

Book Reviews

Critical Psychology - An Introduction

Fox, D., and Prilleltensky, I. (Eds) (1997)

London: Sage

362pp, ISBN 0 7619 5211 X

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What is critical psychology?

Dictionaries of psychology can provide at least a cursory understanding of unfamiliar terms. However, for this question I found them unhelpful. The dictionary listings are usually limited to the psychometric *critical score*, the statistical *critical ratio*, the developmental *critical period*, and the phenomenological *critical incident*. Clearly the basic parameters of critical psychology post-date most dictionaries. New ideas are ultimately judged against the criteria of importance and usefulness. Taking this into account I would have no hesitation in forecasting that future dictionaries of psychology will **all** contain reference to critical psychology.

This is an edited volume containing 19 chapters which are sectioned into four uneven parts: Critical Overviews (five chapters), Critical Arenas (ten chapters), Critical Theories (three chapters) and Critical Reflections (a single chapter which critiques critical psychology). Fox and Prilleltensky have contributed the preface, the first chapter and also introductory notes at the beginning of each chapter.

Clearly disgusted by the current political innocence of the discipline, Fox and Prilleltensky set out to identify their own position and make explicit the values which guide what they suggest could become a blueprint for psychology's change of direction. This blueprint emanates from critical reflections about psychology's basic assumptions and norms. This book aims to present an introductory level overview for readers who have had little exposure to such challenging and thought provoking perspectives. Fox and Prilleltensky find the status quo within psychology distasteful. This is evident when they declare one

purpose of this collection: "to expose the unholy alliance between psychology and social norms that benefit the powerful and harm the powerless, and to offer emancipatory alternatives" (p. xvi).

In addressing psychology's core values and assumptions the editors take the opportunity to articulate their central claim that mainstream psychological practices impede, rather than facilitate, social justice. In short, mainstream psychology is criticised as contributing to social injustice and thwarting the promotion of human welfare. This claim is provocative, as it runs contrary to the reasons why people are initially attracted to the discipline.

This claim is based on a critique of radical individualism. It is supported by a wide range of intellectual traditions including feminism, neo-Marxist psychology, German critical psychology, South American liberation psychology, social constructionism, discursive psychology, post-modernism, and post-positive approaches, and manifests itself in the impressive range of sub-disciplines which are represented by the chapters in this volume. These areas range across a wide spectrum of psychologies: historical, qualitative, ethical, personality, clinical, intelligence, developmental, social, community, cross-cultural, lesbian and gay, legal, political, feminist and discursive.

The psychological diversity encompassed by these chapters is one of the strengths of the collection, and should ensure that there is something of interest for any reader who possesses at least a passing interest in the discipline. It would be almost impossible to draw from all possible sub-disciplines and the editors readily acknowledge the lack of representation from areas such as race and ethnicity, industrial and organisational psychology, cognitive psychology and learning theories. The breadth of coverage included in this text strengthens the suggestion that the social justice agenda and the associated critique presented by the editors is not merely a case of "sniping from the sidelines". Clearly, similar concerns are at the very heart of many key sub-areas within the discipline.

While this collection is testament to that claim, some of the chapters are less directly concerned with a political and social justice agenda. Rather they address particular theoretical, conceptual, and

methodological issues which are currently the subject of academic debate. Some of the supporting chapters are therefore perhaps less supportive of the broad political agenda than the editors may have wished for. However this does not detract from the high calibre of the work presented in these chapters. Indeed, the less politically driven material is just as sharp in outlining fundamental critique of important issues.

Another strength of this collection is the outstanding quality of the individual chapters. The authors of these contributions are scholarly, productive and internationally respected. They include some of the top people from various fields: Rappaport (community psychology), Parker (discursive psychology), Wilkinson (feminist psychology), Kitzinger (lesbian psychology) and Burman (developmental psychology). The chapters are uniformly erudite, well crafted, and accessible. I will limit the remainder of this review to a brief discussion of three of the more outstanding contributions.

Laura Brown's chapter "Ethics in Psychology: Cui Bono?" deals with the question of whose interests are being served by ethical codes. Brown launches a scathing attack on the way in which 'American psychology' has belatedly dealt with the ethics of professional practices. Her critical argument is that the discipline has failed to integrate ethics into the overall context of the work of psychologists: ethics often remains as an add-on. The level of ethical preparation for professional psychologists is criticised, with the claim that most students receive little formal instruction in ethics.

Brown takes issue with codes of ethics, on the grounds that they are written for the benefit of the psychologist rather than the client or research participant. One highlight is the section dealing with science as the ultimate good - and the accompanying problematic that "science is *per se* good" (p.54), and thus constitutes an adequate foundation for ethical actions. As Brown carefully documents, the history of psychological science has been rife with oppressive norms. Brown argues for a major rethink on ethics codes based on wider community input. Such codes should acknowledge the professional, the personal and the political. Aspects of the Feminist Therapy Institute code are presented. This contains some challenging dimensions including sections dealing with cultural diversity and oppression, power differentials, overlapping relationships, therapist accountability and social change.

David Nightingale and Tor Neilands have contributed "Understanding and Practicing Critical Psychology". This superb chapter deals directly with a basic definition of critical psychology. The authors

conceptualise this as a response to inadequate theory and practice. The critical work advocated comes from a yin/yang relationship between the mainstream acceptance of existing methodologies, assumptions and theories, and the critical challenges to these. Neither would exist without the other and Nightingale and Neilands assert that the mainstream will ultimately be strengthened by the input provided by critical psychology. The dual forces of resistance and challenge which are alluded to here are apparent throughout the chapters of this collection.

The section "Critiquing the Status Quo: Philosophical Arenas", which deals with the relationship between ontology, epistemology and methodology, is excellent. The discussion of these crucial foundational issues regarding the nature of psychological reality, what constitutes psychological knowledge, and how we can legitimately go about establishing such knowledge, is conducted with unparalleled conciseness and clarity.

S. Mark Pancer's chapter "Social Psychology: The Crisis Continues" provides one 'take' on social psychology's perennial 'crisis'. The chapter begins by providing an historical context for 'crisis talk'. The basic argument which is presented is that social psychology has become (paradoxically) asocial. The 'who, what, when and how' structure of the chapter strongly supports suggestions that the discipline has severe limitations. In particular it seems to be a male dominated area which relies heavily on the study of North American undergraduates. Its rampant individualism works to completely undo the social in social psychology, and the recent adoption of cognitivism further undermines claims regarding a social focus. The artificiality of the laboratory maximises control at the cost of ecological validity and social relevance. On a more optimistic note Pancer sees resolution coming in the form of alternatives which are briefly examined and touted as heralding a return to a social psychology which is innovative, radical, critical, and above all social.

In conclusion I would strongly recommend this book. It represents an impressive attempt to unsettle any smugness or complacency with regard to our professional practices. Whether readers are convinced by the political agenda of the editors or not, remains to be seen. However I doubt that it would be possible to engage with this collection and not be challenged to question the bedrock of assumptions, premises and values upon which our practices are based. Ultimately such confrontation should form an integral part of any discipline which claims to possess intellectual honesty and self reflection.

Bodily Boundaries, Sexualised Genders and Medical Discourses

de Ras, Marion and Grace, Victoria (Eds.) (1997)

Palmerston North, Dunmore Press.

192pp. ISBN 0 86469 282 X

(\$39.95 paperback)

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This collection of writing on the body, medical discourses, and gender is a valuable addition to the work on the body. It contributes new research of a high standard to the area of medical discourses and medicalisation.

I attended the Body, Gender, Sexuality and Medicalisation conference in 1995 at Waikato University which this collection is drawn from. The conference, organised by the department of Women and Gender Studies, impressed me at the time. The papers were both accessible and challenging. So I was pleased to see this book, which takes a well-considered deviation from the usual form of published conference proceedings. In fact a number of accomplished researchers who presented at the conference are not included in this collection. While the book cannot be read necessarily as a conference proceedings, it is a high quality publication. It contains work that has undergone the scrutiny of peers having been 'road-tested' in front of a critical audience, and edited by two prominent New Zealand researchers.

Bodily Boundaries, Sexualised Genders and Medical Discourses highlights in its title its domain of enquiry. The intention of the book is the exploration and critique of the gendered body in medical discourses and practices. In a clear and useful introduction, the editors, de Ras and Grace, introduce first notions of 'The Body' which underpin the work collected in the book. They locate - within the currently extensive and multifarious body of writing (theory and research) invested in the body - sexuality and medical discourses which are seen to be productive of bodily

representations, regulating, regulated and disciplined. A striking feature of this book is a well managed structure, clearly outlined for readers. Divided into three parts: I. Bodily Metaphors; II. The Politics of Bodily Representation; III. Reading the Body as Text, the editors succinctly synthesise the diversity of contributions into an extremely helpful and satisfying text.

The contributors to this book are an array of international and local researchers with diverse interests in women and gender studies, feminist studies, nursing, art, law, human sciences (including psychology), and anthropology. They have utilised a diverse range of sites of interpretation from a settlement town, to art, autopsy, and chronic pelvic pain.

In the first section, *Bodily Metaphors*, there is attention to the metaphoric representations of the body, whether it be concerned with the metaphors of the immune system as in Emily Martin's work; a (city-) body metaphor for public health in nineteenth century Dunedin in work by Pamela Wood; or society as a metaphor for the body in Judith MacDonald's work. Heather Worth's project pays attention to the race and gender signifiers of HIV and purity surrounding the (metaphoric) infection of New Zealand bodies by black African bodies in the Peter Mwai HIV infection case. While Martin's work drawn from her recently published book is a highlight of this section, the metaphor as a device for the exploration of ideas is well realised by the other authors.

The second section on *The Politics of Bodily Representation* turns its attention to "political investments contributing to particular forms of bodily representation" (p11). The focus of this section is much broader than the others. Its attention is primarily on how and why the body gets represented in certain ways. Exploration of these ideas includes many of the researchers in this section paying attention to historical discourses. For example in her work on large body size, Jenny Carryer explores medical discourses on obesity in her analysis of how representations of the female body exclude the possibility of competing discourses of acceptance and enjoyment of largeness. Questions asked about the privileging of discourses and the silencing of others are also considered. Karyn Lovering's work on the problematics of the menarcheal body examines the "inscription of young girls into discourses of menstruation" and silence (p69). Her

analysis problematises the approach of 'traditional' psychology to this area. Marion de Ras also draws attention to maiden diseases - notably how "certain constitutions of women and girls in Western history become perceived as 'female' and belonging to a certain life phase," and diagnosed as illness (p.13). The focus here is on eating disorders, and attention is given to representations of girlhood such as the notion of vulnerability. The final author in this section, Victoria Grace, utilises the site of chronic pelvic pain, perspicaciously exploring the medical construct of the psychological and physiological. The focus on gendered body representation is carried on here as it is throughout the section. Grace's project, in my opinion, represents some of the best of current work being undertaken in the area of the body, gender, and medical discourses.

The final section *Reading the Body as Text* realises, for those of us fixed into certain ways of working, the best of working in an interdisciplinary manner. It offers an insight into the deconstruction of gaze and inscription as the authors consider a variety of art and iconographic perspectives. Heleen Buijus' work explores this through painting (Dürer's *Melencolia I*). Susan Duncan's project on autopsy and the hermaphroditic (intersex) corpse, and Mary Morrison's evaluation of critical care using fine art unsettle the scopic gaze on literally bodies laid out by medicine.

In a number of the situations I would have like to have read a more extensive discussion about the researching of the 'other' than was offered. This is the main reservation I have about the collection. MacDonald, for example, explores her work as an anthropologist living with the Tikopia people of the Solomon Islands; Mary Morrison explores unconscious patients. However, I am mindful that while this book achieves many things, such questions are not simple ones - and while these are easy criticisms to direct at other disciplinary approaches, they often remain unexamined in psychology.

I recommend this book. The writing was at times challenging, but always engaging, detailed, and excellent. The directed focus of the book makes it a useful guide. The contributors explore theorists such as Foucault, Lacan, body theorists such as Bordo, and health theorists such as Fischer & Todd, and Mischler. A critical text for those working in health with a concern in theorising the body. Despite an obvious location of the body in medical research (medical discourses and medicalisation), these types of research and writing are not widely available.

The book has a great deal to offer psychologists.

For those already concerned with the body it is a stimulating collection of work. For those wanting to further explore questions about the production of psychological and medical knowledge, this book provides a collection of complementary and illustrating approaches to this. As a researcher in health I have already been using the book extensively in my own thesis work. The back cover suggests that the book "will be of special interest to undergraduate and graduate students and academics in women's and gender studies, nursing studies, and the sociology of health and illness." I would have to add to this its value to psychologists, including critical psychologists.