

Psychology – THEMES AND VARIATIONS

Editor: Junaid Hassim

Reviewed by Janice K. Moodley

Department of Psychology
University of South Africa
moodljk@unisa.ac.za

The book under review titled *Psychology: Themes and Variations* is positioned as a Higher Education introductory textbook for the study of psychology. It is the 2nd edition of the South African version of the international book series by the same name. As such it is edited and authored by a team of predominately South African psychologists working in academia and/or public/private practice.

The book is divided into twenty chapters with chapter titles including *The Evolution of Psychology, Research Methods in Psychology, Biology of Behaviour, Sensory Systems and Perception, States of Consciousness, Conditioning and Learning, Key Processes in Memory, Cognition and Language, Human Intelligence, Theories of Motives and Emotions, Human Development, Personality Theories, Social Psychology, Health Psychology, Culture and Mental Health, Complementary Alternative Treatment of Mental Illnesses, and Treatment of Mental Illnesses in South Africa: Culture-Related and Applied Psychology in South Africa.*

This chapter selection presents comprehensive content that is useful in orientating a novice towards understanding introductory psychological concepts, theories, methods and sub disciplines. In addition, it is supplemented by chapter inserts and two full chapters dedicated to understanding psychology within the South African context. As such the text positions itself as unique in its reflection of psychology in relation to the South African context.



New Voices in Psychology
Volume 11 | Number 2 | 2015
pp. 108–111

Print ISSN 1812 -6731
© 2015 Unisa Press

The layout of written and visual text within the book is familiar in its format with other introductory texts to psychology. Each chapter begins with a clear numbered outline of the sections and subsections to follow, which offers opportunities for personal and critical application of knowledge, in addition to a review of key learning goals and a practice test at the end of the chapter. Blocks labelled “Concept Checks” appear periodically in each chapter to check understanding whilst blocks labelled “Reality Check” debunks common misconceptions. There are also “Activity” blocks and “Case Studies” to reinforce learning and applied thinking.

The text is easy to read with key concepts highlighted and italicised within the text eliminating the need for text boxes on the extreme left and right panels as is evidenced in other introductory texts. However, despite the clarity with which the text is presented, the format is conventional and therefore lacks inventiveness. It therefore loses the opportunity to present psychological knowledge outside the confines of traditional academy which would have been invited given the unique offering that the book privileges in giving the reader psychological knowledge and insight unique to the South African context.

Whilst the book has made welcome strides in incorporating aspects of South African culture within the dominant themes found in western inspired textbooks, it does so at a superficial level. The chapter “Treatment of Mental Illnesses in South Africa: Culture-Related” presents a one dimensional interpretation of culture within the South African context where culture is represented as synonymous with African culture. The diversity of ethnicity, race, religion and cultural fusion that inhibits the South African context is lost. In addition, whilst the chapter titled “Applied Psychology in South Africa” presents interesting and useful references to how clinical approaches are integrated with African socio-cultural concerns, it once again omits any critical integration or consideration for other cultural contexts manifest in the South African context. It thereby essentialises traditional African belief systems as representative of the South African identity. This positioning raises questions such as “Who *is* South African?” and “What does an authentic South African identity mean?”

The use of lone African male children as the faces of chapters nineteen and twenty, the contents of which is dedicated exclusively to the South African context, reinforces a one dimensional representation of “South Africanness”. In addition, the representation of South Africa through the use of lone African children in poverty is political since it rehearses colonialist development images that perpetuate the infantilization of the global South. The absence of parents, the exclusion of female children, the exclusion of other races and an apparent embeddedness in poverty, is exemplary of a unitary representation of the African continent reminiscent of aid imagery which has been criticised for perpetuating historical developed versus developing/ first world versus third world/ modern versus primitive divides. Such representations have become dominant within development discourse that invariably

promotes western supremacy and holds power in shaping the ways reality is imagined and subsequently acted upon (Escobar, 1995).

The chapter titled “Complementary Alternative Treatment of Mental Illnesses” offers some redemption in terms of discussing other “philosophies” that may inhibit the South African context although this is not stated as the explicit reasoning for presenting these philosophies as alternatives to the treatment of mental illness. Western philosophy, African philosophy, Eastern philosophy, Indian Philosophy and Islamic philosophy are tabulated as examples essential to an understanding of reality that is “expressed by means of your cultural practices, traditions, attitudes and behaviours (p. 512). The need to include such a description is made explicit for the purposes of a postmodernism approach which “advocates that every individual’s interpretations of reality should be respected and validated” welcoming “alternative conceptions and descriptions of what constitutes the truth” (p. 512). The author goes on to explain that by adopting such an approach “one does not marginalise different traditions, attitudes and behaviours from one’s own, but rather welcomes, respects and acknowledges that all interpretations of truth are valid and authentic in their own right” (p. 512).

This is a welcome deviation from the promotion of scientific discourse as the dominant, if not, only truth, informing mainstream psychological knowledge and practice. Whilst it promotes sensitivity to diversity, it is peculiarly confusing in its presentation of Islamic philosophy as non-religious when is it the only “philosophy” presented that makes direct reference to “God”. This is conflicting since it clearly promotes only one religious consciousness to the exclusion of others. It becomes difficult to justify the inclusion of an Islamic philosophy given the obvious religious implications enacted in the presentation of a God and Satan whilst still advocating that “a philosophy is not a religion” (p. 513). It questions the stated objectives of postmodern philosophy which is to not to marginalise as this inclusion and exclusion of particular knowledges reflects the power that academic discourse holds in allowing what can be said, and by whom, in promotion of a particular agenda.

The power of psychology as discourse is reflected in the predominately clinical focus adopted in the textbook to the exclusion of other constructions of psychology. As such critical perspectives that question notions of intelligence and childhood development, for example, are excluded to privilege a monolithic clinical understanding of psychology. This is politically significant since psychology in its purest positivist form has historically been used to legitimate gross inequalities and injustices within the South African context. A thoughtful critical reflection on the potential misuse of psychological constructs, with special reference to its abuse evidenced in South Africa’s history, is clearly avoided in this textbook, following the trend of other western dominated introductory psychology textbooks. To do so, would question that taken-for-granted with which mainstream psychological knowledge is presented. To do so, would raise uncomfortable questions as to the relevance of such a one dimensional psychology within contexts such as South Africa.

The final chapter of the textbook is beneficial in its presentation of examples of psychology in practice within the South African context. This presentation, however, is once again monolithic with a superficial preoccupation with culture (synonymous with African culture). It misses the opportunity to reflect on the potential role that psychology is able to play in addressing wider socio-political milieus. It therefore misses the opportunity, at the very least, to discuss at an introductory level, the relevance of psychology as a knowledge system and profession outside the offerings of clinical practice which is limited in its reach to the vast majority of South Africans that are in need of such services.

The progressive momentum gained by academic movements advocating for a decolonisation of western academic knowledge, as evidenced by the recent student protest campaigns necessitates the need to raise uncomfortable questions in terms of the type of knowledges inform curriculums within South African tertiary institutions. This in turn raises the need to reflect critically on the knowledges included in textbooks branded as South African. Whilst the textbook is useful in orientating the student towards mainstream themes in psychology, it does little to exploit its full potential as an introductory text in psychology, in informing the student of psychology's relevance (though obviously essential) to the challenges faced within the South African context.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE



Janice Moodley is a lecturer in the Department of Psychology at Unisa. Her research interests include Critical Health Psychology within the global South, Corporate Wellness Interventions and Critical Discourse Analysis.