

## **Editorial: Research in psychology: in search of quality assurance**

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In a previous editorial (Maree, 2010), I referred to the prominent role of assessment in psychological research. Everything in the amended scope of practice of psychologists revolves around this critical activity. In this editorial, I wish to return to this debate, but from a different angle.

Much has been written already about the unexpectedly large increase in the number of Grade 12 learners who passed Grade 12 at the end of 2010. Some commentators expressed their surprise and even scepticism about this 'spectacular' achievement and questioned how such a dramatic improvement could have taken place in 2010. This was the year when the Soccer World Cup was hosted in South Africa, leading to a serious loss of teaching and learning time. It was also the year of a major teacher strike, which resulted in a further loss of crucial learning time. Several analysts asked whether standards were dropping, citing the fact that universities are continually requiring better achievement in Grade 12 for admission to most fields of study. For example, over the past number of years, the entrance requirements for study in Engineering at the University of Pretoria have been raised to 80%+ in Mathematics and 70–79% in Physical Sciences. Other commentators expressed their excitement and satisfaction with the improvement and said that the Department of Basic Education was on track to reach its target of an 80% pass rate in 2014. Another group of education analysts raised questions about Umalusi's role as an education quality assurer. More particularly, they expressed doubts about the 'reliability' and 'validity' of the results and called on Umalusi to explain how the marks had been standardised. Umalusi, however, has consistently refused to provide details of the standardisation process (which it referred to as 'confidential') and asked analysts to differentiate between 'confidentiality' and 'secrecy'. Even though this is not an appropriate platform to debate the validity or lack thereof of the improvement in Grade 12 results, it is clear that unless issues of validity and reliability regarding the assessment of Grade 12s are addressed timeously, professionally and transparently, commentators and lay persons alike will continue to question 'improvements' in Grade 12 marks. If the validity of Grade 12 results is questioned by national and international experts, local institutions will increasingly seek selection criteria other than Grade 12 marks for entrance into tertiary education. International institutions of higher learning may also be reluctant to acknowledge the integrity of the National Senior Certificate thereby creating an unacceptable and untenable situation. Already a trend is emerging among parents (who can afford to do so) to send their children to private schools whose examinations are largely linked to and regulated by international standards-generating bodies (e.g. schools that write examinations set by the Independent Examinations Board). While the goal of securing the best possible opportunities for one's children is laudable, the downside of the trend to send children to private schools is that those learners whose parents can least afford private education are once again disadvantaged. The following vicious cycle is perpetuated: poor/disadvantaged → inadequate support at school → inadequate achievement → inappropriate and/or inadequate study opportunities → inadequate realisation of personal potential → inadequate self-realisation → inadequate contribution to society at large.

In attempting to resolve the situation, the following questions will have to be answered by the Department of Basic Education: How can it be 'proven' beyond reasonable doubt that increases in Grade 12 marks are reliable and valid? How can sceptics be convinced about the quality of the Grade 12 marks? The issue of quality assurance, at every conceivable level of assessment, and defined from either a quantitative, a qualitative or a multi-method research paradigm, needs to be addressed when results of whatever kind are released before valid conclusions can be drawn, and before these results can be factored into selection mechanisms devised by universities. In the interests of all concerned, I would therefore like to suggest that professionals from the Department of Basic Education come

together with researchers from psychology departments at universities to discuss the challenges outlined above and to find solutions long before the next set of Grade 12 results is released.

Against this background, it is therefore not surprising that all the articles in this issue of the *South African Journal of Psychology (SAJP)* (irrespective of the research paradigm adopted) discuss issues of quality assurance (e.g. reliability, validity, trustworthiness, credibility), be it directly or indirectly. The quality of any research on matters such as rigour in research can be assessed only once the steps to promote quality assurance have been clearly delineated. Readers are accordingly invited to comment on how the different authors deal with quality assurance in their articles and whether 'popular' strategies to facilitate such assurance can still be considered sufficiently relevant in the postmodern era.

To enable readers to find common trends in the different contributions, the articles have been placed in four groups that deal with similar issues. The first three articles can be grouped broadly under the heading model development and assessment.

### **Model development and assessment**

The lead article, *A meta-analysis of coefficient alpha for the Impact of Event Scales: a reliability generalization study*, is also the first international contribution. In the article, Vassar, Knaup, Hale, and Hale (2011) report on a score reliability meta-analysis across studies using the Impact of Event Scales (IES). Studies using the measure were located through electronic database searches and then separated to identify those studies that had calculated and reported reliability coefficients from their own data. The remaining 66 articles were subsequently coded to identify potential study characteristics that might influence the variation in reliability estimates. The study results provide useful information — in terms of scale performance — for researchers interested in using the scale in future research.

Research on HIV&AIDS remains high on the agenda of policy makers and researchers. In the second contribution, *Developing a cognitive behavioural therapy model to assist women to deal with HIV and stigma*, Tshabalala and Visser (2011) discuss the development, implementation and assessment of a model of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) to help HIV-positive women deal with HIV and internalised stigma. Analysis of the qualitative data yielded five common themes in the experience of HIV: feelings of powerlessness, anger and guilt, destructive behaviour, experience of stigma and uncertainty about the future. These themes were used in the development of an intervention that was subsequently implemented and evaluated. Non-parametric Mann-Whitney tests indicated that after therapy the experimental group experienced lower levels of depression, internalised stigma and negative coping, and higher levels of self-esteem and positive coping, compared to the control group.

In the third article and second international contribution, *Turkish students' metaphorical conceptualisations of school counsellors*, Özabacı (2011) explores secondary school learners' conceptual metaphors to help counsellors evaluate the learners' views on counselling and to support the continued evolution and modification of metaphors so that they embody the principles of counselling revealed in counselling studies and during field placement experiences. School counsellors can therefore use metaphor analysis as a means of assisting learners in the examination of their values, beliefs and philosophies about guidance and counselling.

The next group of articles deal with research and the way in which it informs intervention and prevention.

### **Research informing intervention and prevention**

Eloff, Forsyth, Finestone, Ebersöhn, Visser, Sikkema, Boeving, and Ferreira, in the third article with an international flavour, *Intervention groups for HIV-infected women: the need for additional services*, report on some results of the Kgolo Mmogo study. This study is a randomised controlled intervention trial that examines the effectiveness of a group intervention to enhance resilience in

HIV-infected South African mothers and their young children. Observing that current referral systems are overloaded and that few specialised services are available, the authors suggest that participants may benefit from the intervention as a first point of support and that psychosocial referrals should be delayed until functional advice is provided (within the group) on how to access wider support more effectively. They argue that socioeconomic constraints, often manifesting as lack of mobility to access service delivery, can severely impact the implementation of an intervention study in a developing context, and they conclude that the latter constraint is experienced in terms of limited access to experimental intervention groups and services from referrals.

Jaga and Bagraim (2011), in their contribution, *The relationship between work-family enrichment and work-family satisfaction outcomes*, investigate the positive aspects of the crossing point between work and family by examining the relationship between work-family enrichment and work-family satisfaction outcomes. And in their article, *An emic perspective on the dynamics of non-fatal suicidal behaviour in a sample of South African Indian women*, Beekrum, Valjee, and Collings (2011) describe the dynamics of non-fatal suicidal behaviour in a high-risk population group in South African, namely, adolescent females of Indian origin. The findings of both studies have important implications for intervention, prevention and future research.

The third subset of articles deal with training issues in psychology.

### **Training issues in psychology**

Pillay and Johnston (2011), in their article, *Intern clinical psychologists' experiences of their training and internship placements*, report on a mail survey of all intern clinical psychologists registered with the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) during 2009. Most of the respondents in the survey were keen to pursue further research and doctoral studies, while approximately a third of the respondents intended emigrating. These respondents revealed significantly higher levels of dissatisfaction with aspects of training and supervision, experienced significantly greater language difficulties with patients and were significantly less positive about community service. All professionals involved in community service should benefit from applying the lessons learnt from this research project.

In another contribution on training issues in psychology, *Judgments of widely held beliefs about psychological phenomena among South African and Australian postgraduate psychology students*, Kagee and O'Donovan (2011) report on an international study where they compared the views of South African and Australian fourth-year psychology students on the factual correctness of statements of psychological phenomena shown to be incorrect by empirical research. A surprisingly large proportion of the students at both these universities believed many incorrect statements to be true. The authors discuss the results with regard to the teaching of critical thinking skills in psychology courses and the influence of popular culture on beliefs about human behaviour. The implications of this research for the teaching of scientific and critical reasoning skills in academic psychology programmes are far-reaching and should also be of interest to professionals in related disciplines.

In the last contribution to this particular segment of the issue, Ramgoon, Dalasile, Paruk and Patel (2011), in their article, *An exploratory study of trainee and registered psychologists' perceptions about indigenous healing systems*, confirm that the health care system in South Africa is located primarily within the dominant biomedical model. They state that the passing of the Traditional Health Practitioners Act (No. 22 of 2007) paved the way for the formal recognition of approximately 200,000 traditional healers and their integration into the health care system, thereby challenging the *status quo*. The authors explore trainee and registered psychologists' perceptions about indigenous healing and its formal recognition in the existing health care infrastructure. The findings, which suggest that registered psychologists hold more positive views about indigenous healing than trainee psychologists and are more likely to collaborate with traditional healers in their work, merit serious attention by all those involved in the training of psychologists.

The last segment of this issue of the *SAJP* contains two articles dealing with the link between

psychology and related disciplines. Incidentally, I am often asked by professionals in related fields of study whether they may submit articles for possible publication in *SAJP*. The answer is, of course, 'yes' — as long as the content relates to psychology and is likely to be of interest to our readers.

### **The link between psychology and related disciplines**

In the first contribution in this section, *Towards a definition of philosophical counselling in South Africa*, Louw and Fourie (2011) endeavour to define philosophical counselling (PC) as practised in South Africa by giving South African philosophical counsellors the opportunity to tell their stories about PC. The major themes that emerged from these stories were the existential need for the other, the conceptual need for the other, engaging with the other methodically, and caring for the other. While the stories resonate with current and overwhelmingly European and North American conceptions of PC, they also reveal a uniquely South African drive to revise these conceptions. The findings may well mediate a dialogue between philosophical counsellors and other professionals, particularly psychotherapists.

Dealing with the crucial issue of burnout, attempting to find ways to prevent it, and dealing with its effects are certainly not limited to the psychology profession. In the final article, *The impact of burnout on the intention to quit among professional nurses in the Free State region — a national crisis?*, Pienaar and Bester (2011) confirm that thousands of qualified nurses leave the South African health sector annually for various reasons including burnout. The authors attempt to determine the level of burnout among professional nurses and explore its influence on intention to leave the profession. As the pressure on all professionals working in the public health sector is likely to increase, the article warrants the attention of practising psychologists, those of us involved in training, and policy makers alike.

The contributions in this issue are, once again, diverse in terms of institution, gender and national/international profile. We are particularly pleased about the increase in the number of articles authored by black researchers. As before, we not only request colleagues to review articles and to submit their reviews within the time allocated for this critical task but also encourage colleagues who are currently not on our reviewer list to contact us. Sadly, we still experience considerable difficulty in soliciting a sufficient number of reviews to help us arrive at an informed decision regarding acceptance or rejection of articles. We also reiterate that reviewers receive three CPD points for each article reviewed, one of which is for ethics. However we do not issue CPD certificates. The letter from the editor, in which receipt of your review is acknowledged, serves as your CPD certificate.

Should you have any ideas for improving the *SAJP*, please feel free to contact me personally ([kobus.maree@up.ac.za](mailto:kobus.maree@up.ac.za)). Your feedback is needed to shape the future direction of the journal.

As always, I wish to thank colleagues involved in the editorial and publishing process for their sterling help and support: Associate Editors, Willy Nel and Martin Strous (who, owing to a heavy workload, has resigned from the *SAJP*), our Consulting Editor, Anthony Pillay, our Consulting Editor: Statistics, Tyrone Pretorius, our Publishing Editor, Erna Kinsey, Fatima and Nosipho from the PsySSA offices, and our Editorial Assistant, Temi Nkambule (who also has resigned to allow her time to complete her internship in educational psychology).

All that remains is to thank Martin Strous and Temi Nkambule for their exceptional work at the *SAJP* over the past number of years (three years in the case of Dr Strous, two years in the case of Ms Nkambule). We also wish to extend a hearty welcome to Linda Theron (North-West University, Vaaldriehoek Campus), who has accepted our invitation to join the editorial team as an Associate Editor, and Moipone Williams, our new Editorial Assistant (arguably the most important cog in the *SAJP* machine!). We sincerely hope you will enjoy your time with us at *SAJP*.

Enjoy reading this issue.

**Kobus Maree**

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