

Editorial: Dealing with contemporary issues in psychology: respecting the unwritten rules

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I find it difficult to believe that the end of the year is in sight already. The past few months have once again been a taxing, yet fruitful period. Our core editorial staff, including our consulting editor, Anthony Pillay, our consulting editor: statistics, Tyrone Pretorius, our books editor, Kopano Ratele, our copy editors, Willy Nel and Linda Theron, our publishing editor, Erna Kinsey, as well as our editorial secretary, Moipone Williams, meet regularly (electronically or in person) to discuss the smooth running of the journal and to ensure that potential problems are dealt with timeously.

When I conducted my usual thematic analysis of the articles due to appear in this issue of the *SAJP*, I noticed various common topics that made it possible for me to group the articles into specific themes. The different authors again considered issues such as stress, well-being and assessment, the multiracial family and adolescent achievement. These issues lie at the heart of our theory and practice as psychologists. However, I wish to discuss a matter that has a bearing on all the topics covered in this issue of the *SAJP*: the impact of the Grade 12 results on the learners ... and on the country as a whole.

Poor pass rates at school and throughput rates at universities continue to dominate the debate on the future of education in South Africa. This is not surprising as the country cannot afford the ongoing delivery of insufficient numbers of appropriately skilled graduates, the high dropout rates and the high failure rates at secondary and tertiary levels. The upshot is an increase in the number of jobs available to skilled professionals on the one hand and an alarming and escalating rise in unemployment on the other. Altman (2010) and Vavi (2010) contend that inequality, unemployment and poverty were more widespread in South Africa in 2010 than they were in 1994. These authors maintain that South Africa is in a state of crisis, especially if it is borne in mind that 74% of the youth under the age of 24 are unemployed.

Unresolved learning difficulties and barriers to learning at various levels of education and training exacerbate the grave situation in education. My own belief is that the incidence of learning difficulties and barriers to learning is actually much higher than is generally realised and that the problem is most severe in South Africa's poorest and most vulnerable populations (Bloch, 2009; 2011; Maree, 2010; 2011).

So we now know what our greatest challenges are, and we also know that there will be a heavy price to pay if we do not turn the situation around within the next few years. We need to ask ourselves how we, as psychologists, can bring about meaningful change. In the remainder of this editorial, I will attempt to answer this question.

While much has been written about possible ways of meeting the challenges facing education, my own view is that community service should be compulsory for all teachers and educational psychologists in order to facilitate and expedite equity, access and redress. Professionals in these two fields who have just completed their training should be obliged to do community service in remote rural schools as well as township schools (Maree, 2008). Such professionals should, of course, receive emotional and psychological support as well as financial incentives, and the necessary steps should be taken to ensure their safety. In executing their chosen careers in these environments, they will not only gain invaluable experience, shape and (re-)shape their own life stories but will also contribute to the collective story of South Africa and make a contribution to the development of the country as a whole. This will be in line with the most current definition of the construct 'career', that is, facilitating social integration and making a social contribution (Savickas, 2011). Community service will enable these professionals to

- a. break down socio-economic and racial barriers between people and, instead, build bridges between them;
- b. experience at first hand the goodwill and embracing attitudes that often characterise people living in desperate socio-economic contexts;
- c. bring much-needed expertise to the schools in these areas;
- d. provide holding environments for the most vulnerable populations (Savickas, 2009; Winnicott, 1987).

I believe that it is the birthright of every teacher and psychologist in South Africa to experience the love and good will of the people in these communities, especially during their year of compulsory community service (or internship, if you wish). If the enthusiastic comments of former teaching and educational psychology students who have ventured into rural and township schools are anything to go by, compulsory community service can be a life-changing experience. Working in the midst of extreme poverty and experiencing at first hand what most of these professionals had before seen only on TV seems to be the necessary catalyst to change the “Yes, we **can**” attitude to a “Yes, we **did**” attitude. These colleagues often report a curious sense of “I will no longer allow myself to be reined in by the constraints of the ‘written rules’ of my profession”. Instead, an incipient desire starts to grow to do much more than is laid down in written rules and minimum requirements.

The introduction of compulsory community service for teachers and educational psychologists thus has a rider: community service, working in communities, trying to make a difference in the lives of others, will make little sense if it is over-regulated and rules-bound.

Hence the need to foster a “respect the unwritten rules” attitude in every professional in the country — not only health care professionals such as psychologists and social workers. In other words, a willingness has to be inculcated not only to adhere to and respect the written rules that guide the various professions but, more importantly, to respect and apply the unwritten rules that guide all professions. More specifically, during training, every professional person should be taught the importance of being willing to “walk the proverbial extra mile” — not just during training and community service but especially afterwards. Professionals should show how much they care for others in a tangible manner: give more than is asked for by supervisors and managers; work harder than is required by institutional guidelines and requirements; offer their services in our communities at no charge; facilitate best practice in circumstances that will not necessarily advance their promotion prospects, salaries or working conditions. Where there is poverty, they should attempt to secure funding to start a vegetable garden or to begin a shoe project, a bread oven project, a food distribution project, a clothing distribution project. They should work with the corporate world to initiate upliftment programmes in impoverished communities; in other words, they should apply the often-quoted Chinese proverb: “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day, teach a man to fish and you feed him for life.” Of relevance here also is a line in Dolly Parton’s song Coat of many colours: “One is only poor if one chooses to be”.

We can choose to make meaningful social contributions for the rest of our lives.

Readers may be interested to learn that research shows that being altruistic and helpful to others impacts positively not only on those who are being ‘helped’. In the words of Steger, Kashdan and Oiski (2008):

The studies presented here clearly show that people who report engaging in more eudaimonic behaviors feel their lives are more meaningful and satisfying, across global and daily levels of analysis. Contrary to the prevalent popular cultural support for pleasure-seeking, those who engage in more hedonic behaviors did not consistently report more well-being (p. 40).

I firmly believe a willingness to respect the unwritten rules can effect change in contexts where change is so desperately needed and also enable those who do so to live happier, more fulfilling lives.

Psychological research should therefore be relevant to and impact on what is happening in the broader society. Reported research can only replicate what is happening in real life, and theory should follow and impact on practice — not the other way round (Savickas, 2011).

I will now briefly discuss each of the contributions in the current issue under the headings indicated above.

Stress and related matters

In the leading article, *Mauritian undergraduate university students' sources of stress and support*, Pillay and Bundhoo (2011) discuss stress among university students and its negative impact on their personal well-being and academic achievement. In their research among 327 undergraduate students at a university in Mauritius, the authors found that academic concerns caused the most stress, with female students significantly more affected than the men. Family issues also featured prominently. The authors emphasise the importance of determining the longer-term consequences of stressors and of scrutinising the course of stressors, that is, whether they are transient or chronic. As chronic stressors can have serious implications in the longer term, further research is needed on the topic to promote student well-being, academic progress and adjustment. The article has particular significance because of the high failure rates at many tertiary training institutions in South Africa and, indeed, in Africa as a whole.

People with intellectual disabilities (ID) are more likely to become victims of sexual assault than their non-disabled counterparts. In the second contribution in the first collection of articles, *PTSD symptoms in intellectually disabled victims of sexual assault*, Shabalala and Jasson (2011) discuss their research on the presence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms in people with ID who have been sexually abused. Their findings revealed higher rates of PTSD diagnosis and a higher intensity of PTSD symptoms in the group with a history of sexual abuse than in the group without such a history. The authors call for more adequate service provisioning for the mental health needs of people with ID.

In the third article in this section, *The manifestation of anxiety among Sesotho speakers*, Mosotho, Louw and Calitz (2011) discuss the lack of mental health research in South African black communities and the consequent precariousness of the national health system. The researchers investigated the ways in which anxiety manifests clinically among Sesotho speakers and found marked differences in the presentation of anxiety symptoms compared to the presentation reported in Western literature. An implicit finding was that someone who is disadvantaged is very likely also to be the victim of neglect.

The second group of articles deals with well-being.

Facets of well-being

In the first contribution in this section, *A retrospective evaluation of a wilderness-based leadership development programme*, Draper, Lund and Flisher (2011) evaluate the Leadership Project (LP), a wilderness-based leadership development programme that targets young people from diverse backgrounds in Cape Town. Contact between 'self', 'others' and the 'environment' contributed to the participants' positive experiences of the LP. *Interpersonal* outcomes in the LP are shown to be supported by *intrapersonal* outcomes, and the complexity of these outcomes in terms of assessment is highlighted.

In the second contribution, dealing with well-being, *Individual responsibility for health and HIV infection: a critical investigation of the lived experience of HIV-positive women*, Du Plessis (2011) argues that the popular discourse on individual responsibility for health has led to prescriptions on how to live 'positively' with HIV. Referring to Foucault's notion of technologies of the self, Du Plessis reveals how HIV-positive women struggle to forge new identities as women with HIV and to take responsibility for their health and the health of their loved ones. The author lists various silent factors that shape the lived experiences of these women and highlight certain important facets that conceal the constraints that women living with HIV may face.

In the concluding contribution in this section, *The difference between adolescent users and*

non-users of addictive substances in a low socio-economic status community: contextual factors explored from the perspective of subjective wellbeing, Florence and Koch (2011) explore the differences in terms of subjective well-being between underprivileged Cape Town adolescents who use addictive substances and those who do not. Notably, significant gender-based differences on general mood did not interact with substance use. The authors highlight the importance of basing intervention programmes on self-concept, the handling of feelings, and family and school relations. They conclude that while intervention programmes should focus on the adolescents, programmes for teachers, parents and community leaders should also be included.

The third batch of articles deals with assessment and related issues.

Issues related to assessment

In the first article in this section, *Introducing the CORE-OM in a South African context: validation of the CORE-OM using a South African student population sample*, Campbell and Young (2011) discuss the cross-cultural validity of the CORE-OM with a South African student population. The authors conclude that the CORE-OM can be used in South African contexts not only to measure serious psychological distress but also to facilitate evidence-based therapeutic treatment.

Underdeveloped communities, unemployment, violence, poverty and poor infrastructure are major concerns in South Africa. Kramer, Seedat, Lazarus and Suffla (2011), in the second contribution in this section, *A critical review of instruments assessing characteristics of community*, examine the conceptual reliability of asset-based community assessment instruments. Particular attention is given to instruments that measure social capital, social cohesion, community resilience and sense of community. The authors recommend the use of measures that draw on a combined quantitative-qualitative paradigmatic approach to deal with challenges; an approach that presupposes participatory strategies *vis-à-vis* implementation.

Gradidge and De Jager (2011) in their article, *Psychometric properties of the Wellness Questionnaire for higher education (WQHE)*, point to the absence of standardised measures of wellness for use in South African contexts and elaborate on the psychometric properties of the WQHE. Based on the evidence here, it seems the WQHE can be profitably used by professionals to assess clients' levels of wellness.

In the last article in this section, *Rethinking Rorschach interpretation: an exploration of resilient adolescents' personal constructions*, Odendaal, Brink and Theron (2011) explore Exner's Rorschach Comprehensive System (RCS) to explain how black South African adolescents' personal constructions inform their transactional resilience. The authors conclude that the culturally sensitive use of the Rorschach Comprehensive System (CSRCS) offers suitably trained, experienced and respectful clinicians the opportunity to explore young people's resilience-promoting processes across cultural boundaries.

The next section comprises only one article.

Multiracial family issues

In their stand-alone article in this section, *Multiracial families and contact theory in South Africa: does direct and extended contact facilitated by multiracial families predict reduced prejudice?*, Du Toit and Quayle (2011) look through the lens of contact theory to investigate the extent to which general contact with people of other races, direct contact with multiracial families and extended contact with multiracial families can predict reduced prejudice, reconciliatory race policy attitudes and reduced intergroup threats. The authors suggest that multiracial couples and families warrant special consideration as important intersections of positive interracial contact in South Africa.

The last section, too, contains only one article, an international contribution.

Factors impacting adolescent achievement

Munteanu, Costea and Paloş (2011) in their article, *Relationships between academic achievement and*

personality dynamics during adolescence, discuss whether a combination of personality facets (psychological personality type, energetic pattern, emotional pattern and motivational structure of personality) influences academic achievement among Romanian adolescents. They found, for instance, that although psychological personality type does not influence academic performance significantly, certain motivational traits appear to be important pre-conditions for achievement. The authors highlight the discrepancy found between the configuration of Romanian schools and the potential and needs of adolescents and suggest ways of improving the formative value of the educational process.

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, to submit articles that address gaps they see in South African psychological research.

I conclude by thanking the SAJP's core editorial staff for their exceptional support. Without their selfless efforts behind the scenes, there would be no journal.

I also thank Prof. Anthony Pillay for co-presenting a workshop on scholarly writing at the recent 17th South African Psychology Congress at Emperors Palace, Johannesburg. The workshop was well received and feedback has been exceptionally positive. Anthony, what a privilege it is to work with you!

Lastly, I thank Tim Steward for his excellent editing of this contribution.

Enjoy reading this issue of the *SAJP*.

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