

Welcoming cheeky children into the conference hall

Book review

Morss, J R (1997) **Growing critical: Alternatives to developmental psychology**. London: Routledge. ISBN 0-415-06109-1

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Constructing a bounded space within which it is possible to differentiate South African developmental psychology from any other strand of developmental psychology is neither an easy nor an intellectually trendy thing to do. But for the purposes of this review, I will ask that the reader momentarily excuse my impudence. I have constructed a boundary around South African developmental psychology because I believe that we are distinctive for one main reason. South African developmental psychology is unable to reconcile problems of explanation and intervention (confronting us in the heterogeneous settings within which we work) with the theoretical models that emphasise the inappropriateness of the developmental paradigm. In a word, South African developmental psychology is uncritical. I could suggest several reasons for this but for the sake of this review, I will point out only one. We have come to rely too heavily on mostly US-published reference materials such as textbooks and journals that are static, dry and overwhelmingly uncritical. **Growing critical** may be the alternative we need to challenge our views of development and developmental psychology.

Growing critical, by John Morss of the University of Otago, is unashamedly a critical voice in developmental psychology. I like the fact that it is a text which is, in the words of Morss, "a small cheeky boy running in and out of the conference hall" (pix). I think this is the point exactly. Developmental psychology has for too long been dominated by an authoritarianism that has forgotten that it - developmental psychology - is about life in all of its messiness, ugliness and wonder and which has substituted "the stage" for "life" or "the child" for "person". We cannot blame The Positivists alone for this. Psychologists, on the whole, are a pretty fearful bunch who strive to contain passion, rage and destructiveness within the safety of the consulting room, their flow charts and overhead projected lecture notes. Morss refuses to do this.

Morss' critical reading of Western and Soviet appropriations of Vygotsky are fascinating. Vygotsky leaps into life and suddenly the reading of his work by late twentieth century enthusiasts such as Bruner or Donaldson is rendered dry and incomplete. To accept (Western appropriations of) Vygostkian theory in the terms which many of us now assume - namely The Theory of Enculturation as Apprenticeship - is to suppress the contradictions and disharmonies that Vygotsky himself rejected.

In my opinion, the content of the chapters, *The problem of development* and *Marxism and the critique of development*, touch on some of the most important issues in critical developmental psychology. This statement may in part be influenced by my own fascination with the work of Valerie Walkerdine and her quirky working class hang-ups as well as the negative dialectic and general grumpiness of Theodor Adorno. These two chapters question the concept of development in developmental psychology and in less detail, the concept of agency. What is particularly enjoyable about Morss' discussion of developmentalism and anti-developmentalism is the fact that he refuses to accept that developmental psychology is only something psychologists do and/or know.

I would like to pause at this point to mention one of the two major concerns I have about **Growing critical**. Morss' book is great fun for those genuinely interested in debating and extending critical psychology's role in developmental and educational psychology. But I fear that Morss is guilty of producing one too many "bumper sticker" statements. While this may simply be a question of style, I am concerned that he has not substantively developed his critique of developmentalism in the social sciences nor his critique of the presence of developmentalism in the ontological and epistemological threads that run through psychological conceptualisation. I would prefer him to spend more time tackling these issues, especially since as a South African reader, I believe that South African developmental psychology tends to avoid (uncomfortable and sometimes painful) debates concepts and issues of children, culture, difference and division. We have positioned ourselves in an intellectual space that does not welcome questions about the narratives and voices in developmental psychology. These standpoint narratives shy away from critical interrogation. While I do not expect Morss to provide a neat formula for consolidating critical thought in South African developmental psychology, I am concerned that the uncritical reader will appropriate some aspects of his argument without having tackled these issues more substantively.

The passion and destructiveness of life is well-captured in Morss' theoretical discussions of psychoanalysis, development and anti-developmentalism. I am particularly impressed by Morss' discussion of the more negative and pessimistic voices that influence critical developmental psychology such as Freud, Adorno, Foucault and although not explicitly mentioned, Nietzsche. The pessimism, which these theorists have brought to discussions of development, challenges the saccharine optimism of Piaget and Bruner for example. This pessimism is a necessary antidote to the uncritical claims made about children and development and the underlying political agenda of developmental psychology which constructs the "innocence of childhood" as "icon for this constant upliftingness of the past, for this always-becomingness" (p158). Morss' discussion of some of the major psychoanalytic work on development deals with this explicitly. He exploits and highlights the contradictions in the theoretical writings of many of the major psychoanalysts and reshuffles the deck of cards stacked against Freud and Lacan.

Growing critical does not fall into the trap of surrendering itself or its central message to the worst of post-structuralist mumbo-jumbo. Morss is emphatic in his insistence that while development "is a story, or rather a set of stories, each told by a different author with different interests" (p152), we must - in the midst of our concerns with stories, narrator and intent - remember real children and real children's lives which do not unfold in the regulated way we "claim" they do.

The final point I want to raise is my other concern, that of the publisher's claim that **Growing critical** will appeal to the undergraduate and postgraduate student. This is not an undergraduate text but is a demanding read filled with sets of claims and counterclaims that require a certain amount of familiarity with developmental psychology theory. Nor do I believe that we should regard **Growing critical** as a self-contained guide to critical developmental psychology. The real test of **Growing critical** will be not only in how it is used, or with whom it is used, but why it is used. And that may be the most difficult and challenging test of all.