

Desperately seeking the African personality!

Book review

van Niekerk, E (1996) **Paradigms of mind: Personality perspectives in context**. Johannesburg : International Thomson Publishing (Southern Africa). 263 pages.

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There have been at least three recent attempts to produce an introductory text on personality for and about South Africans: André Möller's edited collection, previously reviewed (Gillmer, 1996) in this journal; Meyer, Moore, and Viljoen's (1997) revamped and hideously renamed earlier edition of their widely prescribed **Personality theories: From Freud to Frankl**; and now van Niekerk's serving of trendy brutalism: personality a la Kuhn. This is by far the worst of the three because it fails to provide - as the others do, but far more glaringly - either an African perspective or the "paradigms" in the vanguard of contemporary personality "science".

Characterising vignettes with "Khanji, an attractive young [township] woman" is crassly paternalistic enough. Psychoanalytic expositions of Apartheid as derived from displacement activity by ambivalent followers of Verwoerd is breathtaking. Imparting a South African context? Well yes, it is a good example of its kind. Ironically, van Niekerk misses a marvellous opportunity that he created for himself. A little like another example of the same type, André Markgraaff. In a few pages he mentions and effectively dismisses the rich "division, cleavages and opposition" (Foster, Nicholas and Dawes, 1993:174) within South African psychology. Simon Biesheuvel, Noel Chabani Manganyi, Dreyer Kruger, Len Holdstock and, crucially, Jungian psychiatrist and isangoma Vera Bührmann could have provided a truly South African fabric around van Niekerk's "perspectives". A great pity.

Bluntly put, the time honoured "theories of personality" courses and associated textbooks are increasingly being recognised as "misleading and uninformative" (Pervin, 1996:vi). Having decided to fall into the trap of providing yet another of these shelf-groaners (perhaps cheaper, certainly nastier), van Niekerk simply ignores the leading modern theories: behavioural genetics and evolutionary psychology. If there is a paradigm that approaches scientific credibility - if that's what one is seeking - then these are starting to fit the bill. Any personality theory that is inconsistent with evolutionary theory stands little chance of being correct (Buss, 1991). McCrae and Costa's work on universalities of personality trait structures (most recently in 1997) takes the earlier rather crude behavioural genetic research to another explanatory

level. None of the local personality texts makes mention of these theories. Which begs the question: what have these guys been reading? It is not as if the stuff is lurking in arcane journals. One begins to suspect a more malignant reason. Political blindness.

Modern personality theory is simultaneously about uniformity and diversity, constraints and opportunity. The tools of the trade: correlational methods, factor analysis and, God forbid, genetical twin studies have made it possible for a modern scientific examination of some of the oldest questions about humankind. Theory has evolved from various relatively static typologies - as old as Hippocratic dogma - to a single model of rigorously verified and economically portrayed universal trait dimensions. Yet the "big 5" doesn't even get a mention. A gene-environment interaction imbedded in language and culture, uniformity and diversity, constraints and opportunity. If one did not know better this would sound like home.

van Niekerk is not merely negligent or ignorant, but is positively and dangerously misleading when he does ground theory in the South African instance. The Soweto uprising is a Bandura landscape: a culture of violence inspired by aggressive, unemployed youthful Black role models. To be fair this is not far removed from Meyer et al's depiction of *toyi-toying* as "a coping strategy for stress and tension promoting optimal mental health among traditional and modern day Africans" (1997:625). Tracts like that require a mental health warning sticker.

No, the book is not about **Paradigms of mind**. It is a reactionary and tired rendition of grand personality theories that, yes, do need to be read as *perspectives in context*. Freud's semantic understanding of personality is as fertile a ground for deepening the bald explanations of science as it was at the beginning of the century. South Africa is as good a place as any to explore these matters. But the Afrikaner mind treks on. And on. Dragging its nineteenth century eurocentricism with it.

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