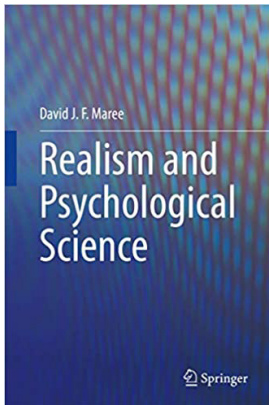




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Realism and psychological science



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Mythic images, realism and the shaping of psychological science

Professor David Maree takes us on a fascinating journey into realism and psychological science, beginning with the argument that, since the early 20th century, a narrow conceptualisation of science has been applied to discussions of psychology – a conceptualisation which, as Maree puts it, ‘does not do justice to either psychology or science’. The relationship between ‘science’ and ‘psychology’ is one of the most debated features of contemporary psychological theory, research, and practice. For some, the alignment between psychology and science has been used to legitimise psychology alongside the ‘hard’ sciences. However, disagreement about the relationship between science and psychology has also spurred the development of many subfields of psychology that have questioned, to varying degrees, the extent of the relationship including whether psychology should be considered a science at all.

But what exactly do we mean by psychological science? Have scholars in psychology simplified ideas of science to such an extent that they have become unhelpful to knowledge production? What assumptions of psychological science can and should be interrogated? Are there ways in which we could reconceptualise science and psychology?

In chapter one, Professor Maree introduces how the ‘mythic image of science’ in psychology has influenced three central features of contemporary psychology, namely, methodology (quantitative versus qualitative methods), application (scientist–practitioner split) and metatheoretical opposition (constructionism and positivism). The three areas are carefully and deliberately selected because of their prominence in the discipline. Maree devotes a chapter to each of these topics (chapters two to four) and carefully interrogates some of the core assumptions of the ‘mythic image science’ and its manifestations by drawing on his extensive expertise in the history and philosophy of psychology.

A strength of the book for me is that it draws attention to a broader (beyond realism) point about the philosophical roots of psychology. Much of psychology is rooted in historical and philosophical thinking that is often glossed over or simplified. Few scholars and students engage with the complexity of those philosophical debates. With an interest in how we teach research methods in psychology, I am often struck by how superficially we cover the philosophical underpinnings of psychological research. This book reminds us of the rich philosophical and historical thinking that underlies psychology. It also reminds us that simplification may serve important political functions at key historical moments. For example, the mythic image of science was perhaps a necessary ‘straw man’ for some subfields to emerge and develop. It is, however, important to be aware of this and to recognise when this becomes unhelpful.

Of course, the main strength of the book is that it draws attention to the rich scholarship about realism itself. Chapter five delves into realism, its history, and variations. The chapter covers several important types of realism, including scientific, minimal scientific, critical, and situational realism. Importantly, it introduces the reader to scholars who write about the types of realist thought. I recognised some of the more well-known scholars but was happy to learn about the scholars I had not come across. I am not an expert in realism (those who are might have more to say about the chapter), but after reading this chapter I appreciated just how rich and complex the literature is. It certainly inspired me to relook at my engagements with realism.

The final chapter (six), aptly titled ‘The realist image of science’, invites us to re-imagine psychological science from the perspective of realism. Importantly, the chapter covers the question of ‘so what?’ Maree covers science as criticism, revisits the mythic image of science and discusses measurement, which is, of course, central to psychological science. Importantly, he refers to three studies that, while at face value differ significantly in paradigm and methodology (for example, experimental and qualitative), can be usefully framed by realism. The studies focus on personality, how infants count, and media coverage of the Marikana massacre. Interestingly, the latter lies outside of psychology, suggesting that this book may be useful to other social science and humanities disciplines too.

The book is interesting and engaging. It compels us to appreciate the complexity of realism and invites us to think differently about psychological science. Maree breaks down unhelpful dichotomies and demonstrates how realism may allow for a richer, perhaps even more liberating, engagement with psychological science. Even though some of the fundamental concepts of realism could have been explored in more depth, the book adequately demonstrates how the mythic image of science has hindered conceptualisations of psychological science and the potential for realism. Some of the arguments were difficult to follow, but this is probably a reflection of the fact that the material *is* complex, and that I too have engaged with it superficially, until now. In addition, I would have liked to have read a more extensive application discussion about the three studies in chapter six, but this is perhaps a sign that the book stimulated sufficient interest for me to want to engage more.

Very few publications have tackled the topic of realism and psychological science in South Africa, with the exception perhaps of Maree’s previous works. The book is, therefore, timely and relevant. It is well worth reading; and I recommend it to those who have broader interests in science, philosophy and psychology as well as to those with a more focused interest in realism and psychological research. It is also likely to be useful to those who teach psychological science and research methods.