

The International Congress of Psychology (ICP 2012): a brief analysis of the scientific programme

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Abstract

South African Psychology has a unique history and stands out among its peers across the world. In the wake of its divided past and collusion with apartheid, its subsequent international 'rehabilitation' was capped by its successful hosting of the International Congress of Psychology (2012) during July 2012. This was the first such event on the African continent, and involved a mammoth organisational effort that spanned more than 6 years. This article briefly analyses the scientific programme within the context of the content areas and the countries represented. Some of the challenges faced by the Scientific Committee are also outlined, together with the strategies developed to manage these challenges.

Keywords

Congress, continuing education, psychologist, psychology

South African Psychology has a complex history, a mixed bag that included a period of decidedly dubious practices, especially in the context of apartheid and the preceding political era that was also characterised by institutionalised racial oppression and systematic discrimination against large sectors of the South African population. The discipline's reputation had been substantially marred by its association with these regimes in the many decades before the country achieved democracy and international recognition.

Much has been written about the extent to which psychology responded to and collaborated with the social engineering and human rights violations of the pre-1994 era, as well as the psycho-logical impact of these processes on the country's majority (cf. Nicholas & Cooper, 1990).

Psychology's failure to use its vast theoretical and scientific resources for the betterment of the living conditions and quality of life of all its citizens has been highlighted and lamented (Dawes, 1985; Seedat, 1997).

While psychology emerged as a field of study in South Africa during the second decade of the 20th century, was taught at tertiary institutions from the 1920s onward, and practised in clinical, educational, industrial, and other settings for the better part of the previous century, the discipline struggled to find legitimacy until the 1990s. This was largely due to its complicity with apartheid through its academic and professional practices (such as providing racially segregated teaching and training, as well as academic legitimisation for apartheid) (Manganyi, 2013). Its attempts to actively promote the ideology of White supremacy through psychological 'research' have been widely documented. History is replete with examples of poorly applied science providing support for spurious ideas such as the superiority of one racialised group over another. The work of Fick (1939) was one such South African example of psychological 'research' used to support racist notions of cognitive differences among racial groups, not unlike the infamous works of Jensen (1969) and others elsewhere in the world. Recently, Saths Cooper noted that during his incarceration on the Robben Island prison in the late 1970s, together with Nelson Mandela and others, he encountered an unusually large number of psychologists among their captors (Pather, 2014).

However, there has also been a positive side to South African Psychology in the earlier years. The country provided the world with a number of psychologists who went on to become pioneers in their respective areas of psychological theory and research, making significant contributions to the development of the field internationally. These included Joseph Wolpe, Arnold Lazarus, and Stanley Rachman, among others (Antony, 2013). The groundbreaking works produced by these individuals had germinated in the course of their training and work in South Africa. Nicholas (2013) also noted several other early South African engagements with international psychology. Of note, in 2012, the South African psychologist Saths Cooper was elected President of the International Union of Psychological Science (IUPsyS). All of these examples serve to illustrate the extent of South Africa's contribution to international psychology and thinking in the broader area of human behaviour and development.

Evidence of South Africa's contribution to psychology internationally is also to be found in the number of psychologists who have left the country to ply their trade elsewhere in the world. Locally trained professional psychologists have been welcomed and even actively recruited in large numbers by countries such as the United Kingdom, Australia, Ireland, and others (Pillay & Kramers, 2003). Evidently, South African Psychology is doing something right (and something that is much sought after by many high-income countries). However, it should also be noted that this trend discernible within the psychology community for psychologists to emigrate once they have qualified, has negative consequences. Recent statistics reveal that currently, South Africa has approximately one psychologist per 14,000 people (Duncan, Frank, & Stevens, 2007). The constant flight of psychologists trained in South Africa to higher income countries means that this unfavourable ratio will not improve significantly in the short-term, unless of course the loss of South African trained psychologists to higher income countries is offset by the immigration of psychologists from higher income countries to South Africa, which is not very likely.

Over the years, South African psychology has developed substantially in the academic, research, and practice arenas. The discipline has rapidly gained popularity as a course of study at universities, and is currently one of the more popular undergraduate courses of study (Council on Higher Education, 2010). This is not simply a local phenomenon when considering that *The Princeton Review* (2014) recently listed psychology as one of the top 10 university (undergraduate) majors in the United States, as well. Even at postgraduate level, there is stiff competition for places at all of the country's universities offering professional psychology training, which is an indication of the

value attributed to psychology as a career. This augurs well for the further development and progression of the field in South Africa.

It is clear that psychology in South Africa is alive and well at the start of the 21st century. Despite the many obstacles confronting it, including the continued under-representation of people of colour in the profession of psychology, the ongoing racialised trends in research and publications and the loss of locally qualified psychologists to high-income countries (Pillay & Kramers, 2003), there is adequate reason to believe that the future looks bright for the discipline and profession. There is also evidence that it has much to contribute to international psychology.

Of course, it is argued that the discipline should be offering more to the South African community, given the oppressive history and emotional effects of chronic discrimination and maltreatment, and psychology's capacity to improve the human condition (Nicholas & Cooper, 1990).

Against this background, the authors reflect briefly on the 30th International Congress of Psychology (ICP), held in Cape Town, from 22 to 27 July 2012. They present the results of a cursory examination of the scientific programme, especially the content areas and the countries represented. The event was organised and hosted by the Psychological Society of South Africa (PsySSA), with the support of the National Research Foundation (NRF), under the auspices of the IUPsyS.

Background and context

The ICP is a quadrennial scientific event that has been hosted by many different countries over the course of its history, since the inaugural congress in Paris in 1889 (IUPsyS, 2013). While the event seeks to bring together psychologists from all parts of the world, throughout its history, it was held largely in high-income countries, with the African continent never featuring, until the ICP 2012 in Cape Town, South Africa. The bid to host the event was won by the PsySSA as the organisation representing South African Psychology, and the organising committee spent over 6 years planning and laying the ground for hosting the Congress. The early start was made to ensure a high-quality event. Among the various working committees and task groups, the Scientific Committee was one of the key organising structures of the Congress.

In addition to the standard academic presentations and workshop formats, the ICP 2012 also organised a series of *controversial debates* and an Emerging Psychologists' Programme that selected newly graduated psychology scholars from around the world to participate in a structured series of workshops and events aimed at furthering their academic and research skills and careers.

The establishment and constitution of the ICP 2012 Scientific Committee were informed by multiple considerations, including (1) the need for scientific rigour; (2) the showcasing of South African and African Psychology; (3) addressing succession planning through the inclusion of *emerging scholars*, since those at the helm of the discipline are a steadily ageing cohort; and (4) as a means of pushing the frontiers of psychology by ensuring that previously un- or under-represented fields of psychology (such as Critical Psychology and the Psychology of Racism) could utilise the ICP 2012 as an impetus for growth.

Consisting of psychology scholars from around the country, and elsewhere in the world, the Scientific Committee was chaired by the academic and PsySSA Past President, Norman Duncan. Working with software developers, the committee tailored a customised online system for the submission, review, and management of abstracts. Among the first duties of the Scientific Committee was to decide on the specialised content areas and the formation of Congress tracks. A total of 44 divisions were established (e.g., Cognitive, Educational, Experimental, Industrial/Organisational/Work, and Clinical Psychology). A considerable effort was also made to give appropriate attention to various still-embryonic sub-fields of psychology (e.g., Liberation Psychology) in the establishment of the scientific committee divisions. Another priority was the peer review process which

serves to ensure stringent academic standards in the Congress's scientific programme. Developing a rigorous peer review process is critical in the dissemination of academic material, with reviewers providing 'an essential control' that enhances the end product (Ross, Hankerson, Irwin, Stone, & Higley, 2007).

The volume of abstracts received (approximately 10,000) posed a major challenge in terms of the handling, distribution, referring, and processing of abstracts and the need for an efficient online abstract management system was evident early on in the process. Consequently, the ICP 2012 Organising Committee took the decision to commission the development of a customised abstract management system, tailored to comprehensively address all of the Congress requirements. In addition to the standard double-blind review process, the Scientific Committee instituted an unusual feature (relative to previous congresses), by way of a quality assurance phase in the review process. A small quality assurance team provided a third level of review (after the reviewers and the division chairs) by examining all accepted abstracts to confirm suitability. Thereafter, abstracts requiring minor language editing were handled by a specialist editing team.

The programme for the ICP 2012 was a multifaceted one. In addition to the standard papers, posters and workshop presentations, it included an impressive complement of keynote addresses and State-of-the-Science lectures by a significant number of eminent researchers, including Michael Rutter and Elizabeth Loftus. Furthermore, the programme included numerous invited papers, workshops and symposia, controversial debates, and other innovative formats. Therefore, developing the programme presented significant challenges, which required intricate planning and positioning. With close to 4500 presentations in total, scheduled to take place over 5 days, over 20 parallel sessions had to be developed. This had an obvious spill-over in terms of logistics and venue allocation for the different sessions. Considering the difficulty in predicting the numbers of delegates who would attend specific sessions or papers throughout the Congress, there was an understandable over-demand at a few venues. However, within the magnitude of the event this problem occurred in only a few venues, and was addressed by the organising committee, by way of venue changes.

The ICP 2012 presentations: An analysis

The following data and discussion represent a summary and cursory analysis of the academic presentations. It is not meant to be a comprehensive investigation of the Congress presentations. For the purpose of the current analysis, all of the ICP 2012 abstracts were examined in terms of their content area, the presenters' country of origin, and, where available, the developmental focus of the presentation, for example, child/adolescent or adult. In examining content areas, keywords, phrases, or ideas in the abstract were analysed, and the variables or psychological areas referred to most were used to infer the dominant content area. Therefore, this classification should not be considered in absolute terms, but rather as broad focus areas.

The review process resulted in a rejection rate of 30%, which was higher than in previous ICP congresses, and perhaps indicative of the rigour inherent in the multiple levels of screening and review that were instituted. The accepted papers (oral and poster presentations), workshops, and invited presentations at the ICP 2012 are summarised below, reflecting distributions by country of origin and broad area of study.

Tables 1 and 2 illustrate the distribution of oral papers and poster presentations by country of origin and broad area of study. There were 16 invited addresses from the United States; 6 from Canada; 5 each from Germany, Netherlands, and South Africa; and 4 each from the United Kingdom, Argentina, and Australia. About one-third of the invited addresses were from low- and middle-income countries. The dominant content areas of the invited addresses were (in descending

Table 1. Submitted papers and posters by country.

Country	Papers		Posters	
	N	%	n	%
South Africa	569	25.5	216	18.1
China	360	16.1	142	11.9
India	139	6.2	27	2.3
Iran	117	5.2	104	8.7
United States	115	5.2	67	5.6
Germany	105	4.7	35	2.9
Australia	68	3.0	14	1.2
Brazil	51	2.3	48	4.0
United Kingdom	38	1.7	7	0.6
Russian Federation	38	1.7	17	1.4
Canada	38	1.7	22	1.8
The Netherlands	35	1.6	7	0.6
Spain	35	1.6	61	5.1
Nigeria	28	1.3	14	1.2
Turkey	28	1.3	8	0.7
Japan	28	1.3	94	7.9
Other	441	19.7	311	26.0
N	2233	100	1194	100

Table 2. Papers and posters by area of study.

Area	Papers		Posters	
	N	%	n	%
Industrial/Organisational/Work Psychology	258	11.6	118	9.9
Clinical Psychology	182	8.2	126	10.6
Educational Psychology	158	7.1	66	5.5
Developmental Psychology	124	5.6	75	6.3
Social Psychology	116	5.2	102	8.5
Assessment and Evaluation	116	5.2	72	6.0
Cognitive Psychology	106	4.7	64	5.4
Health Psychology	102	4.6	53	4.4
Positive Psychology	80	3.6	50	4.2
Counselling	79	3.5	41	3.4
Culture	68	3.0	37	3.1
Trauma	62	2.8	21	1.8
Personality	58	2.6	39	3.3
General	57	2.6	36	3.0
Neuropsychology	49	2.2	16	1.3
Sexuality	48	2.1	12	1.0
Community Psychology	42	1.9	33	2.8
HIV/AIDS	38	1.7	16	1.3
Other	490	21.9	217	18.2
N	2233	100	1194	100

Table 3. Invited symposia papers by country.

Country	<i>n</i>	%
South Africa	58	21.4
United States	54	19.9
Canada	16	5.9
Germany	13	4.8
Italy	13	4.8
India	11	4.1
France	10	3.7
The Netherlands	10	3.7
United Kingdom	10	3.7
Australia	9	3.3
Uganda	7	2.6
Argentina	7	2.6
Japan	6	2.2
Russian Federation	5	1.8
Other	42	15.5
<i>N</i>	271	100

order of prominence): Culture, Health, Neuropsychology, Social, Cognitive, Educational, and Developmental Psychology, among others.

Tables 3 and 4 show the country and area of study distributions for the invited symposia papers, while Tables 5 and 6 reflect the distribution of submitted symposia papers, by country and area of study. In the current analysis, the symposium papers were counted individually. An examination of the total number of submitted poster and oral presentations revealed that Congress participants from South Africa provided 985 (22.6%) of the presentations, followed by China with 529 (12.1%), United States with 430 (9.9%), Iran with 222 (5.1%), and India with 186 (4.3%) presentations. The content areas that dominated overall were (in descending order of prominence) as follows: Industrial/Organisational/Work, Clinical, Developmental, Educational, Social Psychology, Assessment and Evaluation, and Cognitive Psychology.

Table 7 shows the distribution of the total complement of posters and papers by continent, and the major contributors per continent. The programme included 42 electronic posters, of which 32 were from the United States. Table 8 indicates the breakdown of posters, papers, and submitted symposia papers by focus or research participants' developmental level.

Reflections on the ICP 2012 presentations

The finding that just over one-quarter of the oral papers was from South Africa is not completely surprising, considering the conference was held in this country. Nevertheless, it is an encouraging statistic. Although largely anecdotal, feedback from reviewers and the Scientific Committee indicated a high level of satisfaction with the quality of abstracts and the work reflected in the abstracts submitted from South Africa. In total, almost 1000 (of the nearly 4000) papers and posters were presented by the host country's psychology community, which can be considered fairly impressive, considering the country's relatively recent re-entry into the international fold, and the fact that approximately 110 countries were represented at the Congress.

The relatively high proportion of papers from China and India must be understood against the populations of these countries, which together constitute 36.8% of the world's total population

Table 4. Invited symposia papers by area of study.

Area	<i>n</i>	%
Cognitive Psychology	32	11.8
Aviation Psychology	20	7.4
Educational Psychology	17	6.3
Health Psychology	17	6.3
Trauma	16	5.9
Developmental Psychology	16	5.9
Social Psychology	15	5.5
Neuropsychology	14	5.2
Counselling	13	4.8
Professional Training and Licensure	11	4.1
Environment/Sustainability	11	4.1
General	9	3.3
Assessment and Evaluation	8	3.0
Industrial/Organisational/Work Psychology	8	3.0
Culture	7	2.6
History of Psychology	7	2.6
Psychopharmacology	6	2.2
Other	44	16.2
<i>N</i>	271	100

Table 5. Submitted symposia papers by country.

Country	<i>n</i>	%
United States	216	24.5
South Africa	200	22.7
Australia	53	6.0
Germany	45	5.1
United Kingdom	40	4.5
Canada	34	3.9
China	27	3.1
Netherlands	21	2.4
India	20	2.3
Italy	15	1.7
Russian Federation	15	1.7
Brazil	14	1.6
Norway	12	1.4
<i>N</i>	880	100

(World Population Statistics, 2013). While one might have expected that countries from North America and Europe would dominate the paper presentations, this was not the case. There are at least two possible explanations for this. First, in recent years, there has been a trend towards more poster presentations at international congresses. Second, researchers from high-income countries are increasingly opting to organise symposia with colleagues and other researchers in their areas of specialisation. This is indeed evident in the symposia presented at the Congress, where five of the

Table 6. Submitted symposia papers by area of study.

Area	<i>n</i>	%
Clinical	71	8.1
Developmental	64	7.3
Assessment and Evaluation	53	6.0
Industrial/Organisational/Work Psychology	47	5.3
Cognitive Psychology	45	5.1
Teaching and Education in Psychology	44	5.0
Social Psychology	38	4.3
Culture	35	4.0
Community Psychology	34	3.9
General	34	3.9
Educational Psychology	33	3.8
Ethics	31	3.5
Social Issues and Political Psychology	29	3.3
Gender	27	3.1
Health Psychology	25	2.8
Professional Training and Licensure	23	2.6
Counselling	23	2.6
Positive Psychology	21	2.4
<i>N</i>	880	100.0

Table 7. Total submitted posters and papers by continent and major contributors per continent.

	Total posters and papers		Continent's major contributor	
	<i>n</i>	%	Country	%
North America	607	14.0	United States	70.8
South America	171	3.9	Brazil	66.1
Europe	941	21.6	Germany	19.6
Africa	1117	25.7	South Africa	88.2
Asia	1359	31.2	China	38.9
Oceania	144	3.1	Australia	93.8
Other/missing	10	0.2		
<i>N</i>	4349	100		

top six countries were high-income countries, with the United States presenting 24.5% of the symposia.

Excluding the United States, the poster contributions were dominated by non-Anglophone countries. Considering that English was the official language of the Congress, this is understandable, since many presenters who are not proficient in the official conference language generally prefer using posters to convey their research findings. Japanese presenters, for example, presented 94 posters and 28 oral papers.

A total of 1194 poster presentations were made at ICP 2012, which represents approximately one-fifth of the total complement of presentations. This is a reflection of the trend over the years, from a time when posters were regarded as a sub-optimal medium for conference presentations, to

Table 8. Posters, papers, and submitted symposia papers by focus or participants' developmental level.

	Posters		Papers		Submitted symposia papers	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Adult	445	37.3	644	28.8	108	12.3
Child/adolescent	216	18.1	358	16.0	69	7.8
Mixed	27	2.3	63	2.8	16	1.8
Not applicable	506	42.4	1168	52.3	687	78.1
	1194	100	2233	100	880	100

the present day when posters are regarded as the ideal method of conveying compact research findings. Since the turn of the century, it is becoming increasingly clear that there are many good reasons to opt for poster presentations over oral presentations (Ross et al., 2007).

As expected, invited addresses and invited symposium papers from high-income countries dominated. Nevertheless, it was encouraging to see invited presentations also delivered, albeit in smaller numbers, by presenters from other countries, such as Argentina, Brazil, India, Cameroon, Sri Lanka, China, Egypt, Lebanon, Nigeria, Uganda, and South Africa. Of course, it should be noted that the under-representation of certain geographical regions was largely a result of the extent of the development of psychology across the world.

The overall low numbers of presentations from African countries other than South Africa is concerning, and it would have been expected that, given the Congress location, more African academics would have considered presenting their work. Cost issues constitute an obvious explanation. Nevertheless, a fair number of delegates from African countries outside of South Africa attended the ICP 2012. Perhaps the initiative towards establishing the Pan-African Psychology Union (PAPU) may serve to bolster scholarly developments and dissemination on broader platforms, especially considering the vision of a commitment to 'scholarship and human development in our communities, countries, Africa and the World' (South African Journal of Psychology: Editorial, 2013, p. 156).

An interesting observation is the country status disparity (World Bank, 2014) between submitted presentations (poster and oral papers) and invited symposia and addresses. Middle- and low-income countries featured prominently among the submitted presentations, while high-income countries dominated all forms of invited presentations. The high number of submitted works is encouraging and may be explained by both the efforts of the ICP 2012 organisers in rallying middle- and low-income country academics, as well as globalisation trends (Prilleltensky, 2012) that are seeing scholars from poorer countries taking their place in international congresses. It is, therefore, hoped that in the near future, we will begin to see more invited presenters from middle- and low-income countries.

A positive finding was the significant number of presentations from Japan. This may relate to the fact that Japan will be hosting the next congress, that is, ICP 2016. This augurs well for a high level of interest from local academics and researchers when the event takes place on Japanese shores. Local support is vital in organising and hosting an event of this magnitude, as was evident at the ICP 2012, where South African psychologists attended and presented papers in large numbers.

A large number of papers ($n = 1151$) were presented in the context of symposia. As indicated, this is a relatively recent trend in international congresses, and may reflect the greater networking, and in some cases collaborative work across different contexts. It indicates the extent to which

researchers have links with others in their area of work, compared to decades earlier when researchers tended to work in greater isolation. Of course, this could also be a function of the growing size of psychology conferences and the consequent need to streamline and focus congress programmes more tightly.

An examination of the content presented at the ICP 2012 revealed that Industrial/Organisational/Work, Clinical, Developmental, Educational, Social, and Assessment and Evaluation Psychology were among the most prominent areas covered in the Congress through submitted papers and posters. It is important to note that many presentations contained overlapping content, but for the purpose of this analysis, the area or variable(s) most frequently or prominently referred to in the abstract were noted in this exploratory analysis. The content area analysis must therefore be viewed in this light, and not in absolute terms.

Interestingly, of those presentations that focused on specific developmental groups, considerably more addressed issues of adulthood than issues of childhood. While this could be a matter of concern since 26% of the world's population is under 15 years of age (United Nations, 2012), it is important that the present findings are viewed with the necessary caution. Although the ICP is the probably the largest international gathering of psychology academics and practitioners, the work presented at this conference represents a portion of the psychological research being done around the world.

Conclusion

The ICP 2012 has, by all accounts, proved an overwhelming success, especially considering the feedback from overseas delegates and those familiar with large international congresses. The wide distribution of countries represented at the Congress also attests to the interest in the event, and confidence among delegates from around the world to make the trip to South Africa, despite the negative reports the country sometimes receives in relation to tourist visits.

The finding that presenters represented a wide range of countries is encouraging, although there is concern that participation from middle-income and lower income countries needs to increase, so that psychology can more appropriately serve all the contexts in which it is taught, researched, and practised. The distribution of content areas presented at the Congress has been broad, and reflective of the multitude of sub-fields that currently characterise the discipline and profession of psychology. It was not surprising to note the specialisations that dominated the programme, considering the research interest in these areas in the global literature, and South Africa as well. However, the inclusion of previously under-represented tracks has been a progressive step, which will hopefully be sustained in future events. It is unfortunate that previous ICP congress data were not available for comparison, but it is hoped that the present analysis will prove useful for future events.

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