

SOUTH AFRICAN PSYCHOLOGY IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Van Ommen, C & Painter, D (eds) (2008) **Interiors: A history of psychology in South Africa**. Pretoria: UNISA Press. ISBN 978-1-86888-448-3 pbk. Pages viii + 485.

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Interiors is a large 482 page book that consists of sixteen chapters written by 21 authors, some of whom are themselves notable figures in the history of psychology in South Africa. It begins with a chapter by editors Clifford van Ommen and Desmond Painter, on forms of historiography. This is followed by a chapter on the “history of history writing about psychology” in South Africa. The other chapters address a range of topics: scientific racism and professionalisation; critical psychology; behaviourism; psychoanalysis; existential-phenomenological psychology; systemic thinking and cybernetic approaches; psychopathology and colonial experience; research on child development; social psychology; neuropsychology; community psychology; and the theory of the individual in South African psychology.

The chapters are arranged under three categories termed “themes”, “movements” and “fields”, although the distinctions between these categories does not come through clearly. This gives the book a slightly unstructured feel, as does the unevenness of the chapters in terms of length and depth of coverage. The editors describe the book as “in search of an audience”. They explain that the book was not conceived as a textbook but it was hoped it would find some utility in the teaching environment.

Certainly some of the chapters would be useful introductory texts in a number of fields: notably psychometric testing, systemic thinking and cybernetic approaches, and research on child development. But the book as a whole would most likely only find a home in a course focused specifically on the history of psychology, or perhaps in a critical psychology course. The chapters are varied in their structure and level of address; although most begin with a broad international perspective on the particular sub-discipline, and narrow down to South African contributions in the field. Some chapters are much richer than others in showing the influences which shaped the sub-discipline in South Africa.

The book is quite strong in showing how the practice of psychology followed and furthered the interests of colonialism and racial capitalism. Psychologists mostly turned a blind eye to the effects of apartheid practices – forced removals, migrant labour, pass laws – and it was only after the intensification of oppression and state violence in the

late 1970s and early 1980s that psychologists began to recognise their complicity in this history and to respond to it through research and to a limited extent through practice.

The chapters differ considerably in the extent to which they present original research and analysis. In a good few chapters the historical accounts end where previously published histories end, with little attempt to take stock of subsequent developments or to revisit well trodden historical ground with fresh questions. Other chapters open up new histories – for example, of psychoanalysis, community psychology, and existential-phenomenological psychology – which each offers a range of interesting stories needing elaboration and further interpretation.

Disappointingly, in more than a few cases the reliance on previously published histories means that the historical accounts trickle to an end as they approach the end of the apartheid era. Among the few exceptions are chapters on research on child development, the theory of the individual, and psychometric testing. For the most part there is bare mention of the history of psychology in the democratic era, although there are some critical jabs at the present state of the discipline.

Chapters on psychopathology, social psychology and critical psychology focus largely on what has happened, and are thin on historical significance in the sense of understanding current challenges and future prospects for psychology. The overall impression in the book is of South African psychology readying to reinvent itself, but still largely derivative, applying the ideas of European and American psychologists and social theorists to South Africa.

The chapter on social psychology paints a bleak picture of the discipline, which is described as having begun and remaining in a state of “paralytic mimicry”, and suffering from “ideological limbo”. Social psychology in South Africa is said to have consistently occupied responsive rather than generative positions; and it “mimics and concedes” to the whims of present SA governance and power structures. The call is made to move beyond adaption and commentary to “social action”, but this is not accompanied by suggestions about what historical understanding may offer by way of possibilities for remedying the situation.

The chapter on systems theory contends that systemic thinkers have generally failed to address the contextual complexities of South African psychological life. This and other damning conclusions scattered through the book provide little reason to celebrate South African psychology, although chapters on psychometric testing and developmental research show that some sub-disciplines have been on the move in the democratic era. But this may under-represent the achievements of the discipline, for the book largely concerns the written outputs of researchers and is mostly confined to the history of psychological research and scholarship, and work conducted in national research institutes and psychology departments.

For the most part there is little history of the professional categories of psychology – clinical and counselling psychology; industrial psychology; research psychology; and educational psychology – although there is passing critical reference to the professionalisation of psychology. The book also makes little mention of the contributions of people educated in the field of psychology who are not primarily involved in researching and teaching. The practice of psychology and the work of the

approximately 10 000 psychology practitioners registered with the Professional Board for Psychology is largely not written about. What have they been doing and how has this changed over time?

This could be yet another uncomfortable story for South African psychology, but it may point to an unrecognised set of achievements of psychology in the democratic era. Some post-graduates of South African psychology departments are certainly making their mark on South African society in ways that are historically significant. These include the Minister of Higher Education and Training, the Deputy Minister of Correctional Services, the Deputy Director General as well as the cluster head of non-communicable diseases in the National Department of Health. There are many others besides, amongst them many registered psychologists working as researchers and practitioners in the health and mental health fields, with many working in the field of HIV/AIDS. Research organisations are quite richly populated and in some cases led by people with research psychology degrees; and the leaders of a number of nationally significant research organisations, including the Human Sciences Research Council have postgraduate qualifications in psychology. There are others working in NGOs and the private sector, and many who work in private sector companies. It would take a more penetrating history to delve into the contribution of applied psychologists, rather than only psychology researchers.

The penultimate chapter comes as something of a surprise in a book which is largely about the social and political influences shaping the study of people in South Africa. At issue is the subject of psychology and the need also to approach the study of psychology from the perspective of the individual. It is argued that this will require a more empirically grounded and theoretically ambitious approach in psychology which does not excise the self / individual, but makes it the subject of psychology in all of its complexity. This contentious and thought provoking chapter calls us to consider what kinds of explanations are good for the individual and for the social environment, and makes a case against the explicitly political career of psychology.

All things considered, this is a book worth reading. I finished it much better informed about the key events, institutions, figures and research programmes that shaped South African psychology, and with a stronger conviction that the history of psychology is important. It covers a lot of ground and provides a useful reference for future historians. I hope historically minded psychologists will soon pick up on where this history trails off some fifteen or so years ago.