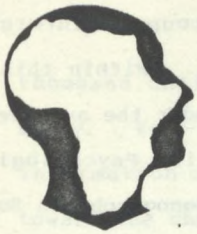

SOWETO'S CHILDREN: THE DEVELOPMENT OF ATTITUDES

by

Beryl A. Geber and Stanton P. Newman*

Gillian Finchilescu
University of Natal, Durban

The past decade has seen a substantive change in the face of social psychology. In the sixties the discipline was dominated by American psychology, with its particular view of reality, its ideological biases, and with its penchant for strict experimentalism. This mainstream social psychology is characterized by the analysis of the social at the level of the individual. The behaviour of the individual within the setting of a number of other individuals is seen as the concern of social psychology. There is no recognition that the social context, inclusive of sociological and political perspectives, presents certain pressures and forces which do not occur in the interpersonal spectrum.

By the early seventies the discontent with mainstream social psychology, stemming in particular from European and British psychologists, had become strident, culminating in the development of a new direction within social psychology.

---

*London: Academic Press, 1980.

This direction moves away from the reductionist concept of the social, in favour of the primacy of the group. Intergroup relations became a topic of particular concern. Within this new trend, a number of publications have emerged, under the auspices of the European Association of Experimental Social Psychologists. One of these is a series entitled the European Monographs in Social Psychology, edited until recently by one of the 'architects' of the new social psychology, the late Henri Tajfel. **Soweto's Children** is number 20 of this series.

Soweto's Children is fundamentally a report on an extensive study into the attitudes, expectations, aspirations and values of 'Black' (African) school-children in Soweto conducted in the sixties. In the words of the authors, this study "sought to examine the demographic and the educational variables which influenced the way the young Black viewed his or her world" (p. 6). However, this book does not confine itself to the description and analyses of the study, but contains a number of chapters outlining the historical and sociological situation of South Africa.

The book appears to have two main foci. The first is an account of how Soweto, and Black urban townships in general, have come into being. This part of the study is augmented by the autiobiographical essays of Soweto children. Excerpts of these are used to illustrate descriptions of life in the township. Some of these provide a vibrant insight into this experience, and present an indication of the level of political awareness held by some of the children. The second, and most emphasized aspect of the study concerns the issue of education within Soweto. One

thousand children from four Soweto schools contributed to the study. Each completed a questionnaire which was designed to glean information on such things as "tribal affiliation; the attitudes toward the church; orientation to urban life; political attitudes; educational involvement, aspirations and expectations; occupational aspirations and expectations; motivational reasons for occupational and educational choices; reference groups and nationalism" (p. 159). The African Thematic Apperception Test was also administered to a subsample of the children.

One of the more interesting results that emerged from the findings was that three distinct constellations of attitudes were discerned amongst the students. The first is termed a conservative set defined predominately by the support of the Church and tribe, though not necessarily endorsing the political status quo. Included here is an attitude that education is the means to personal mobility and social change. The second constellation is termed radical, embodying a rejection of all political and tribal institutions, and a dubiousness as to the real value of education within the South African setting. The final set is one indicative of internalized repression.

In conception, this book represents an attempt to fulfil the aspirations of the 'new' social psychology. It makes an effort to situate psychology within the social reality of the subjects. It also demonstrates that the so-called 'soft' methodologies such as autobiography, content analysis, questionnaires, etc. have a valuable part to play in the pursuit of (psychological) knowledge.

However, **Soweto's Children** does have a number of problems. The approach of the authors in their presentation of the history, and the sociological and political analysis of South Africa is manifestly superficial and limited. The writing often tends towards ambiguity: points are not made clearly, but are blurred, frequently by embedding them within discussion of the surprising number of relevant studies. For example, in discussing the TAT results, an indicator of 'need achievement', together with the constellation of attitudes as explanatory variables of 'success' in societal terms, the authors criticize a number of similar studies for not taking the social context into account. Yet they still suggest "that one set of attitudes and intentions is more likely to lead to success than another: ....." (p. 123), without presenting an analysis of how this may be realized within the South African context.

Finally, the major issue on which this book may be held to task is that of its implied claim to offer an understanding of the Soweto school riots of June, 1976. In the introduction (p. 7) the authors state "[it] is rare for a social scientist's predictions to be confirmed" and support this statement with a quote from Geber's 1972 unpublished Ph.D. thesis (submitted to London University):

> While is is perhaps true that in all societies those values taught at school are not necessarily directly relevant to the life that is led outside it, it is not all societies which present such firm, race dominated obstacles to the translation of these school values to the adult working life. It is possible that the reaction to this frustration will be rejection and aggression, and the whole system of values will be discarded.

The anticipation of violence in South Africa is not an uncommon view to be held by any observer of the situation, and hardly qualifies as a prediction based on the findings of the study. If anything, the results could be argued to predict the opposite. In discussing a group of students who manifest the radical constellation of attitudes, the authors state:

> They are aware of the issues that confront them, concerned with national progress and they understand that political issues demand political solutions. And yet, despite their awareness of the problems and the necessary actions to solve them, the students seem to feel no real competence in actually being able to achieve their aims. There is some helplessness in their responses, and although they are conscious of the notion of resistance it remains at the verbal level rather than being translated into action. (p. 115)

In the final chapter which comments on the 1976 Soweto school riots, the contradiction is attributed to the change in political events that occurred between the time of the study and 1976, in particular, that of the worsening economic situation experienced by Blacks, and the rise of Black Consciousness. Thus, in the final analysis, this book leaves one with the quandry of deciding whether in fact psychology has anything to offer in the prediction and analysis of socio-political events, or whether the authors have demonstrated rather poor judgement in their assessment of the situation and in their selection of relevant variables.

However, while **Soweto's Children** is not wholeheartedly recommended, it should not be totally dismissed. If nothing else, it perhaps deserves a place on the library shelf, but as a demonstration of a technique rather than a conveyor of deep insights.