

Shifting the Publications Game: The Case of a Textbook Project at a Historically Black University

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During 1995 a small group of psychologists initiated a writing project which has culminated in the publication of a textbook for South African students. This paper describes the conditions and factors which motivated the project and contributed to its success. The data for this paper comprises themes which emerged from the transcripts of interviews conducted with members of the editorial collective and several contributors to the textbook. The objective in doing this is to stimulate similar initiatives in other contexts.

INTRODUCTION

South African psychology in crisis

During the past decade or more psychology as both an organised profession and as an academic discipline, has been subjected to intense critical scrutiny from within its own ranks. Psychologists such as Lionel Nicholas, Saths Cooper and Mohammed Seedat were notable among those who argued that the practice of psychology in South Africa was

problematic, if not seriously flawed (Nicholas & Cooper,¹ Seedat,²). The growing intensity of this critique marked a crisis in South African psychology which resonated with contemporary changes within the international and national context.

At a worldwide level, psychology has undergone what has been reported as a succession of “revolutions” (Swartz,³). Prominent among these changes were, as summarised by Swartz⁴ and Lazarus⁵

- a. a shift in focus from the individual to the group (such as the family or larger groups) as the site of psychological theory and practice;
- b. a rejection of positivist methodologies as appropriate for the study of human phenomena, in favour of methods more hermeneutic in orientation;
- c. increased flexibility as regards what constitutes the theoretical boundaries of psychology, with increasing efforts to incorporate the influences of history, ideology, socio-economic contexts, culture and language more explicitly into psychological theories;
- d. a switch in emphasis from pathology and human deficit to human potential and health.

On the national level, the intensification of anti-apartheid resistance campaigns in the mid-1980's, prompted a critical questioning of all areas of society, including psychology. During this time the collusion of psychology with the apartheid state was made apparent.

... the practice and study of psychology in South Africa developed and flourished nestled securely within the institutions and ideology of apartheid. The work of psychologists includes a legacy of direct and indirect contributions to this system of racial exploitation and the profession has certainly reaped the privileges and benefits it bestows upon the educated white elite.⁶

A landmark event in marking the crisis in South African psychology was the 1988 conference organised by a group of black psychologists at the University of the Western Cape (UWC). It was events such as this and the formation of other progressive organisations (OASSSA is an example) within the discipline that culminated in the call for psychology to address the following criticisms:

- a. that psychology in South Africa is based almost exclusively on the theories and research findings generated in Western and Northern cultures;
- b. the irrelevance of these psychological theories to the concerns and needs of the majority of South Africans;
- c. the general neglect of the oppressive socio-political contexts within which the majority of South Africans live;
- d. general support of the social, political, economic and educational structures which

- e. have brutalised and demeaned the majority of the South African community; and the iniquitous provision of segregated psychological services, favouring the minority white sector of the population;
- f. the widespread racist practices and attitudes within psychological and health-care services.⁷

MEETING THE CHALLENGE

The challenges facing psychology are enormous. Seedat outlined it as follows:

The silences, inadequate representation of blacks and women at the level of knowledge production, the paucity of distinctive conceptual and methodological inquiry and the absence of an organised constituency of progressive psychologists represent some of the obstacles impeding the growth of a liberatory psychology of South Africa.⁸

At an organisational level, the profession has indeed recognised the need for fundamental conceptual and practical restructuring if it is to address the concerns of the majority of South Africans. The demise of the old Psychological Association of South Africa (PASA) and the launch of the Psychological Society of South Africa (PsySSA) in January 1994, significantly again at UWC, may be seen as an important milestone. At this meeting the president of what was then PASA publicly acknowledged the collusion of psychology with apartheid.

But, the task facing us is immense; it requires that the entire scope of the discipline, its value framework, its theories and interventions, and its teaching and research practices be transformed. Whether these broadly defined needs and objectives are to be realised remains an open question.

AIM OF THIS PAPER

The purpose of this paper is to describe the conditions and factors which motivated a project in the Western Cape. This project ostensibly made its goal the empowerment of disadvantaged and marginalised academics within psychology. Our vision in writing this paper is to stimulate similar initiatives at other institutions around the country. While the major part of the paper is devoted to reflections on the factors that made such a project possible, a short description of the project itself is given below. Such description and critical reflection may prove useful for those contemplating similar undertakings to ensure that a fertile and enabling environment is created.

THE TEXTBOOK PROJECT

The initial focus of the intervention was research and publications, but through a process of discussion, it evolved into a project to publish a textbook for South African psychology students. While it is difficult to demarcate a specific date when the idea for the project was borne (as will be made clear below), the first meeting to discuss the idea of writing a textbook was held in June 1995. A detailed description of the process of the project will be published at a later date. Suffice it here to mention that part of the process of empowerment comprised a writing skills workshop and a conference which was funded by the ACCESS Programme of the Centre for Science Development (CSD). At the time of writing this paper, the task of editing the chapters for the textbook is in progress. The textbook will be published in July 1997, if all work goes according to schedule.

METHOD

In our quest to critically reflect on our actions, interviews were conducted with members of the editorial collective who are co-ordinating this textbook initiative, as well as with other individuals who were part of the group who initiated the project. These interviews form part of a research project supported by ACCESS, which seeks to document and analyze the successes and failures of the processes undertaken in this textbook project.

The interview format was semi-structured. All interviews were tape-recorded and then the transcribed data was subjected to a thematic analysis. The trends revealed through the data analysis comprise the substantive material for the rest of this paper.

ANALYSIS OF MOTIVATING CONDITIONS AND FACTORS

Upon reflection the participants identified particular events and or changes that they saw as crucial to the initiative. Elucidation of these preceding events and conditions is important if we accept that "...the task of the social science of liberation is to provide people who have been excluded from access to knowledge, the profession or the university, *an opportunity to learn from their experiences.*" (Webster⁹, own emphasis)

Two major areas salient to the development of the project emerged from the data analysis. One area comprised several contextual factors while the second area was the unfolding nature of the project itself. Contextual transformation was seen as crucial in creating both the necessary conditions for the project and for sustaining and supporting such an endeavour. However, there were also obstacles and inhibiting factors within some of these contexts but these were seen as challenges for the success of the project. The nature of the project itself, that is its process and structure, was also seen as a positive motivating factor for the initiative. A further sub-theme related to the nature of the project was the personal motivations and commitment of those responsible for its overall co-ordination. Each of these motivating factors are discussed in further detail below.

1. Contextual factors

The socio-political environment

Momentum for the initiative came from the macro political changes sweeping throughout the country. The writing of the textbook was initiated in June 1995. This was approximately one year after the national elections and the installation of a government of national unity. As reflected by one of the interviewees “I think that the present climate, with the new government of national unity actually means that there is more space for it. It is easier.”

The political climate within South Africa had changed sufficiently to enable individuals to embark on the project. The significance of political transformation, and the need to continue this transformation within all institutions of society, was emphasized by those who were interviewed.

I suppose that there are a lot of factors which would have influenced it. The first factor being that we are living in a different political period. Blacks are increasingly realising that despite the fact that political power has moved from the hands of white people to black people that white people are still dominant in our society and specifically in academia.

Macro political changes seemed to therefore filter through to different aspects of South African society, in this instance academia and the manner in which it has been and continues to be structured. An urgency to transform institutions following broader political changes, enabled and inspired individuals to initiate the project.

2. Developments within South African psychology

Participants were asked to reflect on whether developments in psychology as an organised profession had any influence on the development of the project. Ironically, it seemed that an anticipated lack of support together with a sense of disillusionment with the existing professional bodies played a facilitative role:

The dominant group of academics are not going to support us in reaching our objectives because that is threatening to their position in academia. To that extent possibly the professional boards could have influenced the way we are doing things, not through their support but through lack of support.

As indicated earlier in this paper, the profession has faced a range of challenges in recent years. Amongst efforts to respond to this crisis, was the attempt to form a more representative professional organisation. The success of this organisational restructuring was questioned by those interviewed:

The one obvious change has been the organisational change from the old PASA to PSYSSA and people started talking as if this was an appropriate forum, 'is this going to bring about some transformation?'. I think that many, as well as myself, started off optimistically but realised that it is actually not going to bring about the transformation that we might want, for example, we might look at what happened to SAJP since then, it is very hard to see any transformation. So too with the discipline itself.

and

I think by the time we started this initiative people were disenchanted with PSYSSA. I am not sure that they could have had a supportive influence on the development of this initiative.

While one of the group acknowledged some change in the profession, she emphasised the continued domination by white males of professional structures and resources, and knowledge production:

Psychology has a lot of changing to do, not only in the kind of texts and the resources that we use, but also in who teaches and who represents us both as an academic profession as well as a practical profession. I think that it has not changed fast enough. I think that white men still dominate in South African psychology.

And again, the continued exclusion of black people from the profession's governing structures was emphasized: "Just the realisation that the more things change, the more they remain the same and that things will only change fundamentally if black people change things".

The project was therefore seen as playing a political role in challenging South African mainstream psychology and academia. One of the group emphasized his frustrations with the exclusionary and racist nature of the discipline of psychology in South Africa:

That might have also have brought us to the realisation that we had to make things change for ourselves. When I speak of we, I speak of primarily black people, but secondly women as well, from all shades and backgrounds, and younger people. What frustrates a lot of academics in psychology and specifically at UWC given our youth, the psychologists' youth, in general is the fact that the profession is still run by a number of old people – established academics who are not going to approach younger academics and empower them into doing things.

It is the frustration experienced from the above-indicated context, that strongly motivated this group member: "When people doubt your abilities that is when you become more resolute about it. Then what you are tackling will come to a resolution or come to a conclusion".

A further motivating factor within psychology itself, related to the curriculum. The continued lack of an appropriate, critical and relevant texts from which to work was in the words of one of the group the “straw that broke the camel’s back”. Another reported that:

... North American and European textbooks were totally inappropriate for us; that understanding had always been there. I think last year was just the limit when we were looking for textbooks and we realised that we were not going to find an appropriate text book.

This realisation was echoed by the entire group and who recalled how they felt:

... excited about the initiative which would be a collective initiative that possibly would be a developmental text that was drawn from South Africans and written by South Africans and particularly by a group of South Africans whose voices were not heard.

The frustration about the lack of a book detailing the experiences of South Africans was not seen as unique to this group, but it was connected to the context “of the circumstances outside, ... a new found sense of empowerment, ... a new found imperative to produce, ... a new found movement towards self affirmation”. It was evident that the daily annoyance of teaching from foreign texts provided a necessary motivation to organise the launch of the textbook project. It reflected a desire to develop more appropriate, critical and relevant South African texts from which to teach.

3. Other research and authorship development initiatives

Notwithstanding the significance of political and other contextual factors, it was a range of other initiatives promoting authorship, which preceded and coincided with the launch of the project, that impacted most powerfully on the project. The group involved in the early discussions and organisation of the textbook initiative all pointed to the influence of these preceding authorship meetings and workshops which included a workshop in Pretoria hosted by the ACCESS programme; the subsequent launch in the Western Cape of a Black Research and Authorship Forum; and a range of writing projects developed and sustained by the Psychology Resource Centre at UWC. The influence of each of these projects was outlined by those interviewed.

The ACCESS Workshop was initiated in late 1994 by the Centre for Science Development’s ACCESS Programme. Entitled “Towards developing a programme for black authorship development”, the workshop brought together an array of social science academics and journal editors from across South Africa to examine various aspects of local publication systems. The publication system in the social sciences was seen by the

workshop participants as exclusionary and not conducive to drawing in black authors. Two members of the textbook editorial collective were at the workshop, as well as two of the other contributors. This workshop was reported to be an:

important event which motivated us to go forward..., where we realised that there was in fact a need for an initiative for black people to collaborate and for black people to get their work into print.

In the words of one of the editorial collective members:

[The ACCESS workshop] put us all in the same place at the same time, discussing the same issue [and allowing workshop participants] the opportunity to meet up with people at other universities and to see that our experiences are very similar, that everyone has frustrations around publications.

This workshop is reported to have had a “consciousness raising function”, bringing into focus the range of obstacles impeding historically disadvantaged scholars and others from writing and publishing their work. Furthermore, it motivated at least two of the initial textbook group to subsequently call for a first meeting to discuss the idea of such a writing project.

This materialised when, a few months after the ACCESS workshop, a group of psychologists from UWC organised a meeting, calling upon black psychologists and other social scientists marginalised from mainstream psychology, to support the launch of The Black Research and Authorship Forum. The objectives of the Forum were recalled by one of the participants, who would later also assist in the launch of the textbook initiative:

... it [the Forum] wanted to encourage black people to do research and publish papers that they were working on ... Also to offer support to black and marginalised people to do just that ... The forum helped the [textbook] initiative.

Practitioners, academics, school psychologists and current and past students all attended the first Forum meeting. The attempt to include as many people as possible appeared to have been important in the legitimacy of the Forum and the projects which would directly lead from, or be associated with it. Since the launch, the Forum has been approached by the South African Journal of Psychology to guest edit a special issue on black scholarship. The decisions taken at the Forum meeting were seen to have complemented and supported the momentum which led to the subsequent launch of the textbook initiative. In fact, many of those who attended the Forum subsequently joined the textbook initiative at its first meeting in June 1995.

A number of other writing initiatives were reported to have played a part in the successful launch of the textbook project. The Psychology Resource Centre (PRC), of the UWC Psychology Department, has been promoting authorship amongst psychologists and other social scientists at UWC for a number of years. A number of the textbook contributors

have previously had work published in the PRC's three publication formats: i.e. the *Occasional Publication Series*, the *Working with Children Lecture Series*, and the *Psychology Bulletin*, previously the *Psychology Quarterly*.

From the outset we had decided in the Resource Centre to enable staff members to start the publishing process or the authorship process by having their notes typed out and published or printed by the Resource Centre and these could then ideally, be sold to students ... Quite a number of people utilized the facility ... Out of that flowed the notion that perhaps we could take all those things that were published as part of the publication series, and bind, or publish a number of them together as a book.

Publication in the *Psychology Bulletin* was also believed to have influenced the later involvement of some contributors in the textbook project:

The *Psychology Bulletin* has developed very slowly but very systematically and in a solid manner. I am very proud of the last issue and last year's issue and the one that is going to come out. We are getting more people that recognise the value of the *Bulletin*, people off campus and outside the country. This is related to initiatives such as the textbook.

In the words of another interviewee: "we went through the mechanics of publishing and the publication cycle all on our own ... That was an important way to demystify the manner in which publication happens". The process of submitting work, whether "flimsy or superficial", of receiving comments from peers, and seeing one's work coming back in printed form, is reported as important in promoting the confidence to write up work and then submitting it for publication in the textbook project. These experiences of previous exposure to supportive, non-threatening writing and publication formats are reported by the group to have facilitated the process:

... exposure to writing and writing for peers to comment and to see and to not feel threatened by that. That has contributed as well, the whole kind of way of working has made it ideal for the initiative to take off.

Besides the PRC initiatives, a number of other authorship and textbook projects apparently had been proposed in the past. While these initiatives and their outcomes were not clearly specified or clarified in the interviews, one of the group noted the difficulties these initiatives encountered, particularly around the collaboration with partners from advantaged backgrounds and universities.

In the other initiatives I must add that you had people at various academic development levels, in terms of their knowledge and skills around publishing. People from historically white institutions came to UWC and you had black people. And because people from the two groups functioned very differently, not only at different levels, but I think their existential being in the world is very different, the project could never gel, because the people were not together. Many of the people who had already published and especially those people from the white universities felt that they were being held back by the others and it was not in their interest to get involved in a project which was taken up collaboratively.

These previous “failed” initiatives appear to have lacked the supportive features common to the projects undertaken by the PRC, the Black Research and Authorship Forum and ACCESS.

4. Institutional support

Changes within UWC, especially in its research mission, were significant as this was the institution from which the textbook project was launched and was subsequently based. Support from UWC, and other related institutions was identified as an essential element in the conception of the project. The types of support that were mentioned included financial and infrastructural, as well as an endorsement from the university and related academic and other institutions. While these were identified as important for the project, not all of these forms of support were in fact readily available.

The PRC was identified as the major unit which provided the infrastructure for the project. This factor was highlighted by many of the individuals who were interviewed:

I think one can say that the initiative was in the making for several years already if one looks at the way the Resource Centre is structured and what the Resource Centre endeavours to do.

The pre-existence of such facilities is a critical factor, given the under-development of infrastructure at historically disadvantaged institutions, as noted by an interviewee:

I would also believe that other projects did not materialise because they were not initiated with the support of the Resource Centre, instead they were initiated by one or two people, but not by a structure which had the necessary infrastructure to see the project to its conclusion.

The availability of funds for the initiative was identified as a further critical factor.

... I think that the funding helped a huge amount because it made possible meetings and workshops. We could have had the meetings without the funding, but the funding allowed them to be an event, an occasion, so that people felt nurtured and supported and they saw that this was of value. So I think that access to funding was very important.

Endorsement and support from the institution was seen as a potentially important source of encouragement. Unfortunately, the verbal support for the project expressed by key individuals within UWC did not materialise in the form of financial or other material support. Perceptions were that, on a practical level, very little institutional support was provided, although the institution endorsed the initiative in principle. While this was a disappointment, it did not appear to dampen enthusiasm, since support was provided by other institutional structures such as the afore-mentioned Resource Centre and the funders.

Specific experiences in the history of the UWC Psychology Department, such as working under extremely adverse conditions with large student numbers, inadequate resources, staffing problems and continual crises were noted as influences which prepared participants for undertaking such a project. But certain changes within the Department were also seen as important for the establishment of this project. The appointment of new staff was mentioned as a possible contributing factor:

We had energy that the rest of the staff did not have. When you have been around and you know of all the old initiatives and how they failed, you kind of get flattened by trying and not getting things off the ground. New people come in with energy. They don't have that baggage. I think that does help in getting things started.

The direct participation of the head of department as a member of the editorial collective was another contributing factor according to the interviewees. Overall, the Department was perceived to provide a supportive climate for the project.

5. The Nature of the Project

The manner in which the initiative was launched and managed throughout was mentioned by many of the respondents as a factor that contributed to its success. Two characteristics of the initiative that were emphasised were firstly, the collective manner in which decisions were taken and secondly, the empowering nature of the project.

The opportunity to work collectively was a prominent reason for involvement in the project. Most of the group indicated a strong preference for working and writing in a collective:

I was comfortable as I prefer to work in a collective situation. I had before worked on a collective book and it was a wonderful experience and I saw this as not only being an end product but also a pleasant, empowering process.

And speaking of a previous attempt to write a text:

It would not have been a collective project like the present one. I don't want to sound like this principled person. It is just when you realise that people are egocentric and egotistical there is a greater chance of you being abused in the process. So if I look for a collective process, it is not because of any magnanimous aspirations on my part. The collective would be more nurturing for my own developing skills. So I was not involved in previous initiatives.

It appears that the collective nature of the initiative allowed for both a positive consultative process as well as an efficient one:

I have worked in organisations where commitment and democratic decision making have become an obstacle because it makes things slow and unmanageable, but here there has been a fine balance between collective decision-making and autonomy of the editorial collective. The autonomy has enabled us to get things done without organising too many meetings. We have never taken policy decisions as an editorial collective but for example, at our last workshop we were given the freedom to explore possible publishers and to make the best decision and people trusted us to do that and they let us get on with it.

The empowering nature of the initiative was explicated as follows:

The goals that I had in mind and which we discussed was the commitment to a collective process. The commitment to an empowering process...it was not an empty notion of empowerment as we all had knowledge in some ways, and none of us were experts. We all needed development in some nature.

and

It was a department initiative ...an empowering endeavour. Initially empowering as it was located in the psychology department at UWC. As we gained momentum and as people became aware of the black expertise, that principle aim or objective broadened to include people from other universities.

6. *Developmental focus*

The initial focus of the text on developmental psychology was cited as a motivating factor for contributors. It seems that by choosing from the outset to focus on a particular area, the project attracted collaboration from a group of psychologists interested in, and teaching in this particular area, and who therefore had vested interest in the success of the outcome. This was evident in statements such as:

The people who were initially interested in the initiative were developmental psychologists or developmentalists.

and

Well, it started as developmental psychology because a number of people involved in the first set of discussions were teaching human development. From the outset everyone knew that it was not going to be a narrow definition of human development. It was going to be a social definition of human development and an inclusive one. Our focus has been on development in the sense of changing over time, ranging over a lifespan, but it has been quite broad-based...

The choice of a particular area of psychology also ensured that the initiative was perceived as a manageable one which would not overwhelm the participants, most of whom had very little, or no previous experience in writing a textbook. It also played the role of keeping the writers focused. This was confirmed by one of the editorial collective members during the interview.

... what distinguished this from any other initiative was not only the climate but also the fact that we did have a focus. It was not a broad psychology textbook. We were very focused and that is what held it together ... It did not seem too big, it seemed manageable.

7. *Commitment to the process*

Commitment to the process and maintaining the collective nature, especially by those elected to manage the process (the editorial collective), was further cited as promoting and sustaining the initiative:

I think to a large extent it has also been the individual commitment of the people involved. When I think about it, it has been a lot of work, time and effort and somehow each of us has stayed with it. I am guessing that we do have something in common as each of us feel a really strong commitment but we all seem to be the kind of individuals who feel guilty if we don't complete what we set out to do. I know I am like that.

The importance of the editorial collective in facilitating a supportive, collective process as well as leadership is expressed:

I do think the editorial collective does play an important role - a leadership role. I think that they have, we have worked incredibly hard in keeping the project going and making it a collective one. I would not talk about individuals as it could have been any individuals from the actual writing group, I don't think that it is necessarily the kind of individuals that we are, although there might be an element of that ... I think what all the members of the editorial collective had in common was the vision of a collective project ..., one that really involved everybody within the group and lead in terms of that.

8. Personal motivations

A final important motivating factor are the contributors' personal motives which also overlapped with those of the project itself. The interest in research, writing and publishing appears to have been an important and central thread to the group members' personal motivation and reasons for their early involvement in the project:

[The] project came at a time of my personal development where firstly I was committed to start taking writing seriously.

Some of the group elaborated on this personal significance of writing:

Firstly, I have a story to tell and it is a good way of doing so. It is a good way of telling my story and it is a particular new story and this book will allow for this story to be heard by virtue of the reader. Secondly, it is a search for affirmation and empowerment that I have spoken about before at an individual level. Thirdly, it is the affirmation of power at a collective level in the sense of togetherness in the endeavour.

The strong personal sense of being affirmed and validated via one's writing was woven into all the group member's responses. Some went further to indicate the important external, institutional and academic support for writing:

It is a new sense of discovery, of producing, of creating and that has always been very valuable for me and that is what sustains me. More so than the other reasons which are also valid, namely that there is a sense of prestige in publication,... a sense of achievement ... and it does offer promotion opportunities and it does look good on a CV etc.

CONCLUSION

While there are many factors which contributed to the course and outcome of this project, those which seem most salient to us relate to the ways in which the political, professional, and institutional contexts provided a fertile space for those who felt inspired to move beyond "victim" status to a position of empowerment; from the margins to centre of knowledge (re)production. Through the initiative we have undertaken we believe that we have engaged with the process of scholarship in a broad sense - publishing research and critical reflection in a form which we can use in our teaching. In the final analysis, this has been an experience in which the means (the process) has truly been as important as the end (the textbook).

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