

Psychology for beginners!

Book review

Louw, D A P & Edwards, D J A (eds) (1993) **Psychology: An introduction for students in southern Africa.** Johannesburg: Lexicon.

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As a Psychology 1 lecturer of perhaps too many years, I welcomed the news that an introductory textbook specifically targeted at southern African students, was available. After having to rely on American textbooks for several years, most Psychology 1 lecturers would wholeheartedly support the opening lines in the Preface that "there is a serious need for a new first-year university textbook in psychology written and produced in southern Africa." But what advantages are the users offered over and above being written and produced in southern Africa? Key issues for both teachers and students are: the contextualization of the content, accessibility of language, and the price.

The first of these key issues, that of contextualization, is addressed in the Preface under the sub-heading "The search for relevance". The editors state their view very clearly: that they see the purpose of an introductory text as simply to "follow the discipline". However, there is a clearly stated intention to depart from imported textbooks by including additional material from southern Africa, using localized examples and reflecting the state of psychology in South Africa. These objectives are met to a lesser or greater extent, quite unevenly over the various chapters.

The titles of the 16 chapters as listed in the Contents section are hardly any different from most other introductory texts. All the traditional chapters are included such as "The physiological basis of behaviour", "Sensation and perception", two chapters on "Learning", "Intelligence", and others. Then, there are three sub-disciplines which are given one chapter each: Developmental psychology, Social psychology, and Industrial psychology. The final chapter, like most other introductory texts, attempts to introduce students to research methods and statistics.

While the chapter titles are neither different nor southern African, the inclusion of southern African issues and examples is evident in the content of some of the chapters. In the opening chapter, Dap Louw, David Edwards and Jack Mann have included a section on psychology in South Africa. In this section the history of psychology in this country is briefly laid out in terms of a list of historical milestones. Included in this list are the various political shifts which have influenced psychologists' attempts to

organise themselves as professionals. This is followed by a short section on psychology in South African universities which simply points out that from a very small beginning in 1917, psychology is now taught in all our universities. The subsequent discussion entitled "South African psychology at the crossroads" is an attempt to offer a critical analysis of the current state of psychology in South Africa. Four main points of critique are highlighted:

- (1) The dominance of an American-European model in the training of South African students;
- (2) The low number of black psychologists;
- (3) The bias in research in favour of the perspectives of whites;
- (4) The fact that the majority of psychologists have not challenged social injustices.

The future of psychology in this country is considered by identifying some of the challenges that need to be engaged, such as the need to develop a more critical approach, the need to extend psychological services, and the need to train more black psychologists. Chapter 1 then makes a rather uneven shift to focus on research methods. This sub-section might have been better located as part of the final chapter on research methods since it disturbs the continuity of the opening chapter.

In the Preface the editors point out that some chapters "lend themselves to local contextualization more than others". This is indeed evident in the uneven inclusion of local examples and research applications over the various chapters. In the chapters on the physiological basis of behaviour (Dap Louw), sensation and perception (Cornelius Plug and Michael Budeck), altered states of consciousness (Dap Louw and David Edwards), learning (Judora Spangenberg), and memory (Ann Shuttleworth-Jordan), the attempt to contextualize the content is made by including a study or two that has been conducted by a local researcher. The chapter on social psychology by Don Foster certainly represents the most noteworthy attempt to depart from similarly entitled chapters in international textbooks. Of course, this is a topic that does lend itself to local applications far more easily than most of the others and there are several relevant local studies. While there is a large degree of overlap with other introductory texts, the chapter on social psychology pays significantly more attention to racism and prejudice, issues that have particular relevance for South African students.

Another topic which has the potential to assume a local flavour more easily than others, is developmental psychology. Dap Louw, Anet Louw and Willie Schoeman try to do this by describing several South African studies which take a developmental perspective. These studies are highlighted in that many of them are given specific focus in box presentations. Examples are the research on the influence of black child-minders on the development of white children, studies on street children, and research on the influence of violence on children in South Africa.

In chapter 13 on abnormal psychology Dap Louw and Steve Edwards give a brief description on how health and illness is viewed by African traditional healers who provide a service to a large sector of the population. There is also a short section on the historical development of mental health services in South Africa. Here the focus is primarily on the development of psychiatric hospitals. The rest of the chapter treads well-worn ground that can be found in nearly all introductory texts.

The inclusion of a chapter on industrial psychology (chapter 15 by Jack Blignaut) is not typical of introductory psychology textbooks. However, this is perhaps a reflection of

the growing popularity of this branch of psychology within South Africa. While this chapter provides a satisfactory overview of this area of psychology, it is disappointing in that it does *not* offer anything of particular relevance to the current dynamics of work relations in South Africa.

Other chapters in this book are intelligence (Dap Louw), language and thought (Estelle Doctor and Zelda Knight), motivation and emotion (Neil Broekmann and Norman Duncan), personality (David Edwards), and stress and coping (Gary Norton).

At the beginning of the book the editors state their intention to publish updated versions in the future. They also invite any suggestions that will improve the quality, relevance, and readability of the book. Indeed, in terms of the layout there is much room for improvement. It would help students to have a concluding section or summary at the end of each chapter. This would also enhance the flow of presentation as several of the chapters end rather abruptly. The numbering of the pages also needs attention. For example, the preface could be numbered appropriately. Having the authors' names included in the contents page would also enhance the presentation of the book.

Accessibility of the language is an issue that certainly requires rethinking in future editions. In this book language is dealt with only in terms of English and Afrikaans. Consideration needs to be given to the fact that an increasing proportion of psychology students do not speak either of these languages as a first language. Readability is also related to the frequency and attractiveness of photographs and illustrations. Many of the American textbooks offer colour photographs and these books sell at a similar price to this one. Tables and graphic illustrations of concepts are very useful in enhancing the accessibility of an introductory textbook. While this text uses box presentations quite frequently, a single box presentation should not be split over different pages!

Price is definitely a key issue for many students who are struggling to obtain sufficient funds to study. The approximate price of this book is R145.00 which is virtually the same as the American textbooks.

In terms of the content it is a pity that the authors did not take account of their own criticism of "the uncritical way in which psychology is studied in South Africa" (p31). While the limitations of producing an introductory textbook can be acknowledged, there must still be room for introducing a more critical approach to the subject. This may be included in very small ways, for example, the authors could identify questions for debate within each topic.

Notwithstanding the above criticisms, this introductory text does offer some advantage over the Anglo-American books in that it contains numerous references and descriptions of South African research which should increasingly become part of the psychology we teach to first year students.