

Editorial: Promoting children's rights: rekindling respectivity¹

J. G. Maree

University of Pretoria
kobus.maree@up.ac.za

"By the crowd they have been broken; by the crowd they shall be healed." (Sandra L. Bloom)

The past few years have been a productive period for the *SAJP*. We recently learned that the *SAJP*'s impact factor for 2011 was 0.457, while the five-year impact factor is 0.630. These statistics confirm the *SAJP*'s standing as the leading psychology journal on the continent, and, for this achievement, I wish to thank the core editorial staff as well as our colleagues at PsySSA for their tireless efforts. The downward trend that emerged a few years ago has now been reversed, and further growth can be expected as the *SAJP* will be published both online and in hard copy format from 1 January 2013.

As I page through this issue of the *SAJP*, I must commend Prof. Kate Cockcroft on soliciting eight excellent articles for her guest issue, which will provide interesting reading for all colleagues working in neuropsychology and related fields. The general section, too, contains a number of outstanding articles. The contributions are again diverse in terms of institution, gender, and international profile. Several of the contributions are from black authors, but we would like even more established and emerging black researchers to use the *SAJP* as an outlet for their research.

This is the penultimate issue of the *SAJP* with me as editor (as readers may be aware, Prof. Anthony Pillay will assume editorship from 1 January 2013). In this issue, I would like to air an issue that has been troubling me increasingly in recent years.

I will begin by sharing a few thoughts on my experiences as a researcher in disadvantaged areas in South Africa and then relate these experiences to the question of children's rights. More particularly, I will deal with the plight of so many children in the country and suggest ways of improving their situation. I will then briefly review the contributions of a general nature in this issue. Our special issue editor's editorial appears before the special issue section.

My experiences as a researcher in disadvantaged areas in South Africa

Over the years, I have travelled extensively throughout the country visiting schools in rural areas and townships alike. I have enjoyed every moment of my 'work'; it has energised me, added meaning to my life and enabled me to make a social contribution. However, much of what I have seen has saddened me. The stories of so many of the children gave me sleepless nights not only about their individual futures but, more significantly, about our collective future as a nation.

Abuse of children's rights routinely witnessed by me and fellow researchers during on-site visits and outreach programmes occurred in respect of health, education, security, child-headed households, forced circumcision, corporal punishment, and street children. Some examples are listed below.

- A nine-month old baby raped by her mother's 'lover' and subsequently 'dumped' into a bush.
- A 14-year-old girl forced to witness the gang-rape of her five-year old sister.
- A six-year old girl with a severe disability abandoned by her parents.
- A child-headed family of three (a seven-year old boy and his five-year old brother and four-year old sister) with no place to go after the shack, in which they had lived by themselves after the death of their parents, burnt down. The eldest sibling had been taking care of the two youngsters by begging for food. The three youngsters were eventually placed in an informal 'place of safety'.
- A 16-year-old girl forced to witness the rape of her mother by a gang of thugs.
- A five-year-old girl raped by her father and cast into a fire by him.

The list of abuse is endless. Abuse is seemingly so rife and ingrained in our society that eradicating it will require a concerted effort by all citizens. Because of the accompanying trauma, it is unlikely

that even years of intensive therapy will fully remove the emotional scars.

Fortunately, informal 'places of safety' attempting to alleviate the plight of these unfortunate youngsters are mushrooming across South Africa. Personal involvement in some of these institutions has given me the following insights.

- Such institutions are having an uphill battle getting registered with the Department of Health and Welfare even though they are in a position, literally, to save the lives of some of the most vulnerable children in our society.
- The desire of these institutions to help these children is overwhelming and humbling.
- This desire is colourless, genderless, and without creed, nationality or geographical features.
- South Africa has the resources to change the situation of disadvantaged and abused children.
- Real angels are walking this planet, and one of them is Ms. Catherine Sepato, caretaker of the Tshwaraganang orphanage, who selflessly and almost single-handedly looks after numerous homeless and abandoned children in the Hammanskraal region. She has also managed (after a struggle of some five years) to obtain listing from the Departments of Health and Social Development. Ms. Sepato can best be described as a doer from whom we can all learn so much.

The practical value of debates on children's rights

Numerous conferences have been held on the abuse of children's rights, and countless articles on the topic have appeared in scholarly and popular scientific journals and magazines. Many books, position papers, and laws and charters have dealt with the subject. Yet the situation has not improved over the past few decades. Despite all the talking and writing and promises of renaissances and transitions, there is little indication that the lot of disadvantaged children is about to change in either the short, medium or long term.

Despite all the theorising and speculating about children's rights, steps to curtail the abuse of these rights have been largely ineffectual. An aggravating factor is that key stakeholders are not doing enough to turn around a situation that is, in my opinion, out of hand and threatening the future of the country.

The desperate situation of so many children in South Africa

According to UNICEF South Africa, poverty affects South African children even more than adults: 65% of all South African children live in poverty as opposed to 45% of adults. Poverty among children is most prevalent among black children with 71% of these children living in poverty (UNICEF South Africa and Department of Social Development, 2010; UNICEF South Africa and the Financial and Fiscal Commission of South Africa, 2010). According to Tshabalala-Msimang (2008, p. 2): "The burden of disease among South African youth has taken a particular character. There are key health challenges facing young people and affecting their well-being. These include teenage pregnancies, maternal mortality, reproductive and sexual health, HIV and AIDS, and non-communicable diseases such as cancer, diabetes, and hypertension. Although the health sector and other relevant key stakeholders have tackled these challenges, the campaigns for sexuality education have not had the desired effect and instead, a youth sub-culture of risky sexual behaviour has continued." Holborn and Eddy (2011) confirms that the numbers of orphans and child-headed households are rising steadily. The recent textbook fiasco in Limpopo province and the frustration among educators at all levels is further eroding children's prospects of leading successful, meaningful lives.

Government is evidently concerned about the growing number of people (blacks and, to an increasing extent, whites) living in abject poverty in informal settlements, yet seems incapable of stemming the tide of escalating poverty and inequality. The accompanying increase in the number of single-parent families and orphans makes the overall picture even gloomier.

Reasons for hope despite the above dark scenario

Because of the ingrainedness of the oral tradition in African culture and history, I will conclude this part of the editorial with a 'story'. Only, this is a true story.

A remarkable woman, Ms. Catherine Sepato (whom I mentioned earlier) wanted to know how she could be of help (after I had delivered food and clothing, donated by some true Samaritans, to her orphanage). I responded: "Would you be willing to share your earliest anecdote with me and readers of the journal? I am curious to find out why you do what you do and what motivates and inspires you." She then proceeded to recount the following anecdote.

"On Christmas day, at the age of four, my father gave me a pair of shoes. Unfortunately, the shoes were neither of the same size nor of the same colour. I tried them on, but the left shoe (the smaller of the two) hurt a lot. And I felt ashamed to wear the shoes to the family gathering, fearing that I would be humiliated and mocked." (*"Moletlong wa losika, ke tshogile gore ke tlile go sotliwa le go tshegiwa."*)

She sighed and continued: Yet, my pleas fell on deaf ears, Father insisted: "You will wear the shoes to the family meeting." I cried, and pleaded, but no one listened.' (*"Le fa go ntse jaalo, dikopo tsa me ga di a ka tsa sekegediwa tsebe, rre o ne a pateletsa jaana: 'O tlile go rwala ditlhako tseo go ya moletlong wa losika'."*)

She sighed again: "My fears were realised when we arrived at the gathering. My cousins and nieces laughed at me, mocked me."

A sad smile spread across her face. "I know how it feels to be mocked and to experience discomfort." (*"Ke a itse gore go jang go tshegiwa le go itemogela go se mnisege sentle."*)

Readers familiar with the theory and practice of the Three Anecdotes Technique (TAT) (Adler, 1932; Maree, 2012; Savickas, 2009; 2011a; 2011b) will appreciate the profundity of this story. Firstly, the first verb (give) is pivotal: Catherine is a giver. The act of giving characterises her entire being and life philosophy; it epitomises her main life theme. Secondly, by helping others, she is healing herself. Thirdly, she is turning her pain into a social contribution. She is actively mastering what she passively suffered (Savickas, 2011). Fourthly, by doing something (acting or moving), she is making magic happen (Savickas, 2011). Her work or career story (taking care of voiceless, vulnerable children) is her life story. Her life portrait, constructed over time, is comprised of the five elements delineated above.

As long as South Africa keeps on producing people like Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, F. W. de Klerk and, equally importantly, unsung heroes such as Ms. Sepato and others at the Tshwaraganang orphanage, I will remain hopeful. Prof. Mark Savickas, global leader in the field of career psychology, has taught us the theory and practice of administering (career) counselling and how to design successful lives and make social contributions, and Ms. Sepato has demonstrated what it means to live that theory and practice under the most depressing and trying circumstances.

Maslow's (1970, p. 254) words, "Let people clearly realize that every time they threaten someone or humiliate or hurt unnecessarily or dominate or reject another human being, they become forces for the creation of psychopathology, even if these be small forces. Let them recognize also that every man who is kind, helpful, decent, psychologically democratic, affectionate, and warm, is a psychotherapeutic force even though a small one", are particularly apt in our situation here in South Africa. I also believe that everyone, given the opportunity, and irrespective of their negative life experiences, can go on to achieve the greatness of the mentioned role models. Let us all start making a difference. Now. Today. Politicians, professionals, non-professionals, employers and employees. There are sufficient resources and goodwill in this country to secure a better life for all. Give of yourself. Your money. Your expertise. Your organisational skills. Your verbal skills. Aimless, repetitive complaining and finger-pointing will achieve nothing. Nor will complacency. Action is what is needed. More particularly, the restoration of children's rights should be based on mutual respect shown by all South Africans.

As long as the critical mass of benevolence and generosity remains intact, South Africa can move forward regardless of the direness of the situation. The goodwill of a few dedicated people is laudable but not the solution; neither is the dedication of 67 minutes once a year to good works the sole answer. What will help materially is if government and parastatal organisations can begin to marshal and direct their considerable resources more constructively. Rumours that a major parastatal

recently spent R36 million on seven fun days for family members can engender cynicism and anger among the millions of unemployed and cash-strapped South Africans. Government and its agencies should set an example for the rest of us to follow.

I will now briefly discuss each of the contributions in this special issue consecutively under the headings listed in the table of contents.

Articles of a general nature

Mabena and Moodley (2012) argue that major health crises often result in patients turning to spirituality to find meaning in their illness. In the leading article in this section, *Spiritual meanings of illness in patients with cervical cancer*, the authors report on a qualitative research project involving 16 cervical cancer patients that attempted to gain insight into the psychological understanding of chronic illness. The authors conclude that the spiritual dimension (as an extension of palliative care) should form part of the holistic management of such patients.

Crimes involving sexual violence often result in the secondary traumatising of the victims, which is compounded by disappointing conviction rates. The situation is exacerbated in the case of rape survivors with intellectual disabilities. In the second article in the general section, *The rape survivor with intellectual disability vs. the court*, Pillay (2012) argues that courts of law seemingly expect more from rape survivors with intellectual disabilities than those without such disabilities. The author discusses the many difficulties faced by rape survivors with intellectual disabilities during the process of giving evidence against alleged perpetrators.

In the third article in the general section, *Narratives of power and abuse in gay relationships in the Cape Metropole*, Henderson (2012) contends that the utterances of people such as Robert Mugabe, Sam Nujoma and Yoweri Museveni, who maintain the stereotype of homosexuality's inconsistency with African traditions and cultural beliefs, have deterred black gay men from admitting to their sexual orientation. Employing a qualitative research paradigm comprising in-depth, semi-structured interviews, the author in his research attempted to determine how gay men constructed their (gay) identity and established relationships in a community in the Cape Metropole where heterosexuality is the norm. Henderson's research revealed how the confluence of modalities of social inequality contributed to the abuse experienced by the gay men in his study. In his article, he also discusses the effect of heteronormative stereotypes on the occurrence of abusive experiences.

A growing number of voices have been questioning the ethicality of resilience-related research (Reddy et al., 2010). In the fourth article, *Resilience research with South African youth: Caveats and ethical complexities*, Theron (2012) discusses whether the study of resilience should be examined. A thematic review of purposefully selected articles revealed that a number of cautions (which can be grouped together into five themes) characteristic of resilience processes are highlighted by international resilience literature published from 2000 to 2012. Theron uses these findings to interpret South African studies on youth resilience published from 1990 to 2011 and proposes a framework for future resilience research. Against the framework of the explosion in resilience research over the past few decades, this timely and interesting piece of scholarly writing makes an important contribution to the current body of research on resilience.

Ample evidence exists that a sense of connectedness in educational environments promotes mental and emotional well-being (Hawkins, Catalano, Kosterman, Abbott, & Hill, 1999). In the fifth contribution in the general section, *Factors impeding school connectedness: a case study*, Rawatlal and Petersen (2012) argue that social connectedness in the school environment is central to the delivery of effective basic education in South Africa and that it can contribute to a reduction in high-risk behaviour in adolescents. The authors used an ecological framework to interpret their results, and, unsurprisingly, peer pressure on learners to belong to groups resisting school regulations emerged as a theme. The adolescents in this study also sought help for interpersonal problems from peers and relatives rather than from educational authorities. The recommendations warrant the attention of all those involved in basic education.

Psychology departments routinely request applicants to submit narratives (including auto-

biographies) during the selection of candidates for postgraduate fields of study. In the last article in this section, *The Psychological-Bildungsroman: exploring narrative identity, audience effect and genre in autobiographies of trainee-psychologists*, Knoetze and Stroud (2012) pose the following kinds of questions.

- What factors prompt the emergence of commonalities between several autobiographies even though each autobiography presents idiosyncratic identities?
- How can these autobiographies be composed so that common threads emerge?
- What are the ethical, educational, legal, selection and training implications of the investigation of these commonalities?

Following an experience-centred approach to narrative analysis, the authors analysed the autobiographies of nine successful applicants for a psychology course. Given the importance of the debate on the reliability and validity of selection processes for psychology courses, this study is a must read for all academics involved in the selection of students for courses in psychology.

As always, I urge readers to submit contributions to stimulate the debate on psychology in South Africa and to help expand the network of scholars in South Africa, in the SADC region and in the rest of the world. Your feedback is important to us. Let us try to be innovative and creative and so keep abreast of the changing times we live in.

I wish to thank everybody involved in the editorial and publishing process for their sterling work. This includes our core editorial staff, namely, our consulting and managing (and incoming) editor, Prof. Anthony Pillay; our consulting editor: statistics, Prof. Tyrone Pretorius; our books editor, Prof. Kopano Ratele; our copy editors, Dr Willy Nel and Prof. Linda Theron; our publishing editor, Ms Erna Kinsey; and our editorial secretary, Ms Moipone Williams, who meet regularly (be it electronically or in person) to discuss issues related to the smooth running of the journal. This is a selfless task undertaken by those with the interests of colleagues, the journal, and the scholarly community at large at heart.

I would also like to thank all colleagues who have reviewed manuscripts over the past few months. Your willingness to work late into the evenings and over weekends does not go unnoticed and is a real service to the editors, the readers, and the scholarly community. Lastly, I wish to thank Mr Tim Steward for his editing of this editorial.

Enjoy reading this issue of *SAJP* and remember to send in your manuscripts for future issues.

Kobus Maree

NOTE

1 By 'respectivity' I mean that showing respect should be a reciprocal act.

REFERENCES

- Adler, A. (1932). *What life should mean to you*. London, England: Allen & Unwin Ltd.
- Hawkins, D. I., Catalano, R. F., Kosterman, R., Abbott, R., & Hill, K. G. (1999). Preventing adolescent high risk behavior by strengthening protection during childhood. *Archives of Paediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*, 153, 226-234.
- Henderson, N. (2012). Narratives of power and abuse in gay relationships in the Cape metropole. *South African Journal of Psychology*, 42, 323-332.
- Holborn, L., & Eddy, G. (2011). *First steps to healing the South African family*. Johannesburg, South Africa: South African Institute of Race Relations.
- Knoetze, J. J., & Stroud, S. P. (2012). The psychological-Bildungsroman: Exploring narrative identity, audience effect and genre in autobiographies of trainee-psychologists. *South African Journal of Psychology*, 42, 358-367.
- Mabena, N., & Moodley, P. (2012). Spiritual meanings of illness in patients with cervical cancer. *South African Journal of Psychology*, 42, 301-311.
- Maree, J. G. (2012). Using "informal" hypnotherapy in career counselling: Blending Savickas and Erickson

- to “free the angel”. *South African Journal of Psychology*, 42, 156-168.
- Maslow, A. H. (1970). *Motivation and personality*. New York, NY: Harper and Row.
- Pillay, A. L. (2012). The intellectually disabled rape survivor vs. the court. *South African Journal of Psychology*, 42, 312-322.
- Rawatlal, K. V., & Petersen, I. (2012). Factors impeding school connectedness: A case study. *South African Journal of Psychology*, 42, 346-357.
- Reddy, S. P., James, S., Sewpaul, R., Koopman, F., Funani, N. I., Sifunda, S., ... Ouardien, R. G. (2010). *Umthente Uhlaba Usamila — The South African Youth Risk Behaviour Survey 2008*. Cape Town, RSA: South African Medical Research Council. Retrieved from <http://www.mrc.ac.za/healthpromotion/healthpromotion.htm>
- Savickas, M. L. (2009, April). *Utilising early anecdotes in counselling in the 21st century*. Keynote presentation, SA Society for Clinical Hypnosis. Pretoria.
- Savickas, M. L. (2011a). Reshaping the story of career counselling. In K. Maree (Ed.), *Shaping the story — A guide to facilitate narrative counselling* (pp. 1-3). Rotterdam, the Netherlands: Sense.
- Savickas, M. L. (2011b). *Career counselling*. Washington, DC: APA.
- Theron, L. C. (2012). Resilience research with South African youth: Caveats and ethical complexities. *South African Journal of Psychology*, 42, 333-345.
- Tshabalala-Msimang, M. E. (2008). *Foreword: National Youth Policy 2009-2014*. Pretoria. South Africa: The Presidency of South Africa.
- UNICEF South Africa and Department of Social Development (2010). *Vulnerability of children and poor families to the economic recession of 2008-2009 in South Africa*. Pretoria, South Africa: UNICEF South Africa.
- UNICEF South Africa and the Financial and Fiscal Commission of South Africa (2010). *The impact of the international financial crisis on child poverty in South Africa*. Pretoria, South Africa: UNICEF South Africa.