

## **Challenging the status quo!**

### **Book review**

Prilleltensky, I (1994) **The morals and politics of psychology: Psychological discourse and the status quo**. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press. 283 pages.

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Prilleltensky's book provides a penetrating and challenging critical analysis of psychology's role in maintaining the status quo. He presents an incisive account of psychology's current preoccupation with individuals, and its failure to render any significant commentary on the social implications of psychological theory and practice. "However innocent, this neglect results in a very consequential moral illiteracy ..." (p1).

Borrowing a few concepts from Susan Harding's (1991) book, **Whose science? Whose knowledge?**, he undertakes an examination of that which is "progressive" and that which is "regressive" in psychological theory and practice. Central to all of his arguments is that psychological discourse maintains the societal status quo. In using the title "the morals and politics of psychology" Prilleltensky's wishes to point to the "... social ethics of psychology, and the moral consequences of the discipline for the acceptance and transformation of power relations in society" (p3). By "psychological discourse", he deliberately seeks to cultivate a language that is "saturated with social and political meanings that have serious repercussions for those directly and indirectly affected by it" (p3).

Prilleltensky's wishes to encourage what he refers to as "the political critical standpoint". While most psychology curricula can boast of attempting to help students develop a critical style towards empirical positivist research, they often do not receive any training in analysing the ideological consequences of particular forms of psychological theorising and practice. His work is particularly timely given South Africans' concern with making mental health services more accessible to large segments of its population and especially since most of his commentary is focused on those aspects of psychological theorising and practice that is applied in nature.

The book is divided into three sections. The first part lays the conceptual foundation for his later arguments on the social context of psychological discourse.

Part two examines the moral and political basis of various forms of psychological discourse. Part three focuses on the social and ethical implications of psychological discourse. Throughout the book he adopts the epistemological standpoint of social constructionism.

In the introductory chapter, Prilleltensky lays the groundwork for a discussion of the *political critiques of psychology*. In doing so, the values that guide his thinking are explicitly stated, including a desire to change unjust social structures, never forgetting that in being able to write about it is in itself privileged from both a class and literary point of view. Given that North American psychology wields such a powerful influence in shaping people's thinking about various issues, Prilleltensky argues that understanding the ideological bases for much of this psychology is not only necessary but important in understanding how particular social orders are maintained and reproduced. While he acknowledges that many writers before him, notably people like George Albee, Braginsky and Braginsky, Jacoby, and Ingleby, have commented on these relationships, Prilleltensky contends that these commentaries have not recognised the pervasiveness of psychology's retarding influence on social change. It is only in feminist psychology that serious challenges have been made (in particular to patriarchy), though this influence has not filtered through to the majority of those who provide psychological services.

In the second chapter entitled "The status quo and its preservation", Prilleltensky highlights the functions of utilitarian capitalism which emphasises self interest but not at the cost of upsetting the social order. In other words, utilitarian capitalism " ... posit(s) a society of individuals ... who acting in their own self-interest, advance the social purpose by expanding private wealth" (p18). In this way a market economy is emphasised where everyone has an "equal opportunity" to generate individual wealth. This serves to provide a background for an intriguing discussion on how the use of the "defect" model in explaining human behaviour serves to bolster the individualistic nature of capitalism. Prilleltensky argues that the Cartesian paradigm which is at the heart of modern society, presents the perspective that all social problems are solvable through science and technology. Values are excluded from consideration in this world view, only the discovery of facts is given place of prominence.

The socialisation of psychology and the psychologising of society constitutes the key interests in chapter three. Both aspects lie at the core of the discussion of the interdependence of science and values embedded in various societal institutions. With regard to the former, Prilleltensky makes an often forgotten point, namely, "that most social scientists belong to a social class whose political and economic interests are usually in accordance with those of the dominant sectors" (p26). Persistent criticism of the relevance of values in science has persuaded social scientists to acknowledge the value laden nature of scientific practice. However, the controversy is not whether values play a role in shaping scientific practice but " ... how values are embedded in and shape scientific practice" (p24).

These themes run throughout the next few chapters. In an illuminating argument in the section dealing with ideology and psychology, Prilleltensky points to how psychology is used to both support and criticise the status quo, with the former predominating. He refers to it as a process of *dislocation* whereby changes of a



minor nature give the appearance of a reflexive system. He believes that the voice of the critics who seek to promote social change (Hare-Mustin, Ingleby, Jacoby, Kovel, Unger & Crawford) has been marginalised.

Prilleltensky then describes the "progressive or conservative social repercussions" of various theoretical and applied schools of psychology. For example, a fascinating account of psychoanalysis as a politically and ideologically conservative theory of human behaviour is presented. In this argument, he does not neglect to review the divided criticisms of feminist writers like Chodorow and Lerman. Counteracting the label of conservatism, Prilleltensky also provides insight into how Freud's thinking is viewed as being progressive, including commentary on the work of the radical Freudian left and the neo-Freudian left. As an example, on the subject of homosexuality, Freud is quoted as saying "Homosexuality is assuredly no advantage, but it is nothing to be ashamed of, no vice, no degradation, it cannot be classified as an illness ... It is a great injustice to persecute homosexuality and a cruelty too" (p52). In the final analysis, Prilleltensky does not believe that psychoanalysis can be politically effective because "its discourse remains the exclusive privilege of intellectuals, medical doctors, or therapy clients" (p69).

In the section dealing with abnormal psychology, Prilleltensky notes that while Scheff argued against the use of labels in psychiatry as a way of maintaining the status quo (social control), Szasz's arguments against the use of labels was based essentially on a conservative ideology which failed to account for the role of societal structures in explaining mental disorder. Similarly, he describes the political legacy of family therapy "... as an unfulfilled promise". "Whereas significant progress has been made in reconceptualising abnormal behavior in more interpersonal terms, the promise to look for systemic causes has been limited to intrafamilial dynamics. Thus, the epistemological shift has been more quantitative than qualitative" (p113). Behaviourism, humanism, cognitivism, abnormal psychology, industrial/organisational psychology and school psychology come in for similar scrutiny.

Ideas that are at the core of psychological theorising and practice are reexamined within the context of political ideology and morality to determine whether these foster a progressive agenda for social change and justice. In attempting to answer questions about the need for social change and social justice, Prilleltensky embarks on a discussion of the elements that constitute human welfare and how psychology has a need to reflect upon its social ethics in relation to these precepts.

Prilleltensky does not stop at merely providing a critique, but also makes a serious attempt at arriving at ways in which the agenda for social justice may be fostered. Chapter 14 proposes various strategies as to how psychologists can transform social structures that fail to promote human welfare. He does so primarily on the basis of arguing for a social ethic which is embedded within the concept of empowerment. However, empowerment is emphasised only in relation to the principles of "self-determination, distributive justice, and collaboration and democratic participation in public affairs" (p219), where it is important that the first principle is not privileged at the expense of the others. These principles are debated within the context of control, power, and well-being and the notion of quotidian ethics (ie, displacing an understanding of ethics as a preoccupation with rules and regulations

with one that is concerned with the "equal participation of all concerned in public discussions on contested norms") (p219).

This is a fascinating book as it rekindles thinking about old issues, renders new perspectives on old problems, and provides an impetus for renewing challenges to the status quo both among teachers, students, and practitioners. While it may be argued that the book merely restates arguments others have already made, it is Prilleltensky's singular ability to bring all these sources together in an accessible style that makes this a very worthy contribution to the debate on social change, social justice and psychology. It is especially relevant for those struggling with ideological, ethical and moral issues around clinical and community psychology *practice*. As such it is highly recommended for adoption as a text in both undergraduate and graduate studies.