The good, the bad, and the mediocre

Book review
Moller, A T (ed)(1995) **Perspectives on personality.** Durban: Butterworths.
ISBN 0 409 10928 2.

Bruce Gillmer
Department of Psychology
University of Natal
Durban

There is a genre of Westerns that has always pleased me enormously. Like this text has. There were mostly good ous, some of whom turned nasty, a few bad from the outset, and always one ugly.

It is, I believe, the first text on personality theory by South African psychologists in the English language. The contributors are all Afrikaner academics. The intended reader is likely to be an undergraduate at an English campus who is increasingly likely to be "non-European", or that New South African student, the black English second-language student at an Afrikaans university. All well and good so far.

Perspectives on personality does not grasp the obvious nettle of a South African or African perspective on personality. The intended reader is likely to be historically and culturally ill-prepared to grapple with the esoterics of personality theory or, put more correctly, has very different ideas about personality or whether such a notion exists in the way that eurocentric thinkers imagine it does. Take the utilitarian and endlessly exploited notion of *ubuntu*. Is it an ethos, an African "world-view", an inculcated attitude as in Inkatha-inspired civic preparedness education, a dispositional characteristic that "runs through the veins of all Africans" (Mdluli, 1987:64)? South African constitutional lawyers have seen fit to make explicit use of it in the epilogue of that document, which in its entirety has been described by certain members of the constitutional court as being permeated by *ubuntu* (S v Makwanyane & Mchunu, 1995). *Ubuntu* is never defined in the Constitution of South Africa. However in the case cited above , which effectively abolished the death penalty, Judge Madlala refers to the concept thus:

"The need for *ubuntu* expresses the ethos of an *instinctive capacity for and enjoyment of love* towards our fellow men and women; the joy and fulfilment involved in recognizing their innate humanity; the *capacity this generates* in interaction within the collective community, the richness of the *creative emotions*

which it engenders and the *moral energies which it releases* both in the givers and the society which they serve and are served by" (p68) (emphases added).

Judge Mokgoro is more specific: "Generally, *ubuntu* translates as humaneness. In its most fundamental sense, it translates as personhood and morality. Metaphorically, it expresses itself in *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*" (p78), which roughly means that "a person is not a person without a community of other persons". Lest one loses sight of the significance for personality theory, "*ubuntu* means 'being human'" (Mdluli, 1987:64).

Examining notions like this in a South African text book on personality goes, one would trust, beyond paternalistic indigenizing of native curiosities. To not take cognisance of what would seem to lie at the heart of what it means to be a person for the vast majority of the population one is considering, not to mention writing for, is an oversight of not insignificant slightness. The only ugly and one for which Moller cannot bear the entire blame.

The contributors reflect the paradigms presumably influential in their departments. Behavioural-genetics, a vital development in recent years (Plomin & Rende, 1991; Rowe, 1992), is eschewed yet the more obscure theorists like Adler, Ellis, Sullivan, and Frankl are accorded entire chapters. Allport is the sole representative of mainstream trait theory. Bowlby and attachment theory do not feature. Ultimate explanations are secular rather than evolutionary. The book falls somewhere between an introduction to the big three - psychoanalysis, behaviourism, humanism - on the one hand and the psychotherapies derived from the various theories on the other. All bads, or at least pities.

Yet **Perspectives** succeeds as a no-frills, highly accessible, and affordable contribution. In parts as good as or better than the hard cover American glossies bloated with more clever "boxes", 3-D illustrations, and peculiarly angled photos than sense. Moller and his contributors will and should be criticised but they have produced something that many undergraduates will take to readily. What is needed is a second edition with a wider group of contributors from the other South African campuses in order to achieve a more representative and even-handed product.

The chapter on Adler by Francois Swartz is a concise and remarkably clear critical account of a theory that has not received much attention outside of its devotees. The emphasis on personal responsibility has strong links with existentialism and purposefulness with the intentionality of philosophers like Dennett (1987). I, for one, had no idea that the widely acclaimed Systematic Training for Effective Parenting (STEP) has Adlerian underpinnings. Andre Moller does a solid, comprehensive job with learning theory. Unfortunately the account stops in the mid 1970s and needs to be supplemented with the development of social-cognitive theory (Mischell, 1993). Hennie de Vos' unravelling of obscurant Husserl, Kierkegaard and Boss is a particularly fine section and should come as a great relief to those struggling with linguistically arcane theory. Harry Stack Sullivan's often overlooked notions are nicely integrated with those he influenced like Bateson, Leary, Kiesler and Jay Haley's strategies of psychotherapy. Suzanne Shuda's account is highly readable yet economical. The highlight of the book is Zac Nel's occupation-orientated perspectives on personality. In dealing with

Holland and Super one has for the first time an unself-conscious and practical exposition of applied psychology in South Africa, as well as interesting anecdotes of these theorists' personal links with the country. An articulate and informed section with references that are more contemporary than in some of the earlier chapters. There is a small gem in Louw and Moller's intriguing rendition of Kelly's construct theory illustrating its singular contribution to the psycholinguistics of personality. All good, some very.

Less effective is the mechanistic account of Freud and psychoanalysis. Moller does warn against too literal an acceptance of the topographic and structural models of consciousness and personality but the power of metaphor is elusive as is almost always the case in introductory textbooks. Freudian theory is more than that "shrivelled thing described and studied by behavioural scientists" (Bloom, 1991:4). The intellectual and political history of psychoanalysis in South Africa is overlooked. It would have been apposite to bring the South African link of Wolpe, Lazarus, and Rachman into the chapter on behaviourism. All Wits boys. That's bad. The relevance of Albert Ellis to an introductory text is questionable. His contribution is really to cognitive behaviour therapy and to mauling the English language ("demandingness", "awfulising"). Carl Rogers' non-committal democracy dawdles aimlessly through a poor section by de Vos, after a surprisingly upbeat Maslow that slumps into secular moralising.

The work is uneven both as a whole and within sections. There is a lurking suspicion that some overreached their particular areas of expertise and also that too much was attempted instead of the writers remaining within what should have been a few central focused tenets.

As it stands Moller's **Perspectives** is definitely to be recommended as an ancillary to texts like Phares (1991), Mischell (1993) and Engler (1995) to mention a few I could readily prescribe. At R150 (negotiable with publisher for bulk purchase) it is affordable though not cheap, it renders the theories that it deals with readily accessible, and it is to be applauded as a first step to a South African perspective on personality; which could be very good.

REFERENCES.

Bloom, L (1991) Back to Freud: A radicalism recalled. **Psychology in Society, 15,** 4-23.

Dennett, D (1987) **The intentional stance.** Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Engler, E (1995) **Personality theories.** 4th ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Mdluli, P (Blade Nzimande) (1987) Ubuntu-botho: Inkatha's "peoples education". **Transformation, 5,** 60-77.

Mischell, W (1993) **Introduction to personality.** 5th ed. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace.

Phares, E J (1991) **Introduction to personality.** 3rd ed. New York: Harper Collins.

Plomin, R & Rende, R (1991) Human behavioural genetics. **Annual Review of Psychology, 42,** 161-190.

Rowe, D C (1992) A paradigm shift? **Contemporary Psychology, 37,** 285-286.

State v Makwanyane and Mchunu (1995) Judgement. 6 June 1995. Constitutional Court of the Republic of South Africa. Case No CCT 3/94.