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Critical Psychology: An Introduction

Edited by Dennis Fox, Isaac Prilleltensky & Stephanie Austin

Reviewed by Kirsty Budds, PhD student, University of Huddersfield.

As acknowledged by the editors, at the time the first edition of *Critical Psychology* was published, books about critical psychology were fairly rare. Things have changed over the last decade and this “fully revised, reconfigured and expanded” (p. xviii) second edition emerges at a time when critical approaches to the discipline are increasingly being explored. This extensive edited collection aims to provide an overview of critical approaches to psychology, predominantly, but not exclusively, for those who have never come across them before.

Fox defines critical psychology as “an effort to challenge the forces within mainstream psychology that help sustain unjust political, economic, and other societal structures” (p 410). By mainstream he means the kind of psychology that is “presented as a science” and “whose researchers use objective methods to understand human behaviour” (p 3) - the kind of psychology which is predominantly taught and practiced today and which is critiqued by the individual authors in this collection.

In a comprehensive and informative introduction, the editors sketch out the main arguments and concerns of critical psychology in terms of its ‘challenge’ to the mainstream. These concerns are echoed to varying degrees by the different authors throughout the text. One of the main criticisms the authors have of mainstream psychology is that its task is too narrow. It is suggested its “minor reforms to smooth out society’s rough edges...simply don’t go far enough” (p 3). The authors stress that they are not questioning the sincerity of mainstream psychologists’ attempts to ‘do good’ with their research, teaching or practice. However, their concern is that in practising this kind of psychology they may also, albeit unknowingly, be doing undue harm by upholding harmful institutional structures, which perpetuate oppression and inequality.

Unlike more progressive disciplines, such as sociology, political theory and anthropology, psychology’s focus on the individual, its insistence in carrying out ‘objective’ research, and its efforts to maintain neutrality, largely prevent it from bringing about something the collection of authors are passionate about and believe psychology should be implicated in: social change and reform. Instead, it is suggested that mainstream psychology only serves to accommodate existing institutions and perpetuate harmful institutional power. For example, in focusing on understanding and then ‘treating’ the individual in isolation, mainstream psychology deflects attention from the study of problems inherent within society and so masks any need to alter it. It is claimed that critical psychologists have a much more political and progressive agenda, and ask the question “how can psychology foster emancipation, social justice, and social change?” (P 17).

Additionally, critical psychologists take issue with the lack of reflexivity employed in mainstream psychological research. It is argued that the ability to explore “how our own values and assumptions affect our theoretical and methodological goals” is fundamental if psychology is to participate in agendas for social reform. In remaining objective and concealing the impact of their personal values upon the research they carry out and the theories they present, the work of mainstream psychologists can only ever be presented as neutral and apolitical. It follows that the editors question the extent to which progression and change is rendered possible without such reflexivity.

The text itself is divided into four parts, each comprised of a number of authored chapters. Part One, **Critical Overviews**, contains three chapters, which helpfully contextualise critical psychology for the reader. After the aforementioned introduction, chapters two and three discuss the historical and philosophical principles of critical psychology.

Part Two (chapters four to eleven) discusses **Critical Disciplines** and is comprised of a collection of chapters which offer critical perspectives on the following aspects of psychology: theories of personality, clinical psychology, social psychology, organizational psychology, community psychology, health psychology, psychology and the law and subjectivity. Unfortunately there is little room to discuss the merits of each of these chapters in this short review; however generally speaking the authored chapters present

clear critiques of mainstream psychology's approach to each subdiscipline, whilst offering critical alternatives. For example, in chapter nine, Kerry Chamberlain and Michael Murray talk us through some interesting developments in critical health psychology. The authors begin by suggesting that health psychology "developed within the sphere of psychology at large" (p 145) and as such subscribed to the scientific assumptions and methods of mainstream psychology, focusing on "measuring, predicting and changing health and illness behaviours" and seeking "the truth about the relationship between psychological factors and health" (p 145). However, since its first development, an increasing number of critical approaches to health psychology are emerging as a response to the suggested limitations of the mainstream. In alignment with a more general concern in critical psychology, as outlined above and elsewhere in this text, it is suggested that too little attention is given to social and cultural affects upon health and illness. Instead, health psychology is said to focus too much upon the individual, which, it is argued, has contributed to an ideology, related to increasing medicalisation, whereby people experience a sense of personal responsibility and control over their own health, effectively removing the responsibility of the system.

As a response to this, critical health psychologists wanted to bring context back into the study of health. Opposing mainstream psychology's approach in looking at health or illness as variables to be measured, critical health psychologists believe understandings of health and illness are constructed in interactions. This, it is suggested has led to an increase in the use of qualitative methodologies in health psychology with a view to understanding experiences of health and illness. Further critical approaches discussed in the chapter include participatory action research and performance-based arts approaches, both of which are focused on working with, and promoting the health of, communities rather than individuals. These methods are discussed with reference to their potential to facilitate social change and alleviate oppression and disadvantage in certain communities – something as "agents for social change" (p 4) many critical psychologists concern themselves with.

Part Three (Chapters 12 to 18) provides an overview of **Critical Social Issues**, and includes an exploration of the role of mainstream psychology in perpetuating inequality and oppression on the basis of the following categories: race and racism, class, gender, mental health and disability. In addition, the role of psychology in the movement from colonisation to globalisation and the psychological impact of war on communities are discussed here. Again, there is little room to provide a detailed discussion of each of these chapters, but all implicate the role of critical psychology in these areas in contributing to social action and social change, with a view to challenging oppression and inequality. For example, in chapter twelve, Kevin Durrheim, Derek Hook and Damien Riggs critique mainstream psychology's approaches to the issue of racism, before discussing the benefits of a critical psychology approach. Firstly, they define 'traditional' or mainstream explanations of racist behaviour in terms of either personality traits or cognitive structures. Both of these perspectives are discussed by the authors as being too individualistic and are criticised for their limited scope for social change. It is suggested, for example, that in explaining racist behaviour in terms of something inherent within the individual, we may not attend to those social situations where racism may arise in the absence of people with particular 'racist' personality traits. The authors then outline critical approaches to racism, which look at how racism can be perpetuated in a variety of different verbal and nonverbal social interactions and can be understood "as the product of collective understandings of racial categories" (p 205). In looking at racism as emerging from social interaction in this way, the authors are then able to sketch out some possibilities for tackling racism in terms of disrupting the social action in which it occurs.

The final part of the text outlines **Critical Practice** in psychology. These chapters give an overview of the approach taken by critical psychologists in producing theory, conducting research and practicing psychology. The various authors discuss the ways in which psychology can be implicated in striving for social change and also allude to some of the problems critical psychologists may come across in practice.

This text provides a comprehensive overview of the issues and concerns of critical psychology. However, a limitation of this 'critical' approach to psychology, and a potential barrier for those still siding with the mainstream, may be the sheer variety and diversity in critical approaches offered. The editors admit that

there are “overlapping and competing notions of what critical psychology is about and what it should be about” (p 12). As Teo notes in chapter three, critical psychology may include those from Marxist, feminist, social-constructionist or postcolonial camps and although they may essentially have one fundamental thing in common, in that they are sceptical about and critique the mainstream, they may differ according to exactly how they do this and to what ends. This may cause some initial confusion for those new to critical perspectives.

Largely aimed at students, this ambitious text presents a wholly readable and understandable introduction to critical psychology and an interesting critique of mainstream ‘scientific’, ‘objective’ psychology. As an undergraduate this is the psychology I was predominantly presented with and the very same psychology I grew increasingly suspicious of and disheartened with throughout my studies. I regularly found myself struggling to conceive of a discipline whose focus was first to understand, and second to treat, inherently social and cultural beings in isolation. This text not only provides a refreshing alternative to and critique of the mainstream, but also, perhaps more significantly, sketches out a bright and progressive future for psychology.