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Wahbie Long. *A History of "Relevance" in Psychology*. London: Palgrave, 2016. xii+222 pp. ISBN 978-1-137-47488-9 (hardback). ISBN 978-1-137-47489-6 (ebook).

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Wahbie Long is a psychologist with a social conscience and this forms the background to the book. As a newly-qualified clinical psychologist in South Africa, he began to have doubts about the social value of his profession. A 50-minute session with a psychologist would typically cost \$60 in a country where half of the population lives on less than \$2 a day. Psychologists were overwhelmingly based in the major urban centers and very scarce elsewhere. South Africa has 11 official languages and two of them, Zulu and Xhosa, account for 40% of the population. In spite of this, 80% of the psychologists in the country speak only English and/or Afrikaans, which are historically the languages of privilege. There was also the problem that psychology was usually taught using American textbooks that were of little relevance to the local situation. Considerations like these led to Long asking to be removed from the professional register of psychologists and he came close to leaving the profession. Fortunately for us, he had second thoughts and decided to examine the history of "relevance" in psychology in a PhD thesis. This thesis was the basis of the book.

Long suggests that the issue of relevance has been a constant throughout psychology's history. In the United States, for example, there was little demand for what William James famously called, "brass instrument" psychology and psychologists tried to demonstrate the relevance of their discipline in a variety of settings, including hospitals, schools, the courtroom, industry and the military. There were also calls for a psychology that would address important social issues and the establishment of the Society for the Psychological

Study of Social Issues (SPSSI) in 1936 was an expression of these concerns. Many people in the West will associate calls for social relevance with the questioning of political and disciplinary authority that was common in the late 1960s and early 1970s. A similar questioning occurred in non-Western countries around the same time but it was centered on intellectual imperialism and it has continued to the present day. Western psychology has often been seen as an alien import that reflects the culture in which it was produced and there have been calls for the “indigenization” of the field. This problem is compounded in developing countries whose social needs are often very different from those of the wealthier countries of the West. Both of these factors are present in South Africa and there is the added complication that 10% of the population is of European origin and they provide 75% of the psychologists. As Long points out, the issue here is not one of “race” but the ability to connect with the other 90% of the population in linguistic, geographical and economic terms.

The main part of the book is an analysis of 45 presidential, keynote and opening addresses that were delivered at national psychology conferences in South Africa from 1950 to 2011. 1948 is an important year in the history of the country. It was in this year that the Afrikaner-dominated National Party came to power and began to implement the segregationist policies that were known throughout the world as “apartheid”. It was also coincidentally the year in which the South African Psychological Association (SAPA) was founded. The addresses reflect the differences that existed between Afrikaner nationalists and more liberal English-speakers. These came to a head over the issue of allowing a psychologist of Indian origin to become a member of SAPA and it led to a breakaway “whites-only” organization called the Psychological Institute of the Republic of South Africa (PIRSA) in 1962. The two organizations were reunited under the label, Psychological Association of South Africa (PASA) in 1982 but it was generally apolitical and emphasized the “neutrality” of science. Appalled by this lack of engagement, disaffected mental health

professionals and students founded the Organisation for Appropriate Social Services in South Africa (OASSSA) in 1983. The addresses chart the growing criticism of apartheid in the 1980s and its demise in the early 1990s, as well as the challenge of adapting to the new political order. Far from presenting this history in triumphalist terms, as other authors have done, Long suggests that the current situation is not as different from the apartheid era as many people suppose. It “remains trapped in a sea of poverty, inequality, unemployment, violence and poor education” (p. 34). He is equally critical of attempts to “Africanize” psychology, arguing that these too are reminiscent of the discourse on “cultural difference” that was a feature of the apartheid era. Apartheid has cast a long shadow that the country is still struggling to overcome.

The theoretical orientation is “critical discourse analysis” and it is associated with psychologists like Michael Billig, Derek Edwards, Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell. The work of the linguist, Norman Fairclough has been particularly influential in the book. This approach has been more popular in the United Kingdom than elsewhere and it is presumably old colonial ties that have led to its influence in South Africa. One of its consequences is that Long does not argue for a more relevant psychology. His aim is to analyze the discourse surrounding the topic of relevance and he shows how it has been used by conservatives, liberals and radicals alike.

In making this point, he distinguishes four different kinds of relevance:

1. Social relevance – a psychology that contributes to human welfare.
2. Cultural relevance – a psychology that meets the needs of the black African majority.
3. Market relevance – a psychology that serves the imperatives of the state and industry.
4. Theoretical relevance – a psychology that uses hypotheses derived from basic theory rather than context-driven research.

One of Long's arguments is that, although South African psychologists pay lip-service to the need for social relevance, they are usually more interested in market relevance and this situation has been exacerbated by the reorganization of the universities on business lines.

Long concludes that the concept of relevance is so malleable and it has been used in so many different ways that it has outlived its usefulness. It is an interesting journey that he has made from concerns about the relevance of psychology to arguing for the abandonment of the concept itself. It is far from clear that the concerns that led to the research have gone away, though he now prefers to express them in different terms. As Long is well aware, the topic of relevance is central to the relationship between psychology and society. Given that it has been a constant throughout psychology's history, it is unlikely to disappear soon. Indeed, an article on the need for a more relevant psychology in South Africa appeared in the *Monitor on Psychology* as recently as November 2017 (Clay, 2017). This ironically makes the book all the more important. Its main achievement lies in showing us that the issues are much more complicated than they might at first appear.

Reference

Clay, R. A. (2017). Decolonizing psychology in South Africa. *Monitor on Psychology*, 48(10), 28. [Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/monitor/2017/11/decolonizing-psychology.aspx> on February 13, 2018.]

Reviewed by ADRIAN C. BROCK, Independent Scholar, Manchester, UK.