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Social psychology goes local

Book review
Foster,D and Louw-Potgieter, J (eds) (1991) **Social psychology in South Africa.** Johannesburg: Lexicon.

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Foster and Louw-Potgieter have produced an important book, long overdue in South Africa, namely one which provides a coherent and unified account of existing research into what is loosely referred to as the field of "inter-group relations" in South Africa. In the past, teachers and students of social psychology in this country have tended to rely on inappropriate European and American texts. Researchers have been faced with the wearisome task of tracking down local social psychological scholarship, scattered about in an unwieldy mass of books, chapters and journal articles, many of which were difficult to find. Against this rather inconvenient background **Social psychology in South Africa** provides timely and welcome relief.

With some notable exceptions, however, several of the book's less adventurous contributions will disappoint its more radical readers. Such readers might have hoped for a less gentle treatment of the social psychological establishment in this country, particularly in the light of the conspicuous failure of the inter-group relations tradition to make a significant contribution to current political debates about race, class and gender relations and the possibilities of social transformation.

The book consists of 14 chapters, authored by South African social psychologists drawn from seven universities, and the Human Sciences Research Council. The editors have chosen social identity theory as the linking thread that unites the chapters. Each author sets up a dialogue between his or her particular area of interest and social identity theory. This is a useful strategy and one which gives the book a degree of unity often lacking in those textbooks that consist of collations of disparate chapters on discrete topics. The chapters give a reliable and thorough account of the bread-and-butter issues that have dominated mainstream social psychology both abroad and locally and which form the essential starting point for any student of social psychology: social identity; language and identity (where Louw-Potgieter highlights the potential of the currently neglected area of language for the task of developing social psychology in SA); attitudes; social cognition and attributions (a chapter which includes Finchilescu's most recent and interesting developments of attribution theory within a South African context); relative deprivation; the contact hypothesis; majority and minority influence; and prejudice and racism (including Duckitt's important new contributions to the authoritarianism debate).

Four chapters are singled out as extending the book beyond the limits of a conventional social psychological text. The first of these is Foster's introductory chapter (Chapter 1), which locates the sub-discipline of social psychology within its broader historical and geographical context and alludes to some of the controversies and dilemmas that plague the inter-group relations tradition. This chapter is a particularly useful teaching device. It serves as a brief and accessible warning to the beginner that the field is a contentious and problematic one, and that there are no easy solutions to its dilemmas. This is a welcome change from those glib textbook introductions that gloss over the problematic nature of the material that is to follow.

Foster's awareness of the shortcomings of mainstream social psychology, as well as his enthusiastic vision of future possibilities of the sub-discipline are everywhere evident in all six chapters of the book that he has written or contributed to. His chapter on crowds and collective violence (Chapter 13) illustrates his interest in evaluating the range of available social psychological theories, mostly European or American in origin, in the light of their ability to account for concrete social phenomena in South Africa. The chapter is constructed around accounts of the 1985 killings of municipal policeman Lucas Sethwala (leading up to the "Upington 26" trial), and Nozipho Zamela, a young woman who had allegedly slept with a policeman (leading up to the "Queenstown Six" trial). Foster pits a range of social psychological and sociological theories of crowd behaviour against these accounts, evaluating

these theories in the light of their ability to account for concrete instances of collective violence in South Africa.

Psychology textbooks generally fail to examine the way in which the construction of knowledge serves to sustain (or, less often, to undermine) the interests of the dominant social order. Against the background of the historical and social amnesia characterising many texts, Louw and Foster's chapter on the history of the study of intergroup relations in South Africa (Chapter 3) is a welcome one. Laying bare many of the skeletons in social psychology's cupboard, it reads not only as a history of social psychology but also a fascinating chapter in this country's social history. It includes an account of the key role played by psychologists, such as Hendrik Verwoerd, in the development of apartheid policies, as well as a number of revealing case studies: the 1950s state embargo on Sherwood's doctoral thesis on African civil servants (an embargo which still holds); the alarm and consternation caused by the inferior IQ-test performance of Afrikaans-speaking children compared to their English-speaking counterparts; and the suppression of numerous Human Sciences Research Council studies that failed to support government policy.

In his chapter on ideology (Chapter 11), Foster reviews an array of general theoretical notions of the concept (ranging from classical Marx to Miles) before examining a number of South African ideologies, including for example Afrikaner nationalism, militarism and patriarchy. Foster's reference to patriarchy is a welcome one in a volume that tends to be conspicuously gender-blind and class-blind. Too few contributors have taken the opportunity of highlighting the neglect of gender and class relations in existing research in this country, or of suggesting ways in which social psychologists might begin to fill the gender and class vacuum.

Foster's chapter on ideology is probably the book's most important contribution to the task of extending the narrow field of local inter-group relations research, too deeply influenced by conservative mainstream European and American thinkers, into a more critical and more distinctively South African social psychological tradition. At least two challenges are involved in this task: (i) the broadening of social psychology's focus beyond the intra-individual and inter-individual levels of analysis, and (ii) the breaking down of the artificial boundaries that have traditionally separated social psychology from other disciplines in the social sciences. The concept of ideology provides a valuable conceptual tool for meeting both of these challenges.

Having relied on this book extensively for both teaching and research purposes in the past year, three critical comments are offered. The first

comment is that several of the chapters are more useful as resources for qualified researchers and post-graduate students than as textbook material for under-graduates. This is a pity, since under-graduates inevitably form the bulk of the readership of a text of this nature. Certain chapters are too densely packed with detailed and sometimes confusing accounts of minor research studies. These chapters often do not make enough concessions to the bewildered student, who searches in vain for more detailed commentaries and syntheses of a proliferation of bitty little studies (some of which are alarmingly obscure). Several contributors might have devoted attention to a more explicit structuring of their chapters around more clearly elaborated central themes.

My second critical comment refers to the book's handling of social identity theory (SIT). Despite the editors' excellent choice of this theory as a central theme of the book, the work would have benefitted from a unified chapter giving an up-to-date account of SIT. Such a chapter would, for example, include more recent developments of the theory that developed in the second half of the 1980s, reviewed in works such as Turner (1987), Hogg and Abrams (1988), Skevington and Baker (1989) and Abrams and Hogg (1990). De la Rey outlines the historical background of SIT, as well as some of Tajfel's early work in this area, in a chapter notable for its lucid and accessible writing style, and its tight critical comment. Several other contributors refer to more recent developments of the theory, such as Louw-Potgieter's review of Giles' work on the social psychology of language, and Foster's references to self-categorisation theory and the process of referent informational influence in his chapter on crowd violence. However these more up-to-date references, as well as potential extensions of SIT and self-categorisation theory for the South African context, are unsatisfyingly scattered about and never adequately pulled together. In short, ironically, the book does not do full justice to the very theory it singles out as social psychology's most useful conceptual tool for the South African context.

The book might also have benefitted from a greater degree of skepticism about SIT. While both De la Rey and Foster do offer criticisms of the theory, these tend to be brief, and most of the other contributors tend to embrace SIT rather too unproblematically given its controversial status. While the theory has been welcomed by many as "social psychology's first truly general theory with paradigmatic potential" (Duckitt, 1991, p193) it has also come under heavy fire from a range of critical social psychologists (e.g. Henriques et al, 1984; Potter and Wetherell, 1987) who have condemned the theory for its allegedly narrow and asocial cognitivism. While I would argue that many of these critiques are at best inadequately developed and at worst quite unconvincing, they do need to be engaged with rather than simply ignored, particularly in a text that uses SIT as its central theme.

Thirdly, and perhaps the greatest disappointment of the book is its handling of research methodology. Social psychologists, both locally and abroad, have long bewailed the discipline's state of crisis, characterised in terms of its narrowly individualistic focus as well as its lack of relevance to a critical understanding of existing power relations and the possibilities of social change. There is universal agreement that a central reason for the crisis is social psychology's dependence on limiting and inappropriate positivist research methodologies.

The editors' obvious commitment to the development of a more critical and socially relevant social psychology is not reflected in the book's disturbingly conventional and unimaginative methodology chapter which is located firmly in the very positivist research tradition that led social psychology up the garden path in the first place (with less than two token pages on the importance of taking the "socio-historical context" into account). This total absence of attention to the large body of existing work into alternative methodologies, and the potential of these methodologies for extending South African social psychology, is particularly glaring. Foster himself is politely apologetic about this chapter in his editorial introduction, pointing out that this chapter fails to take account of "the emergence of alternative hermeneutic or interpretative approaches which utilise qualitative methods" (p19). This limitation is not only apparent in the methodology chapter however. Thus, for example, discourse analysis is accorded no more than a one-page account in Foster and Nel's chapter on attitudes (the book's index does not contain any reference to discourse analysis), despite the fact that it emerged as the major challenge to mainstream attitude research in the 1980s (e.g. Potter and Wetherell, 1987).

Despite these reservations, **Social psychology in South Africa** will serve as a useful and stimulating text for both its critics and its admirers, as well as an indispensable resource for student and researcher alike. Furthermore, warts and all, it constitutes a significant and timely contribution to the challenge of developing an appropriate tradition of local social psychological work in a country which has tended to rely far too heavily on uncritical overseas theories and sources.

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