

## I WRITE WHAT I LIKE

### Book review

Ratele, K & Duncan, N (2003) **Social psychology: Identities and relationships**. Cape Town: UCT Press. ISBN 1-919713-83-2 pbk.

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The introductory chapter of Ratele and Duncan's **Social psychology: Identities and relationships** claims a distinct lineage, it notes "the present volume is only the second one to be published on social psychology out of South Africa" (p9). Well thumbed copies of the first, Foster & Louw-Potgieter's **Social psychology in South Africa** (1991), have occupied the bookshelves of the scholars of South African social psychology for over a decade. The publication of a new social psychology text is therefore an exciting, if belated, development. While Foster & Louw-Potgieter's seminal text raised the pennant for local authorship and spoke to the apartheid moment, the **Social psychology: Identities and relationships** text represents a particular consolidation of local knowledge production, and reveals much of the social, and social psychological, within contemporary South Africa.

The Foster & Louw-Potgieter text derived its theoretical cogency from Social Identity Theory (SIT) even if, as one reviewer presciently noted, discursively orientated approaches were enjoying increased ascendancy within psychology (Campbell, 1993). The **Social psychology: Identities and relationships** text attests to the pervasiveness of the subsequent epistemic shift, with social constructionism conferring the conceptual underpinnings for many of its chapters. Ratele and Duncan's text moreover disavows many of social psychology's hoary topics: "... social psychology is not bunch of chapters that must include the self, attitudes, persuasion, experimental research methods, statistical analyses, social cognition, attribution, self-perception, and self-schemata, non-verbal communication, self-concept, inter-personal attraction and anti-social behaviour, inter-group conflict, the nature of crowds, social influence leadership, decision making, and territoriality" (p15). Instead, the text embraces a dizzying array of topics ordered into eighteen chapters, the centrifugal diversity of which is contained by their organisation into five sections.

An introductory chapter followed by a chapter on research methodology constitutes the first section of the text. The methodology chapter consists of a whirlwind tour of experimental social psychology, followed by delineation of a broadly discursive

approach and interspersed with text boxes in a delightfully whimsical idiom ("a post-colonial fairy tale"). The pedagogical efficacy of the entire book might however have been strengthened by a more sustained and integrated consideration of research methodology across its chapters.

The second section is amongst the most substantive, and comprises of six chapters thematically ordered around the topic of race. Race is examined in relation to a number of domains including media representations, the body, selfhood and identities. The radical import of Fanon and legacy of Biko loom large over this section (and resonate across several other chapters in the text). Black Consciousness and Postcolonial theory arguably offer up the pre-eminent set of theoretical resources through which local social psychology is being extended by its young and restless.

Section three is thematically ordered around gender. It includes strong chapters on gender violence, black women's identities, and mixed (interracial) relationships. This section includes a slightly curious, yet not altogether displeasing, chapter on intimate partner homicide. Drawing on a set of empirical materials from France the chapter manages to suggest both the interpretative fecundity and intellectual strenuousness of psychodynamic theorising. It serves also to counter the parochialism of an exclusive focus on local theorising and examples.

The chapters of the penultimate fourth section are united in a focus on sexuality. This section surveys lesbianism, heterosexuality and - in the variety of historically situated work so often sorely missing from psychology - race, masculinity and homosexuality. The relational faultlines examined in the text therefore extend well beyond the familiar axes of race and gender as it examines a social psychology of the margins. Indeed, the text charts how the margins are increasingly becoming part of a polyphonic academic mainstream. If an earlier generation of texts established the viability (both fiscal and conceptual) of local tertiary textbook publishing, I would suggest texts of this generation (cf Hook, Cockcroft & Watts, 2002; Hook & Eagle, 2002; Hook; Mkhize, Kiguwa & Collins, 2004) represent something entirely different in the trajectory of local knowledge production. These texts reflect a consolidation of the field as their unapologetically provocative, perspectival and (at times) playful authors write what they like, explicating neglected and emergent topics alongside social psychology's more traditional concerns.

The fifth and final section is a portmanteau of three chapters very broadly concerned with socio-political change. The first is an interesting chapter on leadership and socio-political change. The second surefooted chapter, concerned with violence and violence prevention from a public health perspective, locates the topic in a lucidly paradigmatic manner. The third chapter is concerned with street children. This final section of the book would have benefited from a section overview to bind its miscellany of concerns and domains together. This brings me to my first criticism.

While the texts multiplicity (both theoretical and domain wise) is laudable, coherence is occasionally the price exacted for this diversity. The text may have benefited from greater and more explicit theoretical framing and locating. It is poorer for the absence of section overviews to keep the centrifugal forces of disparate subject areas and theoretical perspectives in check. Although postgraduate students could dip into the text

unaided, undergraduate readers would probably require extensive scaffolding, or a more traditional supplementary text.

A second, albeit minor, criticism is that the index is a little thin and unhelpful. For instance, it makes precious little mention of the post-structuralism or social constructionism which feature prominently as the epistemological bedrock of several chapters. Thirdly and finally, although this book has bettered the rather dowdy presentation of many earlier South African texts, it is imbued with neither the coffee table gloss of imported American titles nor the plethora of support material these routinely come bundled with.

It is platitudinous and somewhat parsimonious to describe a text as a worthy addition to a field. But this one is, in the best possible sense of the phrase. If areas for improvement can be highlighted it is because the text carries the burden of reflecting a rapidly changing arena of inquiry, against a backdrop of epistemic ferment and contestation, in a rapidly changing social context while giving voice to several emergent authors and meeting the pedagogical demands of the new readers. That the text works as well as it does is glowing testament to its worthiness. No practitioner or serious scholar of South African social psychology can really afford to be without it perched on their bookshelf.

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