OUT OF AFRICA ?
A REVIEW OF G A TYSON (Ed.), INTRODUCTION TO PSYCHOLOGY: A SOUTH AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE., JOHANNESBURG: WESTRO EDUCATIONAL BOOKS, 1987.

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With the publication of Introduction to Psychology (hereafter ITP), Graham Tyson and his co-authors appear to have taken a step that has been spoken of for so long in the struggle to produce and to teach a psychology relevant to a South Africa in transition. At a time when the production of knowledge is, even to the most experimental of observers, increasingly implicated in the struggles of either the oppressors or the oppressed in South Africa, an introductory psychology textbook motivated by a concern "about the relevance of psychology in South Africa" (ITP, p. iii) and a desire to move away from "a traditional American approach to psychology" (ITP, p. iii) must be welcomed.

Why then my intense disappointment upon reading the text ?

In his preface, Tyson sets out the "restrictions" which he placed on authors who contributed to the book in order to overcome the failings of the hordes of American programmed texts that have been the fare of South African Psycho I's up to now (ITP, p. iv):

(A) "that they should make the material as relevant to the local situation as possible."

(B) "...that they should provide a solid foundation of knowledge, rather than a very broad and superficial overview."

(C) "...that, in view of the fact that many students do not have English as their first language, they should express their material as clearly and simply as possible."

Agreed. In descending order of importance, these are the crucial

questions which face the serious student (and teacher) of psychology in contemporary South Africa. And there is no doubt that an introductory psychology text which seriously engaged this context would be described in general terms by the above. There is also no doubt that most American introductory psychology texts do not in general terms meet the requirements of (A) and (B), although in my perhaps limited understanding of the problem, there are amongst them a number of exceptions in regard to (C).

The problem with the contributions to ITP is that they remain trapped in this very general understanding of relevance in South African psychology. I want to argue that they fail completely to meet the requirements specified in (A) (and indeed mystify the issue completely), that as a whole they only partially succeed in meeting up to (B), and that their obvious strengths in relation to (C) do not by themselves constitute an adequate "South African perspective" on psychology.

Let me comment on the relatively uncontentious (C) first. Tyson appears to have done an excellent editorial job in keeping contributions accessible and simple (without allowing them to become simplistic, a criticism that I think we can level at a number of too child-centred American texts). There is the usual array of technical jargon associated with psychology, but with the very helpful glossary included at the end of the book, it is improbable that either first- or second-language English speakers will spend hours in dictionary-assisted translation exercises which alienate them from psychology and its perspectives. But it needs to be said that fulfilling (C) is a necessary but not a sufficient requirement of a relevant South African psychology

text. If ITP's treatment of (A) and (B) is not adequate, (C) makes the book neither South African nor relevant.

With regard to (B), there is no doubt that ITP represents an improvement on the "very broad and superficial" (my emphasis) accounts of psychology offered by the average American equivalent. By approaching specialists to write each substantive section within their own problematics, and by selecting a limited and coherent range of topics, Tyson has managed to avoid the extremely piecemeal, atomistic presentation of psychology on which I was initiated (see Moll, 1983). In particular, the sections on Motivation and Emotion by Lachenicht and Physiological Psychology by Tollmann each display a sustained theoretical integration throughout, while the section by Sharratt reflects to an extent the theoretical unity which is needed to overcome the notion that studying psychology is just the accumulation of facts about psychology.

But ITP has only partially responded to the problem in its South African context. One has only to glance at the pages of previous issues of Psychology in Society to realise that intense epistemological and methodological dispute lies at the very heart of the crisis in South African psychology. But no sense of this is conveyed by ITP: nowhere do contributors question a naive positivist appropriation of knowledge, i.e. a catalogue of experiments, hypotheses and verified theories which, added together, supposedly constitute the knowledge that psychologists have.

Instead ITP offers new psychology students nothing more than its

American predecessors did, namely the straightforward notion that psychology is the science of the behaviour and experience of individuals. That there is no sense of a debate on the issue is a disservice to South African psychology students, given the turmoil of our society and the agony of psychologists attempting to relate seriously to it. Whatever the merits of positivism in psychology, the fact that ITP does not broach the question of paradigmatic, theoretical and ideological dispute in psychology means that it sidesteps most of what must urgently be engaged by psychology students in this country. ITP, unfortunately, does not provide the solid foundation of knowledge that it might.

This brings us to requirement (A), that a South African textbook in this field must present "material as relevant to the local situation as possible" (my emphasis). The advertising brochure issued by Westro Educational Books makes it even clearer what role ITP sees itself playing in the South African context: having acknowledged the problem of "the heavy American orientation" of textbooks used up to now, the brochure claims of ITP:

> (A1) "wherever possible the material is made relevant to the local situation." (my emphasis)
> (Westro, 1987, p. 1)

And it goes on to inform the prospective reader how this is achieved:

> (A2) "This is done through the use of South African examples and by focussing on research of a cross-cultural nature. In addition, certain topics and issues which are relevant to students in South Africa have been included... psychology in Africa, cultural factors in perception, thinking and culture, differing forms of psychopathology in different cultures, African diagnostic categories and the relevance of social psychology for the third world."
> (Westro, 1987, p. 1)

On the face of it, this might appear to be an admirable

contribution to the education of South African psychology students. But I am afraid that ITP does not, even on the face of it, meet its own perception of the role it should be playing.

It can hardly be said that the material is made relevant to the local situation through the use of South African examples wherever possible, as the following review of ITP's contents will reveal:

Chapter 1 The Nature of Psychology (J W Mann) pp. 1-24.
Mann proceeds through topics such as the scientific status and objects of psychology, the history of psychology, its methods and methodological errors, all without a mention of South African examples. The only reference to the supposedly unique concerns of ITP is a two-column comment on "psychology in Africa" (pp. 11-12) which comes accross as a piecemeal addition to the chapter, rather than as its substantive concern. The chapter is all the weaker for the fact that some of the points made in passing in this comment (e.g. "researchable issues" unique to South Africa, and the emergence of a radical tradition in local psychological circles) do not impact on the contents of the rest of the chapter at all.

Chapter 2 Physiological Psychology (Shirley Tollmann) pp. 25-58.
Tollmann presents a sound theoretical and empirical introduction to physiological psychology and neuropsychology, but this chapter is sparse on South African examples. Besides a pertinent section on malnutrition, the "South African perspective" is tacked on to the beginning and the end of the chapter rather than seriously theorised.

Chapter 3 Perception (E J Hammond) pp. 59-88.

Hammond again leaves the impression that South African concerns have been tacked onto the end rather than carefully integrated into the chapter. The major part of the chapter is standard occidental fare on the psychology of perception, and issues of enormous theoretical significance for a truly (South) African psychology are passed by without mention. For example, the "active or indirect nature of perception" discussed in relation to Jastrow's duck/rabbit problem (p. 79), and the usual array of illusions which illustrate technical aspects of perception, all raise important questions about the way in which abstact formalism structures perception in capitalist society. The specificity of economic exploitation and oppression in this country insists that perception cannot be dealt with in such general terms within "a South African perspective" on psychology. To conclude the chapter, a short section on social and cultural factors in perception is added. Because it is a piecemeal addition rather than an integrated part of the overall argument, it traps itself in one of the most problematic of western psychology's blindnesses: African people, somewhat statically, cannot perceive depth in pictures, photos and line drawings!

Chapter 4 Thinking (Pamela Snarratt) pp. 89-140.

Sharratt uses more African and South African examples than any other author in the book, although they are still only dealt with in short comments which are few and far between, and could on the whole have more depth. Nevertheless, Sharratt's treatment of two issues in particular provides exemplars of what might have been achieved in the rest of ITP:

(i) the comments on the Whorf hypothesis (p. 95), while avoiding

complex theoretical elaboration inappropriate to an introductory text, critically orientates the student to the difficulties and problems which the study of language and thought in South Africa will entail;

(ii) the section on "culture and thought" (pp. 97-98) is unique within ITP for the depth and rigorous conceptualisation it offers, although it still appears in the context of the chapter as a whole to be tacked on to mainstream discourse in psychology.

Chapter 5 Developmental Psychology (Philippa Clark) pp. 141-182. In a terrain as rich in South African issues, problems and examples as is child psychology, this chapter is disappointing. Barring some comments on apartheid education (which are political rather than psychological) and some not very central references to malnutrition and compensatory education, local children are hardly mentioned.

Chapter 6 Learning and Conditioning (Alma Hannon) pp. 183-210;
Chapter 7 Memory (E J Hammond) pp. 211-224;
Chapter 8 Motivation and Emotion (Lance Lachenicht) pp. 225-262. Despite the strengths of Lachenicht's contribution mentioned previously, and indeed despite Hannon's pre-eminence amongst teachers of behavioural psychology in South Africa, these three chapters fail completely to meet the stated aims of ITP (see A1 and A2 above). They do not utilise South African examples at all (Lachenicht's oblique reference to Barling and Biesheuvel on p.246 notwithstanding), yet it is surely not difficult to conceive of instances of life under apartheid which could illustrate and perhaps defend some of the claims they make.

Chapter 9 Personality and Psychopathology (David Edwards) pp.263-320.

Edwards' contribution conforms to the general pattern established in preceding chapters. We are taken perhaps too sketchily through a dozen or so personality theorists and broad approaches to personality theory, with no mention of South Africa (except somewhat artificially through presentation of the heart-attack statistics of our compatriots and the insertion of Nguni names into originally non-South African examples). Two very brief sections on "personality and psychopathology" and "culture and psychopathology" then conclude the chapter. It is in the latter that South African examples abound, and the indisputable importance of traditional African healing practices aside, one cannot avoid a cynical response about the way that a cultural anthropology has simply been added to the introductory concerns of the usual American psychology text, as if that will suffice.

Chapter 10 Social Psychology (G A Tyson) pp. 321-349.

There is almost no dissonance between this chapter and the general thrust of the rest of ITP. Tyson proceeds competently through a standard presentation of experimental social psychology, inserts Nguni names into examples, and adds short sections on the relationship between culture and attitudes and on "prejudice in South Africa". Only the brief comment on "social psychology and the Third World" (pp. 324-325) suggests that there might be crucial theoretical problems endemic to the very practice of a South African social psychology. Tyson agrees with Jahoda that "traditional social psychology has little relevance to the Third World" (p. 324), and argues that a practical and theoretically rigorous social psychology is urgently needed in countries like South Africa. The rest of the chapter, however,

seems to be blissfully unaware of this need.

Now what all of this reveals is that the explicit aims of ITP (captured in A, A1 and A2 above) have not really been adequately met by the contributions that make it up. It is more American in character than Tyson hopes for in his preface: ITP is in fact a mainstream introductory psychology text which draws only minimally on examples from the South African and African contexts.

Now while a greater depth and breadth in content specific to South Africa would strengthen the "South African perspective" of ITP, the book suffers from a much more fundamental problem with regard to requirement (A). At the heart of Tyson's project in ITP is a serious misrepresentation of what constitutes a South African psychology.

On first reading, it would appear that the established discipline psychology (let me term it "Western Psychology") and "(South) African Psychology" are culturally separated practices. The Westro advertising pamphlet is perfectly correct in its claim that (A2) is the manner in which ITP believes that it achieves (A) and (A1), as the above review of chapters shows. But there is an enormous problem in the notion that (A2) satisfies the requirements of (A). This notion suggests that what is central to the constitution of an "African" or a "Third World" psychology is a collection of <u>cultural</u> forms which are not usually commented upon, analysed or experimented upon within the mainstream South African (or American) practice of psychology. So they are concerns that need to be added to the mainstream discourse of

psychology, as extra and "relevant" content, usually under a title that expresses some kind of relationship between a standard category of psychology and "culture."

But in fact "Western Psychology" remains theoretically, methodologically and politically dominant within ITP, constituting the space within which "African Psychology" can be expressed. And given the dominant conception that psychological knowledge is the accumulation of psychological facts, "the local situation" is presented as a collection of new facts which are "cross-cultural" in character (A2).

The effect of all of this is what Paulin Hountondji (1983, see also 1985) has termed the "valorization of cultural plurality" - the burning questions (say of psychology) in South Africa become questions of a distorted cultural difference:

> "...culture is reduced to folklore, its most obvious superficial and flashy aspect. Its deeper life and internal contradictions, the fruitful tensions by which it is animated are all neglected, along with its history, development and revolutions. Culture is petrified in a synchronistic picture, flat and strangely simple and univocal, and is then contrasted with other cultures which are also trimmed and schematized for the sake of the comparison." (1983, p. 160)

And so the material conditions and struggles of South African life, surely the real basis for a psychology rooted in South Africa, are conveniently sidestepped. ITP does just this: crucial questions such as the relationship between institutionalised psychology and apartheid, the potential contributions of mainstream psychology in a post-apartheid South Africa, the nature of an emancipatory psychology, and the transformation of psychology in the context of a national liberation struggle find

no place in this introductory textbook. It is on these grounds, then, that I believe that ITP does not meet the requirements of (A): the material it contains fails to be "as relevant to the local situation as possible".

There is in fact no "Western Psychology" nor any "African Psychology", and relevance in the South African context cannot come from a simple addition of the latter to the former. What there is is an emerging South African psychology, a psychology in transition, embedded in the transition of society at large. Sadly, ITP does not introduce its students to this reality.

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