Thinking critically about psychology in South Africa

Book review
Seedat, M, Duncan, N & Lazurus S, (eds) (2001) **Community psychology. Theory, method and practice: South African and other perspectives.** Cape Town: Oxford University Press. ISBN 019 571922 0

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Seven years after the abolishment of apartheid in South Africa, the *first* volume in this country dedicated *specifically* to the subject of community psychology has been published. The editors are to be commended for pulling together the expertise of leading academics and practitioners (mostly South African) into a comprehensive volume that deals with contemporary theory, methodology and the practice of community psychology.

In the introduction to this volume the editors Seedat, Lazurus and Duncan comment on the way in which community psychology (primarily in the southern hemisphere) came to be associated with broad democratic movements that sought to dismantle oppressive state structures and ideological state apparatuses. Within South Africa community psychology emerged in the 1980s as a radical challenge to the discriminatory practices embodied in mainstream apartheid psychology. One of the central aims of this volume is to *critically* reflect on the development and effectiveness of the theory, method and practice of community psychology in South Africa more than a decade after its formal emergence and to pose questions about its future development and relevance. The editors argue that an explicit intention of this volume is to encourage the reader to formulate their *own* critical questions and responses as they engage with the text's content.

This book is aimed at both students and practitioners in a variety of disciplines within the social sciences, ranging from psychology to those involved in development and transformation. Any lecturer, however, who chooses to use this volume to inform or compliment their course content is warned that it will demand creative and innovative teaching. This volume *will* encourage its reader to think *critically* about the role of community psychologists; it *will* question the relevance of community psychology in contexts (like South Africa) that require radical and immediate solutions to social problems; it *will* highlight the potential dangers inherent in the theory; method and practice of community psychology; but it *will not* provide any straightforward answers or solutions! The use of this volume will require the ability to contain excitement and

uncertainty as students engage with its content. The editors (p13) conclude the introductory chapter with the following encouragement: "After a careful study of this book you will no doubt appreciate that community psychology remains an incomplete project. So we invite you, the reader, to celebrate the achievements and insights of all the contributors to this book as you prepare to take up the call to develop your own innovative solutions to the many unanswered questions this book raises".

The volume is organised into four thematic sections, each dealing with a particular aspect of community psychology's theory, method and practice. The content is (mostly) exciting and engaging and its language is accessible although challenging. Each chapter, within each section, concludes with a series of questions that expects the reader to integrate and apply theoretical ideas to contextualised scenarios.

Section I: Theoretical and paradigmatic considerations.
This section is made up of a number of contributions that deal comprehensively with both the historical and projected future developments of community psychology within South Africa. An exciting aspect of this section, however, is that it would be worthwhile (and perhaps essential) reading for *any* student studying psychology in South Africa (not just community psychology). The content is contextualised and reflects the past and current state of psychology in South Africa, dealing with issues such as ideology, power and social change within the discipline and practice of psychology.

A particularly interesting chapter is that of Swartz and Gibson (The "old" versus the "new" in South African community psychology: the quest for appropriate change) who manage to outline the crisis of traditional psychology without discrediting everything about conventional psychology in the South African context. In addition, it poses a challenge to introduce new ways of thinking. This volume deals with the "transformation" of psychology in a balanced way, critiquing past practices of psychology in such a way that the reader is left with a sense of hope and anticipation for the development of a more "appropriate" psychology that is based on lessons from the past.

The most exciting chapter in this section, however, must be that of Hamber, Clifford Masilela and Terre Blanche (Towards a Marxist community psychology: radical tools for community psychological analysis and practice). It is exciting to see the resurrection of Marxist ideas despite the past and present "crisis" of Marxism. This chapter problematizes the theory and practice of psychology within a capitalist framework and encourages readers to "seek to understand the hidden mechanisms that produce individuality" (p54); primarily how social and economic realities construct individual and social relations, and subjectivities. The writers provide the reader with seven radical steps towards developing Marxist-oriented action within community psychology and encourage the reader to place an enlarged copy of these steps in a prominent position in one's university or workplace, in an attempt to actualise them. The issue of *action* is central to this entire volume and will undoubtedly be a welcomed text by those who are concerned with the passivity of conventional psychology to bring about substantial social *change* where and when it is most needed.

However, in the spirit of the critical nature of this volume, there are a number of concerns about some of the content of this section that may be worthwhile keeping in mind. The most disappointing chapter within this section is that of Pillay and Lockhat

(Models of community mental health services for children). While providing an exposition of the economic issues affecting the delivery of mental health services to children within South Africa they do very little (if nothing at all) to challenge the notion of "mental health" itself within a context like South Africa. A number of "types" of childhood problems in disadvantaged communities are described without ever attempting to recognise that these "problems" need to be understood within a particular socio-cultural matrix. In addition, the term "help" is frequently used unproblematically through out the text. It is suggested that terms like "help" are themselves highly political and ideological. Readers of this text may find it useful to refer to other volumes like **The developmental dictionary: A guide to knowledge**, edited by Sachs (1993). An example of a useful contribution to this volume is that of Gronemeyer (in Sachs, 1993:53) who deconstructs the term "helping". She argues, "The very notion of help has become enfeebled and robbed of public confidence in its saving power. These days help can usually only be accepted if accompanied with threats; and whoever is threatened with it had better be on their guard". Gronemeyer (in Sachs, 1993:53) quotes Thoreau who exclaims that if he knew someone was coming to his house with the design of doing good he would run for his life "for fear that I should get some of his good done to me". This argument is particularly relevant in the South African context where communities have become justifiably suspicious of those who come with the intention to "help". We only have to reflect on the period of colonialisation and current developmental practices to begin to appreciate the warnings that Gronemeyer (1993) sounds around the intent to help. Another concern is with the terms "need" and "victim" used in this text. Psychology has the tendency to look for deficit, weakness and need without fully acknowledging the strengths and coping skills of communities who have continued to survive (and even self-actualise) under enormous constraints.

Section II: Methodological considerations.
The writers in this section reflect critically on the positivist paradigm that underlies most research and evaluation processes within community psychology. Current ideas (and exciting ones too) emerging from the post-modern turn in the social sciences are outlined and discussed as alternatives (or complimentary ideas) to those of traditional research and evaluation in the field of social intervention and development.

In an interesting chapter by Kelly and van der Riet (Participatory research in community settings: processes, methods and challenges) a number of helpful tips and ideas are posed that assist the reader in coming to an understanding of the way in which participatory research can harness reflexivity and be used as an instrument of change. The risk of unequal relations of power in the research and evaluation process and the need to be sensitive to the ongoing life process in the community is dealt with very adequately in this section. The chapter by Potter and Kruger (Social programme evaluation) is particularly effective in getting the reader to engage critically with the process of social programme intervention, especially within rural communities. An example is the way in which they highlight the difficulty of systematic and measurement-based evaluation processes to understand the perceptions of all programme *stakeholders*. They argue that these forms of evaluation are aimed at the programme as an *entity*, rather than on the "different conceptions, aspirations, and values of those involved in the programme" (p196).

One major concern, not with this section in particular but with the text as a whole, is the 'silence' around the issue of HIV/AIDS. Perhaps it is a result of, or an attempt to, avoid one of the primary responses to the topic of HIV/AIDS: utter boredom (Crewe, 2001). However this text could have engaged with the topic in an fascinating and interesting way, exactly the response that academics should be trying to generate around the issue (Crewe, 2001).

Section III: Practice in community psychology.
This section is very effective in dismantling preconceived ideas about the *practice* of community psychology. The term "community" has, primarily in South Africa, become equated with "impoverished, suffering black people" in need of the expertise of professionals. This section indirectly challenges this notion by describing some very innovative applications of community psychology: the promotion of safety; the development of accountability; and the reconstruction of gender identities. This also serves to illustrate ways in which psychology can "transcend the limitations of the individual orientation" (Seedat, Duncan & Lazurus, p10). A particularly interesting chapter is that of Nell (Community psychology and the problem of policing in countries of transition). Nell illustrates the way in which broader institutions like that of the state exert a very powerful influence on issues like crime. From this perspective the *individual* is not directly responsible for crime, rather, "in a perverse way, this system controls and manages crime" (p265).

Again, it was disappointing to find that HIV/AIDS was not the central focus of any of the chapters in this section. It is suggested that a chapter that deals with the way in which behaviour, like sexual behaviour, is highly politicised and gendered would have complemented this volume.

Section IV: Perspectives from elsewhere.
This section came as quite a surprise! Although it provides the reader with a description of community psychology in non-South African settings and raises questions about how adaptable these forms are in a South African context one is still left with doubt about its "appropriateness" in a volume that must be celebrated for its numerous South African authors and references.

In summary **Community psychology: Theory, method and practice** is a comprehensive, interesting and engaging volume. It is very effective in describing and critiquing the development of community psychology within South Africa. It is suggested that students who read this text carefully will not only be "left" with a valuable amount of content but will, more importantly, further develop the skills needed to engage critically with the topic of psychology as a whole.

REFERENCES.

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