Clifford van Ommen and Desmond Painter have brought together various strands of the history of Psychology in South Africa in one volume. The book achieves this by contextualising the first part of the book as Themes that reflect on history in the context of the broad and changing socio-political realities. Selected view or conceptions of local history (the past 100-odd years) are highlighted. This is followed by a discussion of science, racism and ‘neutrality’ and the effects this had on the landscape of Psychology. A history of critical psychology adds valuable conceptions of economic-political entanglement and oppression-liberation to the history on a necessarily larger global stage. The macro-economic and political dimensions are then linked to the local particular experiences.

The second part of the book delves into Movements and the relationship of these movements to: science, behavioural scientism, and the implicit psychology of social control via the regulation of subjectivities; quiet politics-neutral stances embedded with positivistic ontologies; the uses and utility of psychometrics then
and now; alternatives to the positivistic science-view; the influence of psycho-
analysis and its paradoxically muted presence as a practice; the revitalising moments
of phenomenological approaches; and (living) systems approaches to psychology,
therapy and community.

The Movements section demonstrates how a given practice and discipline is
formed in the confluence of assumed and often axiological (‘hard to see’) cultural
roots that arise from the interplay between a diversity of ethnic, religious, professional,
theoretical, ideological, and other embedded identity traditions, anchors and reality
producing inscriptions in unsettling late-modern milieus. Perhaps the attempts to
reconcile non-modern, pre-modern and late-modern notions of living (what it means
to be a human being) are at the heart of conceptual indistinctness, blind-siding, and
self-challenge in human ‘science’?

The third part of the book introduces Fields as sub-disciplines with more specific
topics in Psychology: psychopathology or insanity and mental institutions in the
first part of the previous century; children’s development as a zone of professional-
societal neglect and a renewed vision; social psychology and its shortcomings; the
local history of neuropsychology; the move of community psychology to the front
ranks of psychology (beyond positivism and hyper-individualism) although it is still
not unified within a coherent theoretical frame. This is followed by a perspective on
insolvent (heartless) psychological theories of the individual and fragments, trajects,
and polarities that complexify this exploration. Two integrative and reflective
discussions by the editors conclude the book.

It is difficult for me to keep a beginner’s open mind when faced by the detailed
narratives, facts and inquiries that are hosted in this tome. To review such a
work is a daunting task, fraught with the likelihood of misreading, imposing,
and misrepresenting others’ voices and perspectives. Finding myself unable to
‘authoritatively’ review the breadth and scope of this work, I endeavoured to rather
articulate a ‘re-view’ to make the text somewhat more accessible to readers who are
not well versed in the broad fields of Psychology or its local roots (such as myself).
Four keys were created for this purpose, and serve as a unifying heuristic that may
allow for coherent interaction with each chapter and the book as a whole. By using
these keys as interests, lenses or ‘positions of inquiry’ the reader may be able to form
a more coherent and detailed picture, and engage in an articulate dialogue with the
authors and themselves, and hopefully, others.

Key 1 – Three interests in psychology

The three interests are: collective interest and the common good of clients,
communities and societies; the guild interest that encompasses professional
psychology’s interest and is linked to interests of practice, class interest and sub-
disciplines; and the personal interest linked to personal and individual actualisation,
satisfaction, status, meaning, and reward. By viewing, comparing, and contrasting
these interests the reader may be able to gauge and unpack the overt and hidden agreements, disagreements, and ambiguities in the histories described in the text. These concepts were derived from Mohamed Seedat and Sarah MacKenzie’s chapter 2: ‘the triangulated development of South African Psychology: race, scientific racism, and professionalisation’ (pp. 63–91). Applications of this key are present in global politics and the Cold War, national politics such as colonial times and apartheid (before, during, and after), resistance, professional alignment to these forces, and personal alignment. The perceived needs, aspirations, and values of self, guild or party (and bureaucratic formation), class, society, and the global form a backdrop for inquiry into the interplay of these intra- and inter-stakeholder interests.

**Key 2 – The Black Hamlet**

The **Black Hamlet** is a psychoanalytic text by Wulf Sachs (1937) where he describes his interactions with a patient at an African mental (psychiatric) institution. The themes from Black Hamlet that resonate for the purposes of engaging with South African Psychologies’ historical accounts are: identity (similarities and differences), failure and success, and marginalisation (or inclusivity and belonging). These themes are, in my opinion, salient markers of Psychology’s history in South Africa. The descriptions of Black Hamlet by Grahame Hayes in Chapter 7: ‘A history of psychoanalysis in South Africa’ (pp. 182–203), and by Don Foster in Chapter 4: ‘Critical psychology: A historical overview’ (pp. 92–122) aided the construction of this key or lens. Applications of this key are present throughout the book in aspects of belonging and exile, centrality or peripherality, normative or exotic, emic or etic, normal or trangressive, confirmation or invalidation, conspiracies or empowerment across the board, taboos and social self-regulation (or interpersonal policing), internalised exile or integrative reconciliation – leading to systems that can and cannot learn, adapt, and adjust.

**Key 3 – A (living) systems theory approach**

This ‘weak’ form of systems thinking provides relatively new concepts and ways of describing life and consciousness using a ‘complex living systems’ approach to therapy and psychology. This approach attaches importance to context (policies, politics, family, others, expectational frames – revealing the rules and meta-rules of systems beyond their obvious first-order content); shift (deteriorating, improving, normal or strange behaviours); recognisable patterns (histories, feedback and loops); through a different model of causation, or emergence, in living systems (autopoiesis, self-regulation, discontinuous self-transcendent leaps, dissipative structures, instability, complexity, control, negative entropy, closed systems, and meta-stability) – as opposed to a ‘machine systems’ lens that adhere to a rationalist and technical view of complex linear causation using a mostly binary logic (yes or no,
in or out, right or wrong, us or them, friend or enemy). The living systems approach is located in the context of social exchange via inter-subjective negotiation of reality (social constructionism), rather than an obsessive focus on cognitive processes and rigidly objectified factoids or idolised ‘theory-oids’. Chapter 9: ‘A history of systemic thinking and cybernetics approaches in South Africa’ (pp. 225–257) by Corinne Oosthuizen will assist in developing this lens, or rather, meta-lens.

Applications of this key may enable a deeper understanding of closed (as opposed to open and dynamic) first order systems (of individuals, families, communities or cultural groups, epistemic or theoretical communities, guilds, sub-disciplines, political parties, national policies, international policies, economics, politics, memory, and identity). Closed systems are characterised by maximised homeostatic status-quo formations, control, ignoring feedback, imposition of a single dogmatic reality-view, ideological myopia and group think, excessive control and penalties to avoid change, negative entropic processes of decay and systemic collapse, and banishing or imprisoning any deviating voices or standpoints. Second order understandings of living systems and change imply moments when a system reflects on its thinking and doing, and dissolves (temporises and liquidifies) assumptions, beliefs, and deeply held tacit (and often emotional, irrational) meanings and interpretations, and opens them up for inquiry. This allows for a profound reorganisation (positive-adaptive or negative-contracting) of normal axiomatic unquestioned living and world-view. Therapy, contact with new ideas or perspectives, appropriate dialogical intergroup contact, and open mindedness and open-heartedness may evoke such possibilities. In this sense culture is highlighted as the ‘context of lived contexts’ or the platform and container of our living in society. Adaptive second order inquiry may allow for an ability to be more fittingly with complexity, change, paradox, ambiguity, and aesthetic (as a non-linear rationality) in more flexible and differentiated ways. Third order learning of living systems reflect an ongoing ontology (McWhinney, 2005) that is welcoming of feedback and news of difference, is non-defensive, non-rigid yet balanced and dynamic that can hold uncertainty and unpredictability with a capacity of openness, and is appreciative of different ‘meaningful aesthetic arrangements’ of various systems (Allman, 1982, p. 43). Such ontology allows for significant understanding and engagement-enabled presence even in contexts where meaning, ideology, and patterns of relating are foreclosed or epistemologically different – and potentially threatening.

Key 4 – Ideologies, political forces and science

The fruits of science in modern times have added to the complexities of personal and collective human problems and suffering – such as the theory and technology that enabled atoms to be split and applying it to warfare. However, at the same time, they have added new words, understandings, frames and complexities that enable new views on the difficulties (such as mental illness, poverty, racism, stereotyping,
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prejudice, disability) or circumstances that psychology aims to explore or address. Many of the psychological concepts used in the textbook were developed in the relatively recent past (for example: adolescence, psychosis, Psycho-analysis, Behaviourism, and Psychology). **Ideologies and political forces** are key driving forces to understand any science, its constructs, the questions or problems it seeks to address, and the solutions it imagines and attempts. After all, sciences are embedded cultural projects. Each chapter illumines some of the ideologies and political forces at play in the histories of Psychology in South Africa, Africa, and the world. Chapter 11: ‘South African research on child development: a history of bias and neglect’ (pp. 286–323) by Linda Richter and Andrew Dawes can help establish this perspective. This key overlaps with key 1, as it returns to the interests or perceived needs and aspirations of various actors on various levels (self, family, guild, party, class, community, nation, society, and global). The politics and subjectivities of the personal and the interpersonal, of groups and collectives are articulated in ideological positions that encourage various projects, inquiries and activities; and discourage certain others. The interplay between state policy, epistemic communities and guild-like formations validate certain focus areas and invalidate others – this is evident in what is funded, what is seen as legitimate, how the individual and the collective is viewed (reality-view), what exist and what does not exist (or is disallowed to exist in the domain of practice and enquiry).

**Strategy 2**

If the above reading strategy does ‘not work’ it might be useful to also read the book from back to front. This is generally a useful strategy for complex multi-storied texts. The last chapter provides some powerful and useful perspectives on the state of our future in terms of psychology, education, ideologies and politics; and is a good place to begin. In that chapter, Van Ommen and Painter eloquently point out that our challenges and playing fields are now visibly global-local.

As the editors point out, a history is not just a regurgitation of facts, but a narrative that involves creative selection of facts, anecdotes and events that are framed by the lenses of the present. The book is a map of the present as seen through the project of revealing the past. It aims to investigate or tell a tale about the reigning fictions and assumptions about science, the world, and Psychology as it developed in South Africa. It is framed with a warning that knowledge generation should be saturated by a good dose of suspicion (or skepticism) – no doubt in reply to the certainties of the recent and distant past that contribute to large scale human suffering. This evokes a question as to what world we wish to create and enable, and what certainties are worthy and enabling of personal and collective actualisation as opposed to certainties that are delimit our growth and potentials. The same question can be asked of our uncertainties and a more exact understanding of the role of scepticism in creating a meaningful and life supporting (creative and innovative) perspective and praxis.
The text facilitates a type of living inquiry that positions the past in the present – a task made more likely and important as we seem to have declared a somewhat naïve ‘New History’ with an ahistorical consciousness in South Africa’s young democracy (pp. 440–444). The book provides a range of snapshots by various viewers-authors-elders-witnesses. It is somewhat intellectual, sober, somber, and incoagulate (as are most histories of disciplines housed within the Humanities and Academia). As readers we are urged to connect the dots, using this and other valuable books on our history, as a springboard for our emancipatory understandings and inquiries. Studying history is more often than not a heavy and laborious project.

To conclude, the book provides a multi-storied quilt of perspectives by those who have spent time in the histories of Psychology (the discipline) and matters in psychology (the range of the subject matter that existed before the formalistic and the formulars of the discipline), from different angles and in different areas of application. The text is a fine work – it may not be conclusive, it may be partisan in places (and with apparent good reason), it may even be non-aligned to local and world trends (such as obsessive consumerism and profiteering). And that is why it provides an all too rare resource for the students, scholars and citizens of this day and Age – Perspectives.

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