

Double trouble: psychology and psychologization under the spotlight

[BOOK REVIEW]

De Vos, Jan (2013) **Psychologization and the subject of late modernity**. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan. ISBN 978-0-230-30846-6 hbk. Pages xi + 189.

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Jan de Vos' starting point in the **Psychologization and the subject of late modernity** is the gap between being and knowledge. In other words, between how people are as psychological subjects and how they could be as psychologized subjects. He argues, as he has elsewhere, that psychologization is not simply a spillover of psychology into society but that psychology *is* psychologization. Psychologization is psychology's paradigm. In the introductory chapter, de Vos introduces the idea of psychology and its doubles. That is, that the human subject is at once positioned as a subject that *is*, but the subject is also called upon to see itself, with the help of expert knowledge, as the subject that it could be. Moreover, the subject is asked to reflect upon this chasm by asking "how do you feel about this?" He argues that critiques of psychology have overlooked the (re)doubling of psychology, that is, that psychologization calls upon the subject to reflect upon itself. In de Vos' words, "Psychology takes the psychological double for the real thing and denies it has created another subject, the watching one, the psychologized subject, the proto-psychologist" (p 9). Calum Neill in his forward to the book, puts it "... that the conception itself is fatally flawed, the image to which we are encouraged to aspire is impossible, and the toolbox is only ever good for perpetuating the game"(p vii).

Importantly, de Vos argues that modernity needed psychologization and vice versa. He argues, through analyses of the historical writings of La Mettrie, Husserl, Lasch and Agamben, how psychologization came to occupy a necessary place in the Enlightenment and late modernity through the shift away from religion as a backdrop for subjectivity towards the “scientific” study of psychology. He draws on, for example, the turn to neuropsychology as an example of how scientific and physiological explanations of “what it means to be human” still rely on psychology (and its double psychologization) to frame and interpret human biology and genes. The final chapter discusses a theory of the psyche with a closer focus on psychoanalysis. The epilogue, aptly titled “Towards a non-psychology”, makes for compelling reading.

The book is relatively short (five core chapters) but is incredibly rich and, at times, complicated. I had to read some chapters several times to grasp some of the arguments. This said, de Vos’ reminder of the historical and philosophical roots of psychologization is particularly refreshing in a time when discussions about psychology and society have become somewhat lazy and binarised. He uses everyday examples and the taken for granted assumptions of psychology and society, for example, “giving psychology away” to weave intricate arguments about psychologization and modernity.

However, in the context of my interests that are framed by broader ideas about poverty, decoloniality and relevance in South African psychology, I found the historical basis of psychologization in the western canon useful, but less exciting than the *manner* in which de Vos sets out his arguments. In particular, his ever present caution that any critique of psychologization potentially, or perhaps inevitably, uses the tools, language and discourses of psychology bringing us back to the same place where we started. To overcome this deadlock, he puts forward an argument (by his own admission, somewhat paradoxically) towards the end of the book that psychoanalysis has the potential to provide an alternative theory of the “psyche”. Admittedly, this argument was beyond my expertise and readers with a more sophisticated appreciation of psychoanalysis may have more to say here. What I have come to appreciate, however, is how de Vos raises questions, provides arguments and suggests the necessary cautions to ensure that we do not fall into the same traps that our arguments aim to critique.

This book makes a useful contribution to his oeuvre on psychologization and offers a deeper historical engagement with psychology, psychologization and subjectivity than his first book, **Psychologisation in times of globalisation** (de Vos, 2012). The book also represents de Vos’ evolution of ideas that are reflected in his subsequent

work on neurologization. There is no doubt that the book makes an important contribution to existing critiques of psychologization. I highly recommend the book for those interested in psychology, psychologization and society. It certainly ranks high up in my recommended readings in critical psychology.

Reference

De Vos, J (2012) **Psychologisation in times of globalisation**. London: Routledge.