



Psychology in the Global Age

A Review of

Toward a Socially Responsible Psychology for a Global Era

by Elena Mustakova-Possardt, Mikhail Lyubansky, Michael Basseches, and Julie Oxenberg (Eds.)

New York, NY: Springer Science + Business Media, 2014. 289 pp.
ISBN 978-1-4614-7390-9 (hardcover); ISBN 978-1-4614-7391-6
(e-book). \$179.00, hardcover

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0035771>

Reviewed by

Jeffrey B. Rubin 

The world is in a precarious place. The signs and symptoms are all around us—from escalating environmental disasters, to destabilized financial markets caused by a rapacious corporate culture addicted to rampant materialism and greed, to an erosion of integrity and community, and an epidemic of immorality and violence. In the face of this, there is growing unrest, increased demoralization, and escalating helplessness and hopelessness among people on all sides of the stalemated political spectrum.

It is a central assumption of the contributors to the book *Toward a Socially Responsible Psychology for a Global Era* that the discipline of Western psychology has a potentially invaluable role to play in both diagnosing the causes of our crisis and pointing toward solutions if it critically examines its foundational assumptions, confronts its limitations and omissions, and revises some of its core tenets.

In its first century, Western psychology was predominantly a psychology of illness, focusing on illuminating what afflicts us, not on what helps us thrive (Rubin, 2004). The authors of this volume are part of a growing and salutary trend in psychology to also focus on health and flourishing (Rubin, 2011).

Toward a Socially Responsible Psychology for a Global Era is both an analysis of the complex mosaic of “psychological, social, economic, and global forces at work in our time” (p. 255) and a blueprint for change based on principles from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the Earth Charter, which provide, in the view of the authors, “the ethical underpinnings and guiding moral vision for a socially responsible psychology” (p. ix). The UDHR and the Earth Charter stress the interdependence of the world, the inherent worth of all beings; the importance of the human spirit (not just material wealth), and the need for collaboration and equitable sharing of resources.

Composed of 11 chapters that discuss an impressive range of topics, including economics and social health, injustice and intergroup violence, racism and sexism, the psychology of nonviolence and overcoming discrimination, persecution and violence against women, racial justice and the role of religion and spirituality in creating a sustainable future, *Toward a Socially Responsible Psychology for a Global Era* is an important book with a crucial message delivered in a clear and accessible style.

The authors of this interesting volume share an exemplary passion for, and commitment to, an extraordinarily important mission: using Western psychology to create a more sustainable future. *Toward a Socially Responsible Psychology for a Global Era* presents a compelling argument that Western psychology as a discipline in general and psychologists in particular have done a better job of elucidating the individual sources of anxiety and guilt, depression, and despair than they have in clarifying the structural and systematic sources of human exploitation, oppression, and suffering: "The specific ways in which the *systems, structures, and policies* in and through which human beings live, affect their psychology" (pp. 85–86).

The authors in this book maintain that the individualistic focus of Western psychology is all too often complicit in the problems that it attempts to address because it tends to omit—and thus doesn't question or challenge—the harmful impact of the sociocultural and socioeconomic forces that have deeply shaped, if not cocreated, the very problems that afflict individuals seek mental health services to remedy, including sexism, racism, and poverty. There is a tendency to "blame the victims" for their struggles in living. And then the existing social structures and skewed values that underwrite many of the institutions ruling our world may be inadvertently reinforced.

But "the root causes of many seemingly individual symptoms—loneliness, isolation, alienation, anxiety, anomie, low self-esteem, depression, relationship distress, addictions, violence, attention deficit disorders, eating disorders," note Mustakova-Possardt and Woodall, "are at least partly influenced by the beliefs, behaviors, and lifestyles generated by the assumptions and values of global capitalism, crude materialism, consumerism, greed, commodification, wealth distribution inequities, and labor exploitation" (p. 91). I would add: the corrosive influence of the advertising, cosmetic, and pharmaceutical industries.

Toward a Socially Responsible Psychology for a Global Era usefully reminds readers that psychology needs to expand to include the world that shapes and affects all of us, including discriminatory social realities, structural barriers to services and justice, and systematic socioeconomic disparities and inequities.

The authors not only diagnose what is wrong, they also recommend changes that are needed in terms of vision, training, research, theory, and clinical practice to contribute to a "globally conscious, socially responsible psychology" (p. 77). The collective hope of the authors is that changes in consciousness, behavior, and public policy will contribute to creating a sustainable global future. The reader is exposed to fertile resources—from the emancipatory power of dialectical thinking, to the importance of cultivating cultural competence and sensitivity to diversity and difference, to the use of nonviolent communication in skillfully handling conflict and restorative justice circles in constructively circumventing the criminal (in)justice system and healing emotional scars of victims of crimes.

As in all edited collections, the individual chapters vary in content and quality. At their best, they explore neglected areas and point the reader in constructive directions; but at other moments they reduce complex topics and offer well-intentioned albeit psychologically simplistic and naïve solutions. For example, the book has already opened up new vistas that have enriched my own thinking about the practice of psychotherapy, even as some of the recommendations offered to address our collective distress seem more idealistic than practical.

In the spirit of the dialectic vision that the authors in the volume share, in which current understandings are always potentially modifiable by contact with different, even opposed perspectives leading to ongoing alteration and transformation, let me share several questions that this stimulating and important book raised for me. *Toward a Socially Responsible Psychology for a Global Era* is better at pinpointing the structural and systemic forces that contribute to racism and sexism, violence and discrimination, than at presenting a textured, nuanced, and convincing account of what to do about such problems. Too many of the solutions offered read more as a call to arms than as a pathway to radical change. “The devil is in the details,” as the German art historian Aby Warburg was fond of saying, and the specifics are sometimes missing or problematic in the case of many of the solutions presented—especially when they involve how to overcome entrenched power of corporate CEOs and leaders of the financial industry, the military, and the managed care and pharmaceutical industries. That is a crucial problem.

I suspect that they are absent because the authors neglect the pervasiveness of unconsciousness and the importance of emotions. Both are crucial in illuminating what afflicts us and how psychology might contribute to the creation of a saner, more sustainable world.

Toward a Socially Responsible Psychology for a Global Era neglects the role that emotions play in the topics it examines—from violence to destruction of the environment. Shame and injured pride, emotional deprivation and damaged self-esteem all play a crucial role in human behavior—leading to compensatory overconsumption, scapegoating of other people, racism and sexism, violence, and environmentally unsound practices, among many other things.

The recommendations in this book are weakest and most problematic when change involves decreasing the destructive influence of entrenched interests. But greedy and predatory captains of industry and power brokers will not voluntarily give up vested power. And genuine change demands that we figure out what to do about it, which the book never addresses.

The best resources psychology has for that lie in a direction that is not mentioned at all in this book—save for a brief appearance of Erich Fromm—namely, psychoanalysis. A psychoanalytically inflected sensibility that values human subjectivity and the strategies that human beings use to protect themselves and that foster self-deception might yield an understanding of how formative, even traumatic, experiences in childhood might lead a future CEO, for example, to either a ceaseless sense of entitlement or a compensatory need to ruthlessly conquer all opponents in order to occupy a unique place in the sun—regardless of the cost or damage to other people or himself or herself—in order to justify his or her existence and keep alive the tenuous hope of finally gaining the love that was never forthcoming from abusive, neglectful, or massively misattuned caregivers.

Several authors sing the praises of spirituality and mindfulness. As a teacher of meditation and someone who has written extensively about spirituality—which the authors often don't define and sometimes conceive of too narrowly—I am very sympathetic to the transformative potential of both. It is assumed, without it being demonstrated, that spirituality is an unalloyed good. But spirituality, like all human experiences and activities, has multiple meanings, serves various functions, and has constructive and destructive facets. Not one author in the book examines the shadow side of spirituality—pathologies of spirit (Rubin, 2004, 2011)—or what mindfulness may eclipse (Rubin, 2013). Without examining these topics, to make the claim that spirituality (and sometimes religion) is crucial to some of the transformations that are necessary in our world seems naïve and simplistic.

I wish that the book had been more carefully edited and proofread. There are numerous typos, including Eric (and Erick) (instead of Erich) Fromm and Carl (instead of Karl) Marx.

Toward a Socially Responsible Psychology for a Global Era is a foray into an important and neglected territory. The authors are to be commended for their passion and dedication in bringing to bear the immense resources of Western psychology to attempt to lessen human degradation, enrich the world, and increase human dignity and freedom. Despite my reservations, this book will be of interest to all mental health professionals, students, and professors in the social sciences and laypeople concerned with the plight of our world in a challenging age. We should read it not as the final word on a complex topic but as part of an ongoing crucial conversation that we all need to participate in, deepen, and expand so that we can cocreate a more sustainable world and a viable future.

References

- Rubin, J. B. (2004). *The good life: Psychoanalytic reflections on love, ethics, creativity and spirituality*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Rubin, J. B. (2011). *The art of flourishing: Staying sane and finding love in an insane world*. New York, NY: Crown.
- Rubin, J. B. (2013). *Meditative psychotherapy: The marriage of East and West*. New York, NY: Abiding Change Press.