abandon the discipline. This book provides the impetus to reflect on and reconsider the importance of these debates in the South African context. The editors of this book emphasize that they aim to create a community of critical psychologists and the breadth of the contributions already points to the success of this project. Written at a time when critical psychology is becoming a more commonly accepted topic in South Africa and a more easily adopted position for psychologists generally, this book summarizes some of the key debates that have resulted in the creation of critical psychology and the challenges a critical perspective poses to the existing assumptions underpinning the discipline. I will give a brief overview of the book before focusing on three main themes emphasized in the book that I think are of relevance for a South African audience, namely, the nature of the subject of psychology, the possibilities of psychological practice being a force for liberation, and what a more critically engaged alternative psychology might look like.

The book is divided into four sections. Section 1 gives a general introduction to the conceptual issues that have preoccupied critical psychology and some background to its emergence. Such issues include the nature of the subject of psychology, the role of ideology and politics in the creation of the discipline, the scientific method and its influence on the "possibilities of knowing", and the historical and political conditions that

make current manifestations of psychology possible. It is highly relevant reading for those who take their discipline, and the knowledge it creates, for granted whilst also acting as a useful summary for those already working critically from within psychology. The historical perspective that some of the authors in this section bring to bear on their topic (in particular Chapter 2 by Ben Harris) will push those studying psychology beyond assumed concepts and uncritically inherited praxis. Section 2, entitled *Critical disciplines*, offers reflection on some of the key topics that have formed the core of mainstream psychology. This includes chapters on personality (by Tod Sloan), mental illness (by Jeanne Maracek and Rachel Hare-Mustin), industrial psychology (by Gazi Islam and Michael Zyphur), community psychology (by Isaac Prilleltensky and Geoffrey Nelson) and health psychology (by Kerry Chamberlain and Michael Murray) to mention a few. Many of the critiques levelled at psychology's treatment of these topics, including its depoliticized and individualistic approach are similar across the chapters and, read together, they provide convincing arguments to even the most resistant reader - even if the authors vary in their degree of pessimism about the discipline. Section 3 introduces topics that have concerned critical psychologists including race, class, disability, colonization, empowerment and gender. These reflect both how critical psychology opens the space for new topics to be explored as well as some of the new ways that critical psychologists approach old topics – a theme most apparent in the chapter on racism by Durrheim, Hook and Riggs (Chapter 12). The breadth of the topics covered in this part of the book means that this is useful introductory reading for those engaging with these topics in critical ways for the first time. Section 4 is entitled *Critical praxis* and includes a chapter on "doing theory" on critical research methods, on community change and on resistance politics.

The terrain covered by this book's 23 chapters is vast and it is therefore more useful as an overview text than an in-depth study of any of the key concerns of critical psychology or indeed critical theory more generally. This means that those looking for more in-depth studies of the critiques of psychology or those with a critical theory background from outside of psychology may find the text frustrating at times. It also means however that it provides useful provocations to South African psychologists to take debates further by emphasizing the relevance of place and socio-political history for how we tackle psychology's more repressive tendencies. There are three key themes raised by these authors that I felt had particular relevance in this regard.

The first is in how the authors, collectively deal with the nature of the subject of psychology. This is raised early in Chapter 1 where the editors claim that "by focusing on the individual rather than the group and larger society, mainstream psychology overemphasizes individualistic values, hinders the attainment of mutuality and community, and strengthens unjust institutions" (Fox, Prilleltensky & Austin, 2009: 5). No doubt this has been an argument at the heart of critical psychology. However, this particular critique of the universal subject of psychology is only one approach and leads the editors, in their introductory chapter, to suggest that what is needed is a shift in the "level of analysis" (Fox, Prilleltensky & Austin, 2009: 5) rather than a fundamental rethinking of the subject and subjectivity. This is also seen in the preface to the first edition where, in a reflexive moment, the editors claim that "places and personal history fuse to propel ideas and projects" (Fox & Prilleltensky, 1996: xxiii). The approach to rethinking the subject seems therefore not to cover the range of debates within critical psychology circles, and certainly not the cross-disciplinary study of subjectivity, and how these translate into reflexive practices. Indeed, this approach is arguably a rather

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static notion of the individual rooted in principles of developmental psychology. The risks and possibilities of these ways of working with the nature of the subject are not elaborated further. However the wide range of contributors to the book means that there is diversity. For example, Thomas Teo (Chapter 3) takes a somewhat different approach by claiming that the "context is interwoven with the very fabric of personal identity" (Teo, 2009: 40). Similarly, many chapters (see Chapter 3 by Thomas Teo and Chapter 11 by Alexa Hepburn and Clare Jackson) emphasize critical psychology's concern with understanding social life from the "standpoint of the subject". Likewise, Alexa Hepburn and Clare Jackson (Chapter 11) argue for an approach to subjectivity that understands the subject as constructed in interaction; a view echoed in the chapter by Durrheim, Hook and Riggs (Chapter 12). These are mere glimpses of complex and contested debates and are not given much attention but can offer useful starting points for contextualized South African critique.

A second theme that seemed to invite reflection from the South African context is the importance of a commitment to social justice and value-driven research. At times, this is conflated with very large and contested notions of human rights and equality which themselves are not sufficiently critiqued. For example, Brinton Lykes and Erzulie Coquillon (Chapter 17) tend to argue for a human rights focus in psychological practice without much attention to the contested ways that human rights have been set up against notions of culture and the difficulties with the universalizing tendencies of the human rights movement (see Mamdani, 2000, and Burman et al, 2004, for very different treatments of this debate). Nevertheless, taking a human rights approach is an impetus for more interdisciplinary work, in this case with critical development theory supporting psychological critique that is often lacking in psychology. Particularly noteworthy for the South African context is the chapter by Michael McCubbin (Chapter 18) which offers an insightful analysis of how "the community" has been co-opted by the move towards deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill in order to exert the same control, and with equally repressive consequences, as institutionalization of the mentally ill. This is a refreshing alternative to the tendency in some of the other chapters to argue for community interventions (whether they are community therapies or activism of various forms) without much attention to the politics and contestation of how community has been used to undermine the interests of minority groups just as effectively as the individualism they critique (for more such critique see Guijt & Shah, 1998 and Cooke & Kothari, 2001).

Thirdly, for a South African audience, the range of what is included as critical praxis in Section 4 is somewhat thin, including only counselling, research and theory, and is therefore largely focused on changing the nature of the practices psychologists are already engaged in rather than radically rethinking what psychology might look like. Nevertheless, as the editors and many of the chapter authors state, they are working from within psychology and therefore are not about to extend their debates to abandoning the discipline altogether, focusing instead on how it might be adjusted. Indeed, some go so far as to argue that psychological practices can themselves be liberatory. This shapes the nature of the debates that the authors take up and for some critical psychologists this may not extend the critique far enough. This is where critical psychologists from the global South can usefully make a contribution to shaping what critical psychology is by documenting the diverse and creative activities that some psychologists are experimenting with. This does however mean that this book is a reassuring resource for students in psychology who fear what raising critical questions

might do for their commitment to their discipline and their future employment prospects. The question and answer section at the end of this book clearly shows that these are indeed some of the common questions that students ask, and speaks to the anxieties students (and members of the academy) face when trying to re-imagine their discipline or challenge its praxis. For example, in response to a question about how to get a job doing critical psychology the suggestion given is to "tone down the language to get past the reviewers" or "address political issues as a small part of your work, spending the bulk of your time doing empirical research on traditional topics" (Fox, 2009: 412). The advice given is clearly about how to navigate the existing discipline rather than entirely change it. This debate forces readers to ask hard questions about the political commitments we bring to the discipline and their place in our work.

The book includes useful glossaries and easy to access (often online) resources for students wanting to research a topic further. These also help with the book's aim of creating a community of critical psychologists. Whilst on the whole the issues discussed are rooted in debates in the Anglo-US tradition of psychology and the book is heavily focused on the theoretical resources from these contexts, some attempt has been made to counter this by studying new topics such as the chapter *From colonization to globalisation* (by Ingrid Huygens), as well as by including some authors from outside of these contexts. This means that it will perhaps have greater relevance than some other similar textbooks to non Anglo-US contexts and critical psychologists from these contexts might be able to find more space for their work in this *community*. Indeed, the reliance on Anglo-US resources is perhaps appropriate given that this has been the context where psychology has developed and thrived. However, it challenges those of us working from outside of these contexts to think further about the potential colonizing effects of psychological practices in our own work.

This book is therefore a valuable and accessible resource for undergraduate teaching and for post-graduates new to a critical perspective on psychology. For those of us who are engaged in the making of critical psychology from diverse positions it offers a consolidated resource for rethinking psychology in ways that challenge it's dogmatic and anti-liberatory history. It introduces interdisciplinary perspectives that will be new to some South African psychologists even if the introductory nature of the text means that they are not elaborated upon.

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