

Book review

Method and theory in cross-cultural psychological assessment

by Alexis Retief

...demanded up aggressive energy. From a therapeutic perspective it is debatable that catharsis can be considered a significant therapeutic agent. From a political perspective it is equally arguable that the decision to resort to armed struggle can be sustained purely on ideological and strategic grounds and in terms of political goals and aims and gains little by venting all

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One of the principle reasons for writing a book must be that the writer has something new to say or alternatively can say what has already been said in a better or more lucid way. In neither case do these apply to Retief's foray into the area of cross-cultural methodology. Several issues make this a disappointing book.

Firstly there is a lack of clarity as to who might find this book useful. For those who already have a passing interest in the area of cross-cultural research the book adds nothing new to the literature - much of what has been written simply summarises standard texts which have been available to the researcher for several years. The beginner in this area is alerted to some of the methodological pitfalls of the cross-cultural enterprise but when the going gets rough the writer bails out with an injunction to the reader to consult the primary sources. This leads us to question why we need have bothered with the book in the first place. Secondly, as a research report published by the HSRC investigation into Research Methodology one might anticipate a degree of novelty in the project or perhaps some new slant on the problems of cross-cultural psychology in a South African context. In both cases we are disappointed.

Many of the sections in the book are simply condensations of other more substantial approaches to the topic. The chapter on theory draws particularly heavily on Jahoda's account published in the Handbook of Cross-cultural Psychology. Further, in places the author appears to misunderstand the

nature of the theoretical thrust being made, as is the case in the commentary on Miller's (1987) work on methodology and its critique of Cole and Scribner's view.

Although there is a need for a book which alerts the researcher to the nature of the problems in cross-cultural psychology it requires a more whole-hearted commitment to the diversity of the African experience than this volume has managed to portray. Examples abound in the daily experience of researchers actively engaged in doing research; these could have been used profitably to illustrate the problems and the solutions to cross-cultural issues. A more careful selection of examples with which to illustrate points and a more careful use of language with which to describe people from different cultures could have made. This would have begun to redress the balance in the way that people think about each other in the South African context. As Retief correctly points out in his introductory section on the history of psychological assessment this is one area where the legacy of racist psychology is particularly strong and therefore should have been countered more forcefully.

One cannot escape the feeling that this book was written with the author's head quite firmly turned toward a particular Euro-American tradition of comparative research. Indeed this is confirmed in the Afterword of the book itself where the author resorts to the very global characterisations of people in different cultures that cross-cultural methodologists have been trying to warn us against. What can one say to an author who has spent a hundred or so pages summarising the pitfalls inherent in cross-cultural research but who ends his book with the comment: "The various black cultures in South Africa generally seem to emphasise more intuitive and holistic ways of construing, organising and relating to the world and the process of knowing." (p. 184). This is then followed with an exhortation to members of these cultures to try on the analytic attitude adopted by the author himself. When the analytic product consists of little else than a rehash of standard works on the topic the exhortations, should it be required at all, will fall, rightly, on deaf ears.

References

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Miller, R. (1987) Methodology: a focus for change. In K.F. Mauer & A.I. Retief (eds.). Psychology in context: Cross-cultural research trends in South Africa. Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council.