

Editorial: Reporting on research: reflecting on and mirroring the psychological state of our nation

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When I conducted my usual thematic analysis of the articles due to appear in this issue of the *SAJP*, certain themes emerged, enabling me to group particular articles together in terms of five main themes:

- Evolving racial attitudes in South African society
- The value of and need for psychotherapy
- Aspects of help-seeking behaviour in student populations
- Counselling needs in South African schools
- Assessment as a multi-faceted aspect of psychological intervention

These themes show that psychological research does, indeed, reflect what is happening in the broader society. That is to say, reported research replicates what is happening in real life, which is as it should be: theory should follow practice and not the other way round (Savickas, 2011).

Seventeen years after the demise of apartheid, discourses on race continue to dominate the headlines in South Africa. Sadly, these discourses far too often deal with the disturbing race relations in the country and the dire consequences of an escalating racial divide. More recently, utterances of certain politicians, for instance, have stirred deep emotions and (if newspaper reports are to be believed) given rise to an increase in the number of people intending to emigrate from South Africa. In a country so deeply divided along racial lines, race issues need to be discussed widely with a view to promoting understanding and advancing more harmonious racial relationships at all levels. What needs to be clarified is the following: Why are they saying what they are saying? Moreover, what are they really saying? What are people hearing and why are they hearing what they are hearing? Are these people being misunderstood? Why is there so little attempt to engage not only them but also other influential people in constructive dialogue aimed at promoting harmony and understanding? Can it be so difficult to find and focus on common ground and strive towards a future that will provide space for all people in South Africa to design successful lives and make social contributions? Why are rumours allowed to spread out of control? Why have the voices of globally recognized role models such as Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu fallen ominously silent (so it seems)?

Reconciliation will always remain a work-in-progress and not a *fait accompli*. Unless we deal unambiguously and successfully with racism, irrespective of who the perpetrators are, South Africa's future will remain uncertain. Research on all aspects of racism is pivotally important and should be encouraged.

Talking about issues of racial harmony (or the lack thereof) can in a sense be regarded as psychotherapy at national level. The second main theme (psychotherapy) in this issue links naturally with the first, and the accompanying articles offer valuable insights to professionals working in the field of racial attitudes. The articles confirm that access to modern psychotherapy (including counselling at all levels) remains largely inaccessible to the vast majority of people in this country with the poorest and most marginalised (read: black) populations the most disadvantaged.

Of particular concern is the high unemployment rate in South Africa, especially among younger, poorer people. This highlights the need for career counselling for all citizens in the country and not only a select few who can afford this often prohibitively expensive service. A situation where many millions of people are unemployed with little hope of improving their lives is fraught with danger for the whole country. Allow me to repeat myself: Everyone in South Africa and, in fact, in the world should have access to psychotherapy and related services:

- A multimillionaire suffering from depression who lives in Sandton — and a pitifully poor mother of six living in an informal settlement in Cairo and who is an alcoholic.
- A straight A student from Pretoria Girls High School seeking career counselling — and an orphan from the poorest part of Nigeria who sells newspapers to make a living and is denied the opportunity of even attending school.
- An intellectually challenged teenager from a wealthy New York suburb — and a youngster with severe learning barriers; the third of 11 children living in a mud shack on the outskirts of Calcutta.

Numerous studies have highlighted the need for appropriate support structures for university students. My own research supports the view that an important difference between achieving and failing students at tertiary level is the degree to which students know how to and can actually access help. The same principle applies in the country at large — few factors are as pathogenic as the inability to access help when needed.

Major strides have been made over the past 17 years, yet we still live in a distressingly unequal society where (in the words of a Grade 12 youngster from a high school in a township in Middelburg): “Wealth is health”. The government on its own cannot remedy the situation and bring about a just and fair society. It is the responsibility of every person in the country to strive towards achieving this outcome.

Much research has been conducted and numerous articles have been written about the counselling needs of South African schools — needs that apply to broader society as well. Schools tend to mirror what is happening in society at large at any given point in time. Bullying is the subject of one of the contributions in this issue of the *SAJP*, and ways of dealing with it, especially in schools, are discussed. Bullying behaviour often has its roots in a violent society (such as ours), and; the long-term negative effects of such behaviour in the early years (whether the child bullies others or is bullied himself or herself) have been demonstrated conclusively. Dealing decisively with bullying is essential. This applies across the bullying continuum, whether it is one child being bullied by another, an employee being bullied by his or her employer or ‘boss’, or a member of a marginalised or minority group being bullied by members of a majority or non-marginalised group. Regrettably, bullying at various levels is as alive today as it was many years ago and warrants the attention, especially, of those working in the twin fields of psychology and education alike.

Psychological intervention, in whatever form, without some kind of assessment is inconceivable. Likewise, psychological assessment acquires meaning only if it informs the practice of psychological intervention. Intervention strategies need to be designed, implemented and regularly re-assessed to determine whether the envisaged outcomes are being realised.

In conclusion: in this issue of the *SAJP*, basic aspects of personality, psychotherapy, counselling, help-seeking behaviour, diversity and psychological assessment are discussed compellingly by the various contributing authors. These aspects define and form the very foundations of what we do as psychologists.

As indicated, the articles in this issue have been organised into five themes, each dealing with broadly similar issues. The first theme deals with racial attitudes in South African society.

Evolving racial attitudes in South African society

In the lead article, *Historical trends in South African race attitudes*, Durrheim, Tredoux, Foster and Dixon (2011) report on a historical survey of intergroup attitudes in South Africa. Comparing the attitudes of different race groups towards each other over time by standardizing scores from different historical periods, the authors chart the effect racial classification has had on in-group bias patterns, and assess the impact of changing historical contexts on intergroup attitudes. They focus specifically on the threatening and competitive context of the post-1976 struggle for liberation and the post-1994 context of democracy and reconciliation. It is heartening to note that significant changes may be

taking place. Whereas the white respondents in the survey appear to show declining levels of prejudice, a marginally negative change in the attitudes of the black African respondents towards other groups emerged. The latter finding is a timely reminder that improving racial relationships is a work-in-progress that needs the constant attention of everyone in South Africa.

The value of and need for psychotherapy

In the first article under this theme, *Individual psychotherapy as treatment of choice: preliminary findings from the UCT child guidance clinic*, Waumsley and Swartz (2011) report on a quantitative analysis of individual psychotherapeutic interventions conducted at the University of Cape Town Child Guidance Clinic (CGC) between 2000 and 2009. A comprehensive range of clinical information was collated (including data on clients' demographics, their presenting difficulties and the interventions employed, as well as clients' apparent clinical outcomes), and it was found, among other things, that clients' social class had little or no effect on clinical outcomes, and that the majority of clients appeared to have experienced therapy as satisfactory. The authors conclude that their findings reaffirm the power of individual work to release individual potential in local contexts.

In the second article under this theme, *The psychofortology of female psychiatric out-patients: Living with mood and anxiety disorders*, Steyn, Howcroft and Fouché (2011) deal with psychofortology (which, for the purposes of this article, means coping and subjective well-being — Diener & Lucas, 1999; Hobfall, 2001; Wissing & Van Eeden, 1997) among female psychiatric out-patients living with mood and anxiety disorders. The study revealed that these patients generally experienced lower levels of coping and subjective well-being when compared with normative data. The authors also discuss the management and care of these patients.

Suicide rates remain a source of concern globally. Furthermore, it seems that poor socio-economic circumstances often lead to an increase in suicide levels. In the third article under this theme, *Suicide in a poor rural community in the Western Cape, South Africa: experiences of five suicide attempters and their families*, Holtman, Shelmerdine, London, and Flisher (2011) state that many farm worker communities in the Western Cape are virtually 'doomed' to experience poor socio-economic conditions throughout life, to suffer from chronic illnesses such as tuberculosis and widespread alcohol abuse, and to be exposed to pesticides (widely associated with affective disorders). The authors conclude that structural problems have to be addressed in order to deal with the underlying reasons for suicidal feelings, and they propose a broad range of measures to curb the incidence of suicide in this community.

Aspects of help-seeking behaviour in student populations

In the first contribution under this theme *Psychological predictors of attitude towards seeking professional psychological help in a Nigerian university student population*, Oluyinka (2011) investigates the predictive value of psychological factors (including health locus of control, mindfulness, openness to experience, personal growth initiative, and sense of coherence) in respect of Nigerian students' attitude towards seeking professional psychological help when needed. Unsurprisingly, the above factors significantly impacted students' attitude towards seeking professional psychological help. The author concludes that students' engagement in psychological counselling may be improved by changing their attitudes towards seeking professional help.

Atik and Yalçın (2011), in the second contribution under this theme, *Help-seeking attitudes of university students: the role of personality traits and demographic factors*, examine the influences of personality traits, gender, previous counselling or therapy experiences, and knowledge of available psychological services on the help-seeking attitudes of Turkish undergraduate students and their initial preferences for help sources. It is interesting to note that female students who had knowledge about the psychological services provided on campus, as well as students who were extraverted, agreeable, and open displayed more positive help-seeking attitudes. In addition, consistent with the

results of previous studies, most of the students initially preferred sharing their problems with their peers.

The information provided here is of relevance to South Africa and warrants study, in particular, by mental health professionals at South African universities.

Counselling needs in our South African schools

Timm and Eskell-Blokland (2011) in their article, *A construction of bullying in a primary school in an underprivileged community: an ecological case study*, deal with the topic of bullying and related behavioural problems in an underprivileged school context in South Africa. The study on which the article is based investigated the experience of bullying from the perspective of children identified by the school as engaging in bullying behaviour, the school staff and the children's families. Employing an ecological approach in a postmodern social constructionist theoretical framework, and utilising discourse analysis in the construction of the various discourses emerging from the conversations, the authors provide an ecological description of bullying. They conclude that intervention at wider levels does not prevent or negate interventions in the micro-environment or one-on-one interventions and that school and family interventions as well as one-on-one interventions should be included when dealing with the problems of bullying. A context-relevant intervention programme to address the extensive problem of bullying is advocated.

Pillay (2011) in his contribution, *Challenges counsellors face while practising in South African schools: implications for culturally relevant in-service training*, explores the challenges facing counsellors in South African schools. Similarly to the other study under this theme, an ecological systems approach was used in his study. The findings highlight three essential characteristics of counsellors in South Africa, namely, the ability to fulfil multiple roles and responsibilities in a diverse context; taking responsibility for one's own and others' personal and professional development; and the ability to determine internal and external collaborative networks. The challenges highlighted in the research can be successfully confronted only if school counsellors collaborate with local communities as part of an ecosystem to improve systems that already exist in schools.

Assessment as a multi-faceted dimension of psychological intervention

In their article, entitled *The Raven's Advanced Progressive Matrices: A comparison of relationships with verbal ability tests*, Cockcroft and Israel (2011) examine the possible relationships between the Raven's Advanced Progressive Matrices, the Similarities Subtest of the South African Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scales and an adaptation of the Stanford Diagnostic Reading Test and Reading Comprehension Subtest. Although the authors found significant relationships between the Advanced Matrices and both verbal tests, no significant differences emerged between the correlations on the basis of either gender or home language. The authors surmise that convergent validity is supported across these groups and that this provides grounds for future research on the suitability of the Advanced Matrices in cross-cultural, multilingual contexts as exist in South Africa. The authors argue that the conflicting results they obtained point to the need for additional construct validation of the Advanced Matrices.

The article, *An investigation of the relationship between students' motivation and academic performance as mediated by effort*, by Goodman, Jaffer, Keresztesi, Mamdani, Mokgatle, Musariri, Schlechter and Pires (2011), is the second contribution under this theme. The authors investigate the relationship between university students' motivation and their academic performance, with effort as a mediating variable. Although significant relationships emerged between intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation and academic performance, it seemed as if the students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation influenced the degree of effort they exerted in attempting to achieve desired performance outcomes. The authors conclude that increased focus on the enhancement of students' motivation and effort levels could affect students' academic performance positively. Tertiary training institutions

should benefit from identifying strategic contemporary motivational drivers among students and from using the information to enhance student performance.

In the penultimate contribution under this theme, *Psychosocial factors predicting academic performance of students at a historically disadvantaged university*, Sommer and Dumont (2011) discuss Petersen, Louw and Dumont's (2009) model and argue that psychosocial factors such as academic motivation, self-esteem, perceived stress, academic overload and help-seeking can predict academic performance at university. The authors conclude that academic support structures for students are essential, and they suggest that assistance to students should be provided during the first year of study in order to achieve the desired effects indicated in Petersen, Louw, Dumont and Malope's (2010) follow-up study.

The current issue ends with Van Lingen, Douman and Wannenburg's article, *A cross-sectional exploration of the relationship between undergraduate nursing student wellness and academic outcomes at a South African higher education institution*, in which student wellness levels and their relationship to academic performance are explored. In their study, the authors detected a well-defined pattern of highest and lowest wellness dimension scores. Whereas the students' wellness profiles revealed physical and environmental wellness as the weaker areas, group strengths were linked to social, emotional and spiritual wellness. Some evidence was also found of a positive correlation between higher levels of wellness and better academic achievement. The authors recommend the integration of a wellness programme into nursing curricula.

As always, readers are invited to comment on the different authors' treatment of the topics dealt with in this issue and to indicate whether they think the topics themselves were relevant and, also, what other topics should be considered.

We are delighted to confirm that we have effectively wiped out the backlog of articles under consideration. Only one article submitted in 2009 (author reworking) is still in the pipeline, and only seven articles dating back to 2010 (six in the process of being reworked, one out for re-review) are still under consideration. Furthermore, of the 61 articles submitted during the first five months of this year 10 could not be sent for review, seven were rejected by reviewers, and four have been accepted for publication. The number of international submissions is also increasing.

As always, I wish to conclude by thanking our core editorial staff for their exceptional work. They include our consulting editor, Anthony Pillay, our consulting editor: statistics, Tyrone Pretorius, our books editor, Kopano Ratele, our copy editors, Willy Nel and Linda Theron (Willy was recently awarded his doctoral degree — hearty congratulations, Willy!), our publishing editor, Erna Kinsey, Fatima Seedat and Nosipho Thathi from the PsySSA offices, as well as our editorial secretary, Moipone Williams. Should you have any ideas on improving the *SAJP*, please feel free to contact me personally (kobus.maree@up.ac.za). Your feedback is needed to shape the future direction of the journal.

Enjoy reading this issue of the *SAJP*.

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