

Human development in South Africa

Book review

De La Rey, C, Duncan, N, Shefer, T, van Niekerk, A (eds) (1997) **Contemporary issues in human development: A South African focus**. Johannesburg: International Thomson Publishing.

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Attempts by South African scholars to write for local contexts is an emerging trend that needs greater encouragement. This book is a good example of the scholarship that lies largely untapped within South African academia. For many South African writers, not only must they overcome a complex of "international is better" syndrome, but also have to deal with all the prejudices inherent to South African academia. This book succeeds excellently in holding a model of "best practice" that enables "marginalised" academics to write on topics taking account of South African realities.

The book is premised on the basis that there is need for writers in South Africa to reflect the local condition, as well as to give voice to academics who remain unpublished. On both counts, the book succeeds admirably. Specifically, a social psychological perspective is used to describe human development. The term is used in its broadest sense and includes development that is social, political and psychological. The upside of such an approach is that it allows a broad brush to be used that covers a wide range of issues. The downside is that it tends to limit the extent to which any one issue can offer an extensive discussion on its own.

A wide area of interest is covered. The reader is divided into four parts. They include families in social context, the making of the self, violence and child development, and health and social issues. Each area has its strengths and weaknesses. For example, the section devoted to families and the social context provides a very good critique of Bowlby and Winnicott from a feminist/ social constructionist viewpoint. At the same time the chapter on teenage pregnancy and families with mental handicap tends to be less well integrated. The chapter dealing with "Story and the making of the self" is one of the best I have read on theoretical issues in life-span development. The critique it provides should be recommended reading for all developmental students. What is especially unique about this chapter is the privileging of personal narratives in understanding the universal and particular in life-span development. Encouraging individuals to develop their own stories of development helps them to understand when traditional theories of

development apply to them and when they don't. In this way self understanding becomes an important part of the learning process.

Importantly, each chapter seeks to provide critical commentary on the issues at hand. This approach adds significant value to the reader as it clearly challenges the reader to re-think traditional viewpoints on human development. What makes the critical commentary especially useful is that it locates it within local conditions and settings. For this reviewer, this is a huge plus on helping students understand the connection between their own lived realities and just another textbook on human development. A major strength of this reader is the abundance of South African references. Thus the reader also becomes a valuable resource guide for other South African work. The inclusion of pictures also helps to contextualise abstract material within South African settings. These in themselves could constitute an essential reading list for undergraduate and post-graduate students.

Inevitably, any reader that is multi-authored will experience unevenness in the way particular content is dealt with. This reader is no exception. The writers' attempts to introduce a social constructionist framework into the individual chapters meets with varying degrees of success. For example, the initial sections and chapters appear more invested in providing a social constructionist and feminist critique, while the chapters that appear later in the book such as adolescent alcohol misuse or traumatic spinal cord injury among youth have much less to say about this. This appears to be partly due to the differing level of writing experience among the writers themselves.

While the reader focuses significantly on data derived from South African studies, it also becomes apparent that there are huge gaps in our knowledge. It is also apparent that the absence of longitudinal research around violence and conflict in South African society presents an important challenge to all South African researchers. The reader helps provide an important starting point for research of this nature. As an indication of the success of this project, this reviewer would like to encourage the writing of second reader focused around specific themes.

Overall, this is a very worthwhile reader for South African students and I believe adds significantly to the steadily growing knowledge base of South African scientific literature.