

Book review: "Psychology in context"

K. F. Mauer and A. I. Retief (eds.) (1987) Psychology in Context: Cross-cultural research trends in South Africa.

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The seven papers presented here emerged from a one-day HSRC seminar in July 1985 with a focus on current trends in cross-cultural research psychology. The participants were apparently invited due to their established interest and active involvement in the field, their divergence in approach and their concern for methodological issues. The result is an interesting, wide-ranging and challenging set of papers - a worthy contribution to the contemporary debate about psychology in South Africa.

Without further ado I would happily recommend this collection to post-graduate students and scholars interested in matters South African and psychological. This is not necessarily due to agreement with the proponents, but to the fact that many interesting areas for debate are raised. With the exception of the American Sechrest, all contributors are certainly active in local research circles

and their work constitutes no mean slice of either earlier (Biesheuvel) or contemporary research output. This provides sufficient grounds for recommending the work.

Of course there are quibbles. Why not other contributors? Why not more black contributors? Why not participants of a wider range of ideological perspectives? For there is little doubt that this merry band is drawn dominantly from the apparently "reasonable" middle-ground, and were probably so chosen. This does not however constitute grounds for not listening. Furthermore, the references, both to local and international work, by themselves make it worth reading.

The range of positions - from tight, sound methodological advice (Sechrest) to doubts about western, first-world and positivist approaches (Andy Gilbert) is quite nice, despite the limitations raised above. The editors, Mauer and Retief, give us some help in their preface by distinguishing two perspectives among the papers: the "disengaged" and the "committed". The disengaged, represented by Lee Sechrest, John Verster and Peter du Preez take the broad stand of science above application in service to any particular group. They also generally stand for a defence of positivist or conventional methods, while recognising the need for better theory and for awareness of methodological pitfalls. The disengaged position may be usefully

summarized in the words of du Preez: "After a prolonged diet of ideology, social scientist should sit down to the job of explaining social processes" (p.152).

One may note that Simon Biesheuvel who wrote the introduction, was not labelled by the editors, presumably on grounds that he was not part of the original seminar but was subsequently invited to contribute an introduction. His paper indicates a stance toward the disengaged side, a position with which I feel he would not be unhappy.

In contrast, the "committed" stance offers "argument in favour of an engaged form of cross-cultural enquiry" (p.vii) and the editors regard Bhana, Miller and Gilbert as comprising this group.

Bhana is critical of conventional methods and standardized tests for cross-cultural research, claiming the need for a more basic "emic" approach using qualitative devices. For research with "political minority groups" she advocates an approach which focuses on meaning, not on tests. In conclusion she suggests a "move away from the value loaded culture construct" (p.178).

Ronnie Miller also supports a shift away from positivism and comes down on the side of realism, with models provided by Harre, Geerts and Vygotsky. For Miller the most urgent need

is to study social change "whether as an aloof observer in the manner of an astronomer, or as a dedicated functionary committed to some vision of the future" (p.184). Culture he suggests is "not amenable to analysis by means of experimental method any more than history or evolution" (p.190). In the end via Vygotsky, he proposes a view directed towards a "developmental analysis of the processes that generate change" (p.202).

Andy Gilbert also challenges positivist assumptions, introducing critical views from third world psychologists and propounding a model through Morgan (1983) of strategies of critical reflection based on the metaphor of conversation. Such strategy implies a three fold operation of (i) engagement with other social scientists offering different views (ii) engagement with the subject matter of inquiry, and (iii) engagement with the respondents or participants. In this, the role of the scientist is altered from that of "arrogant manipulator, wanting to predict and control, to that of the sensitive facilitator, wishing to improve understanding" (p.221).

One can see what the editors are driving at with their distinction between "disengaged" and "committed", but considerable problems exist, particularly with the latter term and how it may be read at this juncture of history in South Africa. It also reflects a deeper problem regarding

the volume as a whole. Commitment to what? For among the labelled "committed" contributors, one does not get much sense of engagement other than methodological/academic. It is somewhat astonishing, in a volume initially presented in July 1985 (after the declaration of the state of emergency) and published in 1987, to find hardly a mention of the real context and grim reality of contemporary events other than a statement in the preface of a "specific historical period (1985-1987) ... characterized by violent social and cultural upheaval" (p.xi). In this regard the title of the volume "Psychology in Context" may be something of a misnomer; more sensible to employ the more restricted and accurate sub-title - "cross-cultural research trends in South Africa".

It could be counter-argued that a focus on methodology largely precluded the discussion of politically contextual issue. If so, it would be a very sorry position to take. Furthermore some of the papers do touch on political matters - in a rather bland fashion: du Preez by raising the question of identity (but little on ascribed identity), Bhana in her focus on the "minority group" of Indians (no mention of oppression, though she does recognise Indian people as a "politically defined group" (p.161), Gilbert in recognising third-world conditions, and Biesheuvel in talking about a "plural society" faced with "political dilemmas" (p.15).

Furthermore it could be argued that to take a stand against apartheid would be to be ideological rather than scientific. Here the hoary issue of neutrality and social science raises its head again. But to be "neutral" in the face of apartheid is quite clearly also an ideological position. In these debates, false positions are being set up, notably along the lines that those who take a highly critical stand against apartheid are incapable of being scientific. Here one may note Biesheuvel's attack on a "small but militant group carrying little weight scientifically" in reference to earlier criticism lodged by Cloete et al (1986). In a disastrous turn Biesheuvel suggests that the influence of this militant band could influence "the disposal of funds made available by South African subsidiaries of American corporations for research and development programmes on behalf of disadvantaged ethnic groups" (p.12). It is simply sad that someone of Biesheuvel's considerable stature has to be so defensive of the NIPR work and to stoop to such lowly tactics. Equating militancy (if being strongly opposed to apartheid and/or capitalism is classed as militancy) with lack of scientific credibility is a wretched argument and merely demeans such advocates.

A good deal of attention, quite rightly, is given to critical discussion of the concept of "culture". All contributors appreciate that the term presents theoretical

problems and useful coverage of recent writers such as Segall, Irvine, Rohner, Geertz, G Jahoda, Sinha and Berry is provided. The papers of Biesheuvel, Verster and Bhana also offer tidy summaries of some Southern African work. Despite this (not unimportant) review of international theory, it is really only du Preez's paper that begins to get to grips with the notion that "culture" and "identity" ("dirty words" to some, as he recognises) are not givens but are contested on the political terrain, and thus have as much to do with power and economics as with psychology.

In this respect du Preez's paper is arguably the most interesting and innovative in the volume. He has some useful data and challenging things to say about identity - a central term unjustifiably ignored by other writers. I think that he, along with Miller, is correct in suggesting that understanding and explaining processes of social change should be a major concern. In the end however his use of models drawn from evolutionary theory, while not uninteresting, could be queried. In particular his use of the "Lottke-Volterra predator-prey equations" to account for a claim that "the radicals prey on the liberals at conferences and in journals" (p.149) reminds one uncomfortably of other examples in Andreski's (1972) splendid book entitled "Social Sciences as Sorcery".

It would be a sad day if we did agree with everything found in any particular book. In the present case there is little danger of such. I do not think that "Psychology in Context" takes us very far towards answers in striving after an appropriate psychology for South Africa, but it is a most interesting contribution to debate. It certainly should be read, and I for one would happily prescribe it as part of the reading for any postgraduate course in this and related fields.

References

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