

## *Débat / Discussion*

# The Educational Psychology Text as Kitsch: Deconstructing Woolfolk

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*Educational Psychology* by Anita Woolfolk (1995) is now in its sixth edition. I have been told that it is the best-selling or most widely adopted text in the field. Not only is this educational psychology text typical of the genre, it arguably represents the top-of-the-line or the Cadillac of educational psychology texts. For example, the current 647-page, glossy, full-colour edition comes complete with an astonishing array of supplementary materials and technological supports, including a special Annotated Instructor's Edition (AIE), a resource manual, student study guide, media guide, computerized test bank, more than 130 acetate transparencies, simulation software, videotape segments from the Cable News Network (CNN), interactive CD-ROM classroom case studies, and so on. If all this is not enough, busy instructors can also "call a toll-free number, indicate their choices for test items, and receive a master copy of the test in less than a week." And harried instructors can even "request a FAX test for next-day rush situations" (p. IS-xi). As the publisher's advertising slogan brags—without obvious exaggeration: "Users agree. No text does it better."

So why don't I like it? Why do I belittle it as kitsch? Kitsch, after all, usually refers to something of tawdry design or appearance created to appeal to nondiscriminating tastes—for example, those portraits of Elvis or bullfighters painted in neon colours on black velvet. But the Woolfolk text can hardly be accused of tawdry design or appearance. Indeed, measured against its competitors, it is presumably the *crème de la crème*.

*Miseducative kitsch.* In name-calling the Woolfolk text "kitsch," I have in mind a less obvious, but perhaps more definitive, meaning of the term suggested by writer and critic Robert Fulford. In a recent CBC radio interview, Fulford dismissed so-called "victim-based art" as kitsch, but not necessarily because of any cheap or garish aesthetic qualities. Rather, Fulford argued, this "art" is kitsch because it seeks, by design, to compel the viewer to experience certain predetermined responses to it—in this case, sorrow, sympathy, compassion, and, perhaps, guilt. Fulford went on to liken victim-based art to the kitschy *Saturday Evening Post* cover art of Norman Rockwell, the artist whose slice-of-American-life paintings are typically unambiguously and irresistibly "cute" and, hence,

admit of no other viewer response. For Fulford, what makes both victim-based and Norman Rockwell's "art" quintessentially kitsch is that both contrive to over-determine and, consequently, to limit the viewer's range of intellectual and emotional response. Neither allows for any interpretive or responsive ambiguity; both attempt to coerce thought and feeling.

It is, then, in Fulford's special sense that I contend that educational psychology texts have devolved into a species of kitsch. These texts, aided and abetted by their often lavish supplementary materials, have become kitsch precisely in Fulford's sense of coercing an especially narrow range of intellectual and emotional response in their readers. I further argue that the steady decline of these texts from respectable "secondary source" to deplorable "academic kitsch" is very likely an unintended consequence of their own efforts at self-improvement. That is, as educational psychology texts have strived, through successive editions, to become more pictorially attractive, more plainly readable, more technologically integrated, more instructor-friendly, and more socially concerned, they have also become, ironically, more profoundly miseducative.

I could have chosen (or picked on) any one of a dozen or so educational psychology texts to prosecute my case.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, the choice of the latest Woolfolk text is more or less arbitrary. But because its sales and adoptions have made it "first among equals," Woolfolk provides perhaps the most stringent test of my hypothesis.

*Colour me stupid.* The Woolfolk text, like many of its competitors, is abundantly illustrated. Hardly a page goes by without a chart, a table, a figure, an inset, a cartoon, a pen-and-ink sketch, or a colour photograph. As in the generic newspaper *USA Today*, the episodic style and visual bias remind one of television. The heavy use of TV-like, colour photography in Woolfolk is especially interesting and perhaps most indicative of the textbook's descent into kitsch.

One can easily imagine how, for example, almost any history or zoology text could make good use of photographs in support of its exposition. Many history texts can (and do) enliven their accounts of persons and past events with whatever photographic artifacts are easily available. Likewise, colour photographs in, say, an ornithology text no doubt serve to illustrate subtle taxonomic distinctions among bird species when words all but fail. But what about photographs in an educational psychology text? What might they usefully illustrate?

The Woolfolk text, by my count, is larded with some 97 colour photographs. That works out to an average of one photograph every six pages. If every picture were, indeed, worth a thousand words, as the old saw claims, there would be little room for complaint. But *all* of these 90-some photographs portray the *same* two subjects: teachers and children. Moreover, they are photos of teachers and children *either* behaving in thoroughly ordinary ways—for example, playing, laughing, talking—or engaged in inherently covert (and, therefore, unphotographable) mental activities—for example, listening, learning, and thinking.

My complaint about these colour photographs is that they serve no expository or explanatory purpose. They have little or nothing to do with educational psychology. They are, like Norman Rockwell's paintings, merely cute. Again, in precisely Fulford's sense, they are pure kitsch.

In addition to their semi-saccharine depiction of teachers and children, many of the photos are obviously meant to convey certain socio-political sentiments—especially about racial tolerance and gender equity. For example, the lead photograph for Chapter 3 (“Personal, Social, and Emotional Development”) performs double duty. It shows (again!) a cute, tow-headed, White, male preschooler happily bottle-feeding a Black baby doll (p. 65).<sup>2</sup> Noble sentiments—but still kitsch. Nearly all of the photographs mutely promote a broad “tolerance for diversity” theme. Many are virtually indistinguishable from UNICEF posters or the recent, socially engaged Benetton advertisements.

Each of the 15 chapters in the Woolfolk text is fronted with one of these “feel-good” colour snapshots of children or teachers or both. For the most part, they could just have easily been plucked from someone's family photo album. These few lead, chapter photos are nothing more than filler or the graphic equivalent of what television is now required to label as “file footage,” that is, all-purpose, pictorial backdrops.<sup>3</sup> All of the remaining 80-plus photos in the Woolfolk text, however, are accompanied by brief, explanatory comments—by sound bites or what CNN calls “factoids.” What is especially disturbing about these “fotos and factoids” strewn throughout the text is how obviously unnecessary or uninformative either or both are. For example, a photo of a sleepy teenager, nodding off in class, claims to illustrate this startling bit of psychological wisdom: “The first step in learning is paying attention; students cannot process something they do not recognize or perceive” (p. 246). Another colour shot shows three students standing in a classroom apparently conversing about their written assignments, which each is holding. The caption reads: “To benefit from homework or seatwork students must stay involved and do the work” (p. 462). In such instances, the photographs can only be accused of being pedestrian and uninteresting, but the captions can be condemned as intellectually insulting.

In a few cases, the accompanying “factoid” actually does convey information, but then the supporting photograph turns out to be largely pointless. For example, one photo blurb (p. 551) begins by asking, “Is this assessment formative or summative?” and then goes on to give a capsule explanation of the difference between the two kinds of assessment. The companion photo, however, depicts nothing more than some teenage students taking some sort of test. Here, again, the picture serves no useful expository purpose; there is no point to it. Why? Because the difference between formative and summative assessment is wholly conceptual, not visual. Unlike night versus day, it is a difference that can be neither photographed nor observed.

It is possible, of course, to see the abundance of colour photos in the Woolfolk text as harmless, pictorial fluff—as merely a commercial publisher's

well-meaning effort to give readers some relief from drab typography. But this interpretation seems to me to be too charitable. It ignores the fact that most of the photos, along with their supporting factoids, at least pretend to be expository and explanatory — and not just window dressing. And it is this quasi-didactic use of photos throughout the Woolfolk text that is particularly objectionable, because it signals a new low in the “dumbing-down” of university textbooks. However unintentionally, these photos repeatedly suggest that readers’ imaginations are so impoverished that even the most commonplace of educational phenomena (e.g., students taking tests) must be pictured for them. Or, they suggest that even the most vapid and obvious of psychological claims (e.g., that sleeping precludes paying attention) must be clarified for readers with full-colour illustrations.

*Helpful to a fault.* I have dwelled on the condescending and sentimental use of colour photographs in Woolfolk to demonstrate how the putatively “reader-friendly” features of recent educational psychology textbooks can become, in fact, a form of miseducative kitsch. As noted earlier, the latest Woolfolk also comes replete with a wide variety of “instructor-friendly” supports and accessories whose unintended consequences are, I think, similarly miseducative.

No doubt the steady increase in the number of supplementary “teaching resources” (test banks, transparencies, Annotated Instructor’s Editions, instructor manuals, videotapes, etc.) offered by textbook publishers reflects largely a competitive, market-driven trend. Presumably publishers have discovered that texts, like automobiles, sell better if equipped with a range of accessories or “bells and whistles.” That there exists a large and ready market for such “fully loaded” texts is no great mystery, given the nature and status of university teaching. Contrary to public rhetoric, many, perhaps most, academics regard teaching as a chore. Obviously any textbook that promises to make one’s teaching “easier” will receive serious consideration.

Making a task easier usually means finding ways to reduce the amount of time or effort required to carry it out. I find it easier, for example, to skin a potato with a peeler than with a paring knife. For me, the peeler takes less time and effort and, thus, I prefer it. Likewise, any textbook accessories that could, in fact, save on the amount of time and effort required to teach ought also to be preferred. Only a stubborn Luddite would reject such labour-saving devices, *in principle*.

However, the various instructor-friendly or labour-saving features these deluxe texts offer do not just make teaching “easier” in this simple sense of “more efficient.” That is, they do not make teaching merely less time- or labour-intensive. Rather, they demonstrably alter and distort the nature of university teaching by effectively de-skilling it. These teaching “aides” are, ironically, helpful to a fault.

The most conspicuous examples of “supports,” which de-skill or even preempt instruction, can be found in the Annotated Instructor’s Edition or the

Instructor's Resource Manual (Sandlin & Diaz-Rico, 1995) which accompany the Woolfolk text. Both of these accessories provide the nominal "instructor" with detailed scripts and scenarios to follow. It is difficult to exaggerate the extent to which these two "resources" presume to prescribe in utter detail both the form and content of instruction. In their painstaking efforts to make the Woolfolk text "instructor-friendly," these "aides" have out done themselves; they have made it virtually "instructor-proof."

The marginalia, for example, in the Annotated Instructor's Edition spell out in minute, page-specific detail just what immediate objectives to achieve, what questions to ask, what activities to initiate, which handouts to distribute, which transparencies to display, what kinds of discussion to encourage, what connections to point out, and what test items to select (eventually) from the bank. Here is a random handful of abbreviated examples of these marginal annotations:

**Objective 4.4:** Trace the development of language through the beginning of the school years, using the following terms: holophrases, overextension. . . . (p. 51)

**Teaching Tip:** Divide the class into groups of four or five. Give them 2 minutes to recall an instance of punishment they have experienced at some time during their lives. Then ask them to tell you. . . . (p. 218)

**Transparency:** Use acetate transparency T38, "The Dimensions of Multicultural Education." (p. 158)

**Discussion:** This issue of day care lends itself easily to debate. Ask students: At what point should a mother return to work? Do you think we will ultimately see problems with children who have been "raised" in day care? (p. 95)

**Handout:** Give students Handout Master 11.1, "Classroom Management Observation Sheet," to help them structure their observations of effective management. . . . (p. 418)

The back-up Instructor's Resource Manual, with comparable detail, features elaborate, pre-fabricated "Teaching Outlines" which specify both the topical hierarchy and sequence to be followed for each chapter. Each of these supplementary outlines is, then, further supplemented (!) with "Learning Activities," "Discussion Questions," and "Additional Resources for Teaching." Nothing is entrusted to the instructor's own resources. All this well-meaning "instructor-proofing" turns the survey educational psychology text into a prescriptive training manual. Teaching educational psychology becomes a form of ventriloquism.

*Psychological casuistry.* As an applied social science, educational psychology is, by self-description, situated at that problematic nexus between *empirical* psychological research and *normative* school policy and practice. Educational psychology texts are written largely for the teacher education market, that is, for teachers or would-be teachers who are about to enter the hurly-burly of "real" classrooms and schools. This pressing circumstance creates the expectation, if not

the obligation, that any representative educational psychology text must demonstrate its self-proclaimed relevance to this “reality.” As anyone who has taught psychology within the context of teacher education will attest, convincing students of psychology’s immediate, practical relevance to education can be a very “hard sell.” More frequently than not, students criticize texts and courses in educational psychology as being too theoretical, too detached from the real world of teachers and students, classrooms and schools.

One means by which recent educational psychology texts have tried to answer this common complaint has been by becoming more socially and politically engaged, or by being, as the Woolfolk text puts it, “completely up to date, down to earth, and sensitive to the controversial issues affecting classrooms today” (p. IS-ii). If the Woolfolk text were merely (in that dodgy phrase) “sensitive to” the social and political issues of the day, then perhaps there would be little ground for complaint. But the treatment of controversial issues in the Woolfolk text exceeds being “sensitive to.” In a number of instances, being “sensitive to” ranges from extended exposition of material with little or no psychological importance to blatant political advocacy.

Woolfolk’s latest edition, in advertising its contemporary social relevance, assures prospective users that “multicultural and gender issues are integrated throughout the textbook.” In addition, these and other social issues are also discussed directly and at some length in Chapter 5, entitled “The Impact of Culture and Community.” But what the extended discussion in Chapter 5 betrays, I think, is either how psychologically empty or how inherently political the text’s treatment of these issues, in fact, is.

What I mean by psychologically empty is that the discussion of these issues in Chapter 5 is largely unconnected with and uninformed by psychological theory or research. The exposition is bereft of any legitimate psychological content. Consider, as evidence, the list of “key terms” at the end of this chapter. Usually, the text’s “key terms” refer to important psychological concepts or principles explained in the foregoing chapter, for example: accommodation, field dependence, divergent thinking, operant conditioning, norm-referenced testing and the like. But here, in Chapter 5, the “key terms” have no particular psychological significance. Most are simply the terms and slogans that pervade current political discourse and debate surrounding the controversial issue of “diversity,” to wit: androgynous, cultural deficit model, culturally compatible classrooms, culture, dialect, discrimination, ethnicity, gender biases, melting pot, minority group, multicultural education, prejudice, race, resistance culture, and so on. Furthermore, the text makes no effort to explore whatever psychological dimensions these ideas might have. And occasionally the exposition lapses into blunt political advocacy—sometimes with embarrassingly effusive rhetoric:

*The idea of multicultural education is that all students—male, female, disabled, rich, poor, from different racial and ethnic groups, or speaking different languages—all*

*students* should have a full and equal opportunity to learn in school and to be respected. (p. 155)

The preachy tenor of this “definition” is surely apparent; it wears its social and political sentiments on its sleeve.

This recent textbook trend toward increased coverage of controversial issues in the pursuit of relevance is at best confused and at worst (again) miseducative. Rather than preserving the distinction between the empirical and the normative, the texts simply ignore it. As a consequence, they instead offer students and instructors a confused mixture of empirical psychology and moral philosophy wherein “is” and “ought” are often conflated.

Besides the confusion, there is a serious danger in all this. Educational psychology purports to be an empirical social science. Its claims are presumed to be warranted by factual circumstance. When, however, it lends its empirical warrant and social-scientific clout to what are essentially socio-political sentiments, it becomes misleading and miseducative — a kind of intellectually coercive kitsch.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See, for example, any of the following recent texts: Borich and Tombari (1995), Dembo (1994), Eggen and Kauchak (1994), Good and Brophy (1995), McCown and Roop (1992), and Slavin (1994).
- <sup>2</sup> I am grateful to my colleague Colin Laine, who called to my attention the fact that this same photograph also appears on page 132 of Slavin (1994). In the Slavin text, however, the photograph is captioned with the somewhat loaded, rhetorical question: “How does this picture suggest changes in American culture about *appropriate* [italics added] sex-role behavior?”
- <sup>3</sup> That these photographs are, more or less, all-purpose “file footage” is evidenced by the fact that a number of them appear in both the Slavin (1994) and Woolfolk (1995) texts.

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## Is Woolfolk Kitsch? The Sizzle and the Steak

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Through his review of a best-selling textbook in educational psychology, Sanders has broached some important issues that warrant public discussion. Accordingly, my purpose here is to respond to this review of Woolfolk (1995) under two main headings: (a) the sizzle, concerned mainly with Sanders' assertions about the Woolfolk "package," including the text's photographs and supplementary materials, and (b) the steak, commenting on the Woolfolk text's contents and the nature of educational psychology itself. Although I too have problems with the Woolfolk text, my concerns have different origins from those of Sanders.

### THE SIZZLE

*The photographs.* Sanders portrayed the 92 (by my count) colour photographs as "kitsch," that is, as forcing a narrow and limited range of intellectual and emotional responses from the viewers. And I would agree, but only if I were a White, middle-class, conservative, Christian American who did not think very deeply about issues affecting modern America and who lived comfortably in suburbia with access to well-appointed schools. I am far less sanguine than Sanders about who is shown doing what in those photographs, and who is not. Rather than seeing the onslaught of photographs as politically correct (which they try to be) and "merely cute," I am disturbed by the unceasing stream of well-clothed, well-scrubbed, well-groomed, and well-fed citizens in a carefully crafted dream world that bears little reality to that of large groups of American schoolchildren and teachers.

Let me elaborate. To begin with portrayals of sex and gender, 38 photographs (ambiguous images were not counted) show males and females together, with females controlling or directing the action in 15 of the images and males doing likewise in 6: the result of a gender agenda? Four photographs show individuals displaying authority positions at the front of a classroom: two males and two females, all of them White. However, the two males (on pp. 322 and 453) are non-smiling, a traditional sign of authority and dominance, whereas the two females are half-smiling (p. 197) or smiling broadly (p. 409): an oversight in the gender agenda? Males only are shown in 21 photographs, females only in 25. However, images of lone males are more numerous than those of lone females (14 to 10). In addition, the photographs showing White males only are linked to the Ku Klux Klan (p. 170), social isolation (p. 220), aggression, in the context

of pointing a toy gun (p. 223), and sleeping in class (p. 246). Elsewhere, another White male naps in class while alert and energetic White female students participate eagerly in the ongoing lesson (p. 370), and two young males, perhaps of Asian descent, spray two females with water guns (p. 173). The only possibly negative image involving females shows a blonde White female linked to concern about sexually transmitted diseases (p. 100). The general impact of the text's photographs is that of a generally equal presence of males and females, with minor transgressions of social norms (major ones are not shown) associated with White males.

How do the Woolfolk photographs treat race, a major theme of American life if there ever was one? Eleven colour images present solely minority, mainly Black, adults and children in assorted configurations including a Native mother and child standing somewhere in a plain (p. 333). In contrast, 47 photographs display Whites only. Seven other images show Whites as a substantial majority with Blacks placed in the corners of the photographs or at the periphery of the action. There are no, I repeat, zero, photographs where the reverse situation holds, that is, where a majority of Blacks dominates and Whites occupy secondary roles and spaces. There are no photographs of Black teachers in authority positions, in contrast to the four images containing Whites. One overriding message of these photographs is that no Black male or female students have any problems in the existing school system, as the images display no reactions to racism past or present, no social isolation, no aggression of any kind, no sleeping in class, and no concern about sexually transmitted diseases. Is this kitsch? Maybe, for some people. Is this merely cute? Certainly not, in my view.

I too wish to address the photograph on page 65 showing a young blond White male holding an empty baby bottle to the lips of a Black doll. Sanders applauded this image for serving double duty in the cause of both racial tolerance and gender equity, but branded it as kitsch. Again, maybe, for some people. But what would have been his reaction had a young Black male been shown nursing a White doll? In the absence of a fuller context, the present image borders on the preposterous and can just as easily be interpreted as dominant White male America forcing nothing of positive value down the throat of helpless Black America. Incidentally, the assorted images suggest that if any interracial interactions occur, females will be involved. Two images (pp. 84 and 185) show Black and White females of the same age sharing activities, whereas there are no corresponding photographs of males. One image (p. 345) does display an adult Black, who may be a teacher, interacting with two White male students; unfortunately, the placement of the adult's arm around one of the boys looks too staged to be genuine. I suspect Sanders would call this photograph kitsch.

Let me consider one more theme presented in the photographs, differential physical ability. I counted seven photographs involving differentially abled White persons, four males and three females. No physically challenged non-Whites

were represented. Either there are none or they were deliberately excluded. These images also show that a White male in a wheelchair is more likely to be in charge of a class than a Black person of either sex (p. 464).

I support the depiction of physically challenged persons, but the choice of images in Woolfolk leaves something to be desired.

Accordingly, in my analysis, the Woolfolk colour photographs are anything but benign. Instead, they generate a particular image of America that is friendly, safe, and White-dominated, with no drug problems in schools and no assaults on teachers. This America has no wildly aberrant behaviour, no extreme clothes, no strange hair colours or styles, and no foreign or non-Christian accessories. In addition, the numerous colour images are placed in a context where the six ghost-like black-and-white representations of mostly-dead White males (Piaget, Vygotsky, Erikson, Binet, Skinner, and Bruner) are made even more prominent by virtue of their relative rarity. The single deviation from the six White males is a 40-year-old photograph of then-nine-year-old Linda Brown (p. 169), who was the focus of an anti-segregation law suit in Topeka, Kansas in the mid-1950s. Are the photographs kitsch? Not to me, and, I hope, not to anyone preparing for the reality of modern schools and society. There are too many troublesome omissions to consider. But if these images somehow elicit only warmth and comfort in the viewer, then I agree that they are kitsch.

Finally, Sanders was most distressed over the absence of intellectual links between the written captions and the photographs. My interpretation on this point is that the conscious cognitive relationship between the two elements is simply not important in this context. Rather, the captions function mainly at the covert emotional level to link mastery of the text's contents with creation of the dream America crafted by the photographs.

*The supplementary resources.* Sanders commented on the wealth of supplementary teaching resources accompanying the Woolfolk text. Quite properly, he was concerned about the de-skilling and instructor-proofing that over-dependence on such materials can produce. However, my main concern with the availability and use of these aids is the number of contradictions they engender with the precise content that the materials claim to support. That is, the resources do not practice what the text preaches, as illustrated by at least five points.

First, lecturing. Most of the text's aids presume a stand-and-deliver mode of instruction that has as many disadvantages as advantages and that is out of step with modern trends in teaching, such as teaching for understanding. Second, working on projects in cooperative groups. The aids support the learning and testing of the same material for all students. Third, individual abilities. Although the text addresses this topic in several places, the resources are slanted toward masses of students. Fourth, constructivism. Despite Woolfolk's coverage of the constructivist learning perspective, the aids do little to acknowledge sense-making in practice; the dominant theory underlying the aids is one of simple information

transmission. Fifth, testing. In spite of the text's attention to alternative ways of testing student knowledge, such as portfolios and performances, the aids continue to rely on paper-and-pencil means of assessment, including heavy reliance on standard multiple-choice questions. Thus, the uncritical use of these aids provides multiple examples of "do as I say, don't do as I do" that reduce the credibility of knowledge supplied by educational psychology.

#### THE STEAK

If the photographs can be disregarded or, better, deconstructed in class and if the various resources can be used with discretion or ignored entirely, can the textual substance of the Woolfolk text still be used with enthusiasm and confidence? The answer depends on: (a) how the instructor conceptualizes the discipline of educational psychology, and (b) how effective s/he is at maintaining some unifying theme or set of principles across innumerable pieces of disconnected information.

*Educational psychology as a discipline.* Based on Sanders' few comments, I suspect that he and I would quickly diverge about what constitutes the discipline of modern educational psychology, what are its legitimate topics, and what are the appropriate means of researching them. Neither of us would use Woolfolk as our own course text because it does not represent our own perspective of the discipline. However, Sanders' and my perspectives are probably more different from one another than each is from Woolfolk's.

Sanders described educational psychology as situated between "empirical psychological research and normative school policy and practice" and as subject to student criticism for being too theoretical and detached from real people and classrooms. He condemned Woolfolk's attention to social and political issues of the classroom as "psychological casuistry." I disagree both with this last point and with the notion that educational psychology is strictly empirical. Clearly, despite some questionable practices (e.g., Cohen, 1994; Oakes, 1986), an important stream of theory and research endorses the paradigm of Newtonian physics. However, other versions of educational psychology subscribe to models of relativity and quantum physics, cooperative evolution, chaos theory, social constructivism, and postmodernism (e.g., Barton, 1994; Brewster Smith, 1994; Derry, 1992; Gergen, 1994; Sinnott, 1993). Under these latter perspectives, the basic premises of educational psychology are flushed into the open for critical scrutiny. Such perspectives also make the content (and omissions) of the text's colour photographs entirely germane, acknowledge the social priorities and values underlying psychological enquiry, emphasize the cultural specificity of most experimental results, and reduce student criticism about the irrelevance of educational psychology to educational practice.

Sanders singled out Chapter 5 of Woolfolk, entitled "The Impact of Culture and Community," as particularly unconnected with psychology and "bereft of any

legitimate psychological content.” True, but only if one follows a narrow version of empirical psychology. Absolutely *not* true if one subscribes to Wundt’s *Völkerpsychologie*, Vygotsky’s mediational theory, or assorted claims of such researchers as Bruner (1990), Cole (1990), Cunningham (1992), and Lave and Wenger (1991). The subdiscipline of cultural psychology makes the theme (but not necessarily the present content) of Chapter 5 the bedrock of a course in educational psychology. However, cultural psychology should not be confused with cross-cultural psychology or some brands of multicultural psychology; if you consider “culture” as an independent variable, you’ve missed the point. Unfortunately, for the most part, Chapter 5 misses the point.

*The text’s topics.* Much can be forgiven in an educational psychology text if its portrayal of the discipline is consistent and coherent. Fundamentally, the Woolfolk text is substantial and very traditional in its coverage, with lots on Piaget and the information-processing approach to learning and memory, to cite two examples. However, the text’s message is weakened by mentioning, usually briefly, almost every concept and buzz word currently in circulation. Consider “cognitive constructivist” or “community of practice” (both p. 277) or “semiotic function” (p. 35). Each is a fundamental idea which is tossed out in a sentence and then abandoned for something else. “Aggression” (pp. 86–87) and “AIDS” (pp. 100–101) are just two of the innumerable topics mentioned in a paragraph and then dropped in favour of the next subject. No single coherent perspective unites these assorted concepts and topics, especially across chapters.

Let me touch briefly on human memory as an example. The important idea of remembering as a group phenomenon (pp. 49–50) is tucked away under “Assisted Learning” and not resurrected later on when memory is portrayed, via the standard information-processing model, as a strictly individual undertaking (pp. 243–257). Bartlett’s (1932) seminal work on the construction of memories is dismissed quickly (p. 276) without any discussion about how memory construction might be linked to memory retrieval or how memories can be shaped by time, events, and expectations. Accordingly, students end up learning basketfuls of disconnected facts about memory without acquiring any coherent sense of the basic questions affecting the topic. Eventually, this lack of coherence extends to the discipline as a whole. Finally, the text represents a strictly American view of issues, schools, and classes that does not transfer well even to the neighbouring jurisdiction of English-speaking Canada.

#### CONCLUSION

I agree with Sanders in that basic concerns prevent me, and I assume him, from adopting Woolfolk as a course text. However, we disagree substantially about the specifics of those concerns. And, to return to the main topic at hand, I disagree that Woolfolk can be dismissed simply as kitsch.

There are major issues to be debated about the nature and content of courses and texts in educational psychology. Relevant proposals have emerged from recent discussions in American circles (e.g., Anderson et al., 1995) and I appreciate Sanders' initiating a parallel discourse in Canada.

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## Review of an Educational Psychology Textbook as Kitsch: Reconstructing Woolfolk

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I teach an educational psychology course for undergraduate psychology students, and for perhaps five of the last seven years have used Anita Woolfolk's *Educational Psychology* as the required textbook in this course. When the editor of the *Canadian Journal of Education* sent me Sanders' review of Woolfolk for commentary, I naturally assumed that Sanders would deal with substantive strengths and weaknesses of the text, and I wondered whether his substantive criticisms would agree with my own. Unfortunately, it was not possible to determine whether this was the case, because, unlike any book review I have ever before encountered in my own academic field, Sanders managed to review the book without making any substantive comments whatsoever! In essence, he criticizes the Woolfolk text on the following non-substantive, stylistic grounds: (1) it contains too many non-functional colour photographs; (2) it is accompanied by too many supplementary teaching aids, which tend to "pre-empt" or "de-skill" the instructor; and (3) it is too moralistic or political in approach, and fails to differentiate between conclusions that are empirically based and those that are not. On this basis, Sanders concludes that Woolfolk is, in Fulford's use of the term, pure kitsch. In other words, it is too "cute," and it tries too hard to coerce thought and feeling in the reader. My own view, again following Fulford's use of the term, is that Sanders' analysis of Woolfolk is far more kitschy than Woolfolk itself. To illustrate my dissatisfaction with the quality of this review, let me examine his three criticisms of Woolfolk in greater detail.

The first criticism is that Woolfolk makes excessive use of glitzy colour photographs that have no expository or explanatory role. According to Sanders' count, there are 97 colour photographs in the text, and most of these are used not to foster understanding of educational psychology concepts, but solely to promote socio-political themes such as gender equity and tolerance of diversity. In support of this view, he cites a total of 3 out of 97 photographs, including one depicting a White male pre-schooler bottle feeding a Black baby doll. This appears a rather biased sampling to me. I took the trouble to inspect all 97 colour photographs, and my impression is that although some of them could indeed be considered superfluous or non-functional, fewer than 10% of them convey any obvious socio-political message, and at least 80% of them could potentially serve an expository or explanatory role with respect to educational psychology concepts. Is there a hidden political message in photographs of people playing slot

machines, or working with a computer, or taking an IQ test? Perhaps I am missing something? And although there is no guarantee that a particular photograph will assist students in understanding a particular concept, there is evidence from cognitive psychology that, in general, imagery and visualization do contribute to encoding and retrieval of written material. Furthermore, many students have commented spontaneously to me that visual examples in textbooks “stick in their minds” and help them to learn and remember concepts. Thus, I think it is conceivable that the photograph of people involved in competitive and cooperative activities on page 377 of *Woolfolk* could help students learn the definition of competitive and cooperative classroom reward structures, and, contrary to what Sanders claims, that the photograph of a sleepy student in class on page 246 could serve as a “retrieval cue” for the pivotal role of attention in information processing. And even if you believe that the photographs in *Woolfolk* are totally useless, there is an obvious solution: ignore them. I must admit that I had never noticed most of the photographs in *Woolfolk* until Sanders brought them to my attention. The reason is that I have always been more concerned with what the book actually says rather than with its secondary, stylistic features.

Sanders’ second criticism is that *Woolfolk* is accompanied by an “astounding array” of supplementary teaching aids, including a test manual, an instructor’s resource manual, transparencies, CNN video clips, and instructional software, most of which are useless, but some of which are worse than useless in that they “alter and distort the nature of university teaching by effectively de-skilling it.” In other words, because the support materials provide possible scripts and scenarios for the instructor to follow, including suggestions for class projects and activities (e.g., handouts, debates, questions, and research projects), Sanders argues that the support materials pre-empt university instruction by prescribing or dictating its content and form. I find this criticism unbelievably silly and childish. If you don’t like the suggestions in the support materials, don’t use them . . . no one is forcing you. Of the hundreds of “teaching tips” in the *Woolfolk* instructor’s resource guide, I have used perhaps 7 or 8 over the years. I picked the ones that supported my teaching goals and were consistent with my teaching style, and ignored the rest. Sanders seems to think it is wrong for one person to offer another tips or suggestions on how to teach. Does this mean that by offering my colleague in the next office a tip on how to teach a particular topic in educational psychology, I am de-skilling my colleague, or pre-empting him or her, or serving as a “ventriloquist” for him or her? I doubt it.

His third criticism is that *Woolfolk* is too “preachy” and moralistic, too much involved in political advocacy, and fails to distinguish between conclusions based on moral philosophy and those based on empirical evidence. In support of this criticism, Sanders cites one example only, namely the contents of Chapter 5, “The Impact of Culture and Community.” He claims that the “key terms” listed at the end of Chapter 5, such as melting pot, gender bias, cultural deficit model, and resistance culture, are political slogans that “have no particular psychological

significance.” As an example of inappropriate political advocacy, Sanders cites a passage from Chapter 5 to the effect that, according to multicultural education, students of both genders and all races, socio-economic levels, and so on, “should have a full and equal opportunity to learn in school and to be respected.” I agree that some sections of Chapter 5 are more concerned with political advocacy and too far removed from research evidence in educational psychology. In fact, I believe that, throughout the textbook, Woolfolk should give greater emphasis to the details of research findings and theories in educational psychology, including the problems of doing good research and developing useful theories, rather than glossing over research findings in one-sentence summaries. Also, I agree that Woolfolk should differentiate more clearly between conclusions based on research evidence and conclusions not based on research evidence. On the other hand, it is fair to point out that Chapter 5 is only one chapter out of 15, and even in Chapter 5 many concepts do have at least some degree of grounding in research and theory in educational psychology. Although it may be true that terms such as melting pot and resistance culture are on the fringes of psychology, most of the “key terms” listed at the end of Chapter 5, terms such as androgynous, authoritarian personality, bilingualism, prejudice, gender bias, discrimination, stereotype, and gender-role identity, have a long history in basic research and theory in psychology. It is difficult to imagine why Sanders says these terms are unconnected to psychological research and theory. And going back to the equal-opportunity statement he considers inappropriately “preachy” or political, I argue that although this statement is indeed based more on moral philosophy than on psychological research evidence, it represents a rather weak form of political advocacy. With the possible exception of the American Nazi Party, does anyone actually disagree with the idea that all students in our schools should have full and equal opportunity to learn? Isn’t this one of the ideals or foundation assumptions of a free-enterprise, democratic society? If this is the best example of casuistry or political advocacy that Sanders can find in Woolfolk, then I conclude that he does not have much of a case.

In summary, I believe that Sanders (1) is biased and unrepresentative in selecting supportive examples from Woolfolk; (2) focuses on secondary, stylistic issues such as colour photographs and support materials rather than on what the Woolfolk text actually says; and (3) proposes criticisms that in my view are trivial, childish, and silly. Although I believe that there are some serious substantive weaknesses in the Woolfolk text, it appears that Sanders is either unaware of these or has chosen to ignore them. Is it possible that he has not actually read the book? Although Woolfolk may not be the best possible educational psychology textbook that could be written in the best of all possible worlds, it is certainly a better, and less kitschy, text than is implied by Sanders’ rather silly and kitschy review.

## Pics, Props, and Politics: A Reply to Murray and Smith

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Both Smith and Murray begin their responses by referring to my “review of Woolfolk,” but Murray is especially disappointed “because, unlike any book review [he has] ever before encountered . . . [I] managed to review the book without making any substantive comments whatsoever!” I understand his disappointment, but my critique of the Woolfolk text was never meant to be a conventional book review and, hence, I felt no obligation to “deal with substantive strengths and weaknesses of the text.” As I thought my title made plain, my target was “*the* educational psychology text,” not “*an* educational psychology text.” For this larger purpose, as I explained, “I could have chosen (or picked on) any one of a dozen or so educational psychology texts to prosecute my case” against this academic genre. And, in fact, I listed a half-dozen suitably representative textbooks in an endnote. I chose the Woolfolk text to illustrate my complaints simply because its sales and adoptions suggest it is *exemplary* of the genre in both senses—a *typical* example and an *ideal* one.

One of my complaints about the genre (again, merely illustrated by the Woolfolk text) is the extravagant use of colour photographs. Setting aside the fact that such abundant full-colour “artwork” substantially inflates the price of these textbooks, I contend that the photographs, themselves, are mostly pointless, often intellectually insulting, occasionally maudlin, and sometimes politically manipulative. I hasten to add that I have no objection, *in principle*, to the use of photographs in textbooks if it adds to our understanding. And furthermore, I do not doubt that, as Murray claims, “there is evidence from cognitive psychology that, in general, imagery and visualization do contribute to encoding and retrieval of written material.” But my question is: Do these *particular* photographs serve any useful expository or explanatory purpose in these texts? Murray’s hedged answer is that “at least 80% of them *could potentially* [italics added] serve an expository or explanatory role with respect to educational psychology.” I take it that this is Murray’s elliptical way of admitting that “at least 80% of them [*do not actually*] serve an expository or explanatory role. . . .”

More to his point, Murray mentions approvingly two photographs (on page 377 of Woolfolk) which he insists “could help students learn the meaning of competitive and cooperative classroom reward structures.” One photograph shows a teenage boy and girl shouldering in tandem a length of pipe (cooperative); the other, a teenage boy and girl pulling on a rope against one another in a tug of

war (competitive). Now for starters, I cannot imagine an English-speaking university student enrolled in an educational psychology course who does not know the meaning of the words “competitive” and “cooperative.” Second, these photographs are exactly the sort of alarming evidence of how far the “dumbing down” of university textbooks has proceeded. At most, the photographs, like a child’s picture dictionary or “pictionary,” simply illustrate elementary vocabulary!

But perhaps the most decisive evidence of just how pedagogically pointless and superfluous these photographs are (evidence from cognitive psychology notwithstanding) comes from Murray himself. Even though he has used this text for some five or so years, he cheerfully admits that he had “never noticed most of the [90-plus!] photographs in Woolfolk until [I] brought them to [his] attention.” What else can I say?

However cognitively empty these photographs may be, it seems obvious to me that a number of them are intended to convey certain socio-political sentiments—especially tolerance for diversity. Murray, however, dismisses my suspicion as a trumped-up charge based on a “biased sampling” of the photographs. Smith, on the other hand, clearly takes my complaint quite seriously and, indeed, offers a much more speculative and sinister ideological interpretation of the photographs than I think they can plausibly bear. Whatever the truth of the matter, I wish only to point out that the two respondents are sharply at odds with one another. Murray regards most of the photographs as either politically neutral or, as motherhood once was, non-controversial. Smith, quite to the contrary, contends that “the Woolfolk colour photographs are anything but benign.” For example, he suggests that the photo of the White preschooler bottle-feeding a Black baby doll, far from being merely “politically correct” kitsch, “can just as easily be interpreted as dominant White male America forcing nothing of positive value down the throat of helpless Black America.” I must say, Smith’s interpretation here strikes me as a tad over-the-top. As Freud once cautioned, sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.

In addition to the abundance of useless colour photographs that saturate educational psychology texts, I am critical of the abundance of ancillary materials and services marketed alongside these texts. They seem to me to de-skill and sometimes pre-empt instruction. Now Murray simply dismisses my worry as “unbelievably silly and childish”—as silly, presumably, as objecting to the exchange of teaching tips between colleagues. Smith, again to the contrary, is more sympathetic. He grants that I am “quite properly . . . concerned about the de-skilling and instructor-proofing that over-dependence on such material can produce.” But Smith has an additional worry that goes beyond mine. He is concerned that these aids promote, by example, an overly didactic, “stand-and-deliver” model of teaching, and in so doing, fail to practice what the text often preaches.

I must confess that Murray’s own easy, take-it-or-leave-it attitude toward this support material has caused me to re-think my objections. Are these ancillary

materials really just like teaching tips swapped by next-door colleagues? If so, what exactly is my beef? First, I still find it hard to imagine a colleague either willing or able to supply me with detailed classroom discussion questions, hundreds of colour transparencies keyed to my text and ready to use, a hefty manual with additional student activities, hundreds of handout masters, a computerized test bank, a call-in testing service, videodiscs and videotapes specifically keyed to my text, and so on and so on. I suppose one could argue that the only difference between a colleague's teaching tips and this panoply of supplementary materials is one of degree. But then so is the difference between a drop of water and an ocean.

But the more important qualitative difference is the presumptuous and prescriptive detail inherent in these supplementary materials. A teaching tip is usually meant as a tentative, take-it-or-leave-it suggestion for improvement—as something you might want to try to improve your teaching. The supplementary materials that accompany most educational psychology textbooks, however, presume to do most of your teaching for you! Whereas Smith is concerned about the style of teaching they model, I am worried more about the content they specify and pre-package. The net effect of these detailed, pre-fabricated lecture outlines, classroom questions, transparencies, student activities, test items, and the like is that they over-determine what is important, what is worth talking about, what is worth knowing—in short, what is to be taught. They pre-empt the very decisions that ought to be made by instructors and their students. True, the individual instructor can choose to ignore these ancillary materials. One can, as Mrs. Reagan once advised, “Just say ‘No!’” But this individual expedient, it seems to me, fails to face up to the larger issue of just what the popularity and successful marketing of these canned materials and commercial services say about the current state of educational psychology as an academic discipline and university teaching as a scholarly profession.

My final bugbear about contemporary educational psychology textbooks is that they have become increasingly contaminated by ideology and political advocacy—possibly because they wish to portray the discipline as socially engaged. What is insidiously miseducative about this trend, however, is that various contestable moral commitments and political preferences (recast in the dispassionate rhetoric of the textbook) are likely to be mistaken by students as the facts and findings of empirical social science. I cited Chapter 5 in the Woolfolk text, “The Impact of Culture and Community,” as a particularly blatant and extended example of my complaint.

Murray agrees, although grudgingly, that from time to time, Chapter 5 is “more concerned with political advocacy and too far removed from research evidence” and that “Woolfolk should differentiate more clearly between conclusions based on research evidence and conclusions not based on research evidence.” He dismisses, however, my citation of the equal educational opportunity principle (on p. 155 of Woolfolk) as less than compelling evidence of blatant political

advocacy. For Murray, the principle represents “a rather weak form of political advocacy” which only a Nazi sympathizer could possibly disagree with. True enough. But Murray has overlooked or else chosen to ignore something crucial in my example. The excerpt begins:

The *idea* of multicultural education is that all students—male, female, disabled, rich, poor, from different racial and ethnic groups, or speaking different languages—all *students* should have a full and equal opportunity to learn in school and to be respected.

Readers please note, this statement poses as a textbook *definition* of multicultural education—not as a *declaration* of the equal educational opportunity principle. Although equal educational opportunity may well be politically non-controversial, multicultural education certainly is not (see Bernstein, 1994; Postman, 1995; Schlesinger, 1992)! To imply that multicultural education is synonymous with equal educational opportunity seems to me to be not only blatant, but deceptive, political advocacy.

Smith, I fear, regards my aversion to mixing the empirical with the normative, or “is” with “ought,” as presumptive evidence that I hold a naive, Newtonian, “strictly empirical” view of educational psychology which, in turn, implies that the discipline should (if it could) be hermetically sealed against social and political influences. By contrast, Smith, I presume, leans toward a postmodern, socially or culturally constructed view of educational psychology—a view that abandons Newton and instead depends upon specious appeals to chaos theory, relativity theory, and Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle. However, if by socially or culturally constructed Smith means merely that educational psychology cannot help but reflect the human purposes, interests, beliefs, and even prejudices of the ambient culture, then we have no quarrel. But by acknowledging this circumstance, I see nothing that would make the distinction between the empirical and the normative otiose, or that would, therefore, “make the inclusion of social issues mandatory” in an educational psychology text or course. Because educational psychology is inevitably contaminated by social and political influences does not require that it forsake its empirical warrant and become *ersatz* moral or political philosophy.

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