

# Professional Counseling in South Africa: A Landscape Under Construction

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The focus of this article is on the history, status, and trends of the counseling profession in South Africa and on the similarities with the development of the counseling profession in the United States. A need exists for South African professional counselors to refocus their research efforts to reflect the realities of the 21st century and link counseling practice and theory with global realities to suit the needs and collectivist origins (*ubuntu*) of the South African population.

The context of counseling in South Africa is evolving rapidly because of various political, economic, and sociocultural factors. Thus, whatever is said in this article needs to be interpreted from the perspective that there is variability relative to the degree to which counseling theories developed elsewhere can be transposed directly to the South African situation; however, this is what actually occurred until very recently. Because counseling theories provide counselors with the theoretical foundation for establishing an acceptable practice that is in the best interests of their clients, the following working assumption will guide this explication: Professional counseling in South Africa is largely driven by an emphasis on individual needs, yet a culture of sharing and a focus on the collectivist needs (needs of the group) rather than individual needs is characteristic of roughly 90% of South African society. Moreover, South Africa is currently in a state of turbulence marked by poverty, xenophobia, unemployment rates of more than 40%, spiraling crime levels, ever-increasing socioeconomic inequality, emigration, and political instability. Because the prevailing political, social, and economic culture in which any counseling practice evolves affects the advance of epistemology (theory) and practice, this discussion is embedded in and framed by the reality explained herein.

Second, we concur with the views expressed by Egan (as cited in Levers, 1997) that professional counseling, as understood not only in the United States but also to an increasing extent in the progressively more internationalized counseling community, is an interactive, two-way process involving counselor and client in a relationship characterized by empathy, authenticity, and (probably more than anything) respect. Likewise, the physical, emotional, cognitive, vocational, social, conative, and spiritual dimensions of the individual are regarded as an indispensable facet of the critical mass of this unique relationship. Additionally, a major focus of professional counseling in South Africa involves career counseling. As far as career counseling in particular is concerned, we subscribe to Savickas's (2007a) definition of *counseling* as a concentration on "the daily life adjustment issues faced by reasonably well-adjusted people, particularly as they cope with career transition and personal development" (p. 183). Savickas (2006) advocated establishing

a cross-national professional identity for professional counseling; encouraging indigenous models, methods, and materials; and promoting international collaboration.

We begin our discussion by clarifying key concepts, followed by an analysis of the counseling context in South Africa.

## Concept Clarification

It should be noted that the changing character of the psychology landscape in South Africa has led to the inclusion of large facets of the scope of practice of educational psychology in professional counseling. (The interested reader is referred to the amended scope of practice of all psychologists and counselors in South Africa, a scope that was recently accepted by the Professional Board for Psychology, "Health Professions Act," 2010). We are aware of an overlap between the terms *career counseling* and *general counseling* in both South Africa and the United States; however, they are still distinguishable from each other. Furthermore, as in the United States, there is a distinction between counseling psychology and the counseling profession in South Africa. We use the term *counseling profession* throughout. Likewise, we use the term *professional counselors* to refer to professional counselors in both educational and noneducational settings.

## Historical Context of Professional Counseling in South Africa

In this section, we review the history of the development of professional counseling in South Africa by drawing on comparisons between counseling in South Africa and the United States.

Counseling in South Africa has always been a contentious issue rooted in the vocational guidance and counseling movement that emerged in the United States. Counseling was established in South Africa during the 1920s, largely as a result of the rise of intellectual testing during a time of "intense class-ordering in the new South African union" (Foster & Louw-Potgieter, 1991, p. 68). It was the aim of Afrikaner academics to perpetuate racist ideology and to maintain economic power in the hands of the White minority by uplifting

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poor Whites and applying social engineering to restrict access to careers for the Black majority (Leach, Akhurst, & Basson, 2003; Watson & Fouche, 2007).

Nicholas, Naidoo, and Pretorius (2006) cited the following five major influences on counseling in South Africa: (a) the Industrial Revolution and the influx of immigrants from Holland, France, and England; (b) the European colonization of South Africa, which “forcibly dispossessed, subjugated and enslaved” (p. 4) the indigenous peoples who later constituted a convenient farming and industrial labor supply; (c) the discovery of diamonds and the introduction of mining technology and training as part of the rapidly developing mechanization of industry; (d) the urbanization of poor Whites after the Anglo-Boer War and the economic depression of the 1930s; and (e) the labor shortages after World War II.

The ad hoc implementation and lack of development of professional counseling in Black schools resulted in indecision among Black university entrants who were increasingly admitted to English universities, which were subtly penalized by government funding cuts for admitting Black students (Akhurst & Mkhize, 2006; Kay & Fretwell, 2003; Leach et al., 2003). Because counseling in the Afrikaans university context used racially oppressive directive approaches, Blacks associated it with the inadequate guidance administered at school and consequently regarded it as inferior. Academic departments in homeland universities renounced professional counseling and career counseling in particular (Leach et al., 2003).

### Structures That Organize Counseling in South Africa

Education was used in the past to sustain the gatekeeping function of the Afrikaner nationalist government by regulating career development (Nicholas et al., 2006). Professional counseling was consequently compromised by the prevailing apartheid ideology, a lack of teacher training in school guidance, underresourced schools, and the low status afforded counseling as a profession. According to Dube (as cited in Nicholas et al., 2006), racism had been entrenched in the education system by 1882, and the Bantu Education Act (1953), which segregated schooling along racial lines, ensured the underfunding of Black schools and regulated entry into the job market (Dovey & Mason as cited in Nicholas et al., 2006). From 1967, guidance was a compulsory subject in White schools, but only in 1981 were guidance teachers appointed in Black schools as part of reforms aimed at quelling rising Black unrest. The current situation in South African schools is somewhat improved because the Department of Education has included life orientation as a core learning area in the National Curriculum Statement (2007). For the first time in South Africa’s history, guidance and counseling, on which learners spend approximately 8% of the school week, has been allocated credits in the learning system.

The South African Psychological Association (SAPA), the first South African association for psychologists, was founded with 34 members in July 1948. When Blacks were admitted in 1962, some White members immediately formed

an exclusively White association (Psychological Institute of the Republic of South Africa). The third psychological association in South Africa, the Society for Student Counselling in Southern Africa (SSCSA; now known as the Southern African Association for Counselling and Development in Higher Education), which was established in 1978 by White, mainly male delegates from 15 universities, was confronted in 1986 about the lack of papers on contentious issues at its conferences and its complicity with the Afrikaner nationalist government. The Western Cape Counselling Centre eventually withdrew from the SSCSA because of repeated allegations of “pseudo-political neutrality” (Nicholas, 1993, p. 332) on the part of the SSCSA and the irrelevance of conference program items. SAPA was disbanded in 1992 when a new, more inclusive body, the Psychology Society of South Africa (PsySSA), was founded and rapidly gained international legitimacy (Nicholas, 1990; Painter & Terre Blanche, 2004). Currently, PsySSA is associated with the International Union of Psychological Science and the International Test Commission and has good working relations with various other international and national psychology bodies. Furthermore, PsySSA has signed memoranda of understanding with the American Psychological Association, the British Psychological Society, as well as 10 other psychological societies or associations, and regularly liaises with local, national, and international structures to facilitate professional development and the exchange of ideas that underpin the discipline.

### Counseling Associations in South Africa

The South African Association for Counselling Psychology (a division of PsySSA) is the body overseeing the interests of persons registered as counseling psychologists. The task of this association includes recruiting new members, retaining current members, and revitalizing the association. In light of recent changes made to the scope of practice of all categories of psychologists in South Africa, the association has decided to redefine the role of counseling psychology as a registration category. However, this review will only be carried out once the new Professional Board for Psychology (currently under consideration by the Minister of Health) has been announced and relevant information regarding new policies has been made available (Nicholas, 2009)—hence the title of this article. No other association for counseling exists in South Africa.

## ■ The Current Context in South Africa

The current context in South Africa is characterized by a number of contemporary issues that need to be addressed as a minimum requirement for the positive development of counseling (Leach et al., 2003). In the following section, we briefly discuss some of the most important of the current issues.

### Indigenization

The transformation in counseling in South Africa during the early 1990s (e.g., a new, inclusive professional body; racial rec-

conciliation; and a drive toward higher standards) “confound[ed] Euro-American expectations . . . for ‘third world’ settings” (Painter & Terre Blanche, 2004, p. 533). As is the case in the United States, career counseling in particular has begun to adapt and to develop its own indigenous South African practices, whereas most career counseling interventions elsewhere are informed by a Western worldview that focuses on individual as opposed to group needs (Nicholas et al., 2006).

The development of an indigenous African-oriented counseling practice is advocated by Abdi (1975) because the “Western notion of a talking cure is alien to many black people in South Africa” (Straker, 1988, p. 9). Malott (2008) believed that not only the Western versus non-Western paradigm should be addressed, but also the challenge of cultural differences across Western countries. He supported Levers’s (1997) call for “psychoecological pluralism” (p. 271) to include indigenous practices in the counseling curriculum. Indigenization could “enable scholars to accept both traditional and imported psychological perspectives” (Sinha as cited in Stead & Watson, 2006, p. 188).

### Government Policy and Legislation

A number of policies and laws were designed and promulgated to regulate the reconstruction and democratization of South African society after the dismantling of the apartheid system and its discriminatory policies, such as the Labour Relations Act, 1995, which includes clauses on joint employer–employee decision making and the regulation of trade union rights (Nicholas et al., 2006, p. 7); the Skills Development Act, 1998, which provides for workplace training linked to guidance and counseling and for labor centers, which also provide career guidance and career counseling (Flederman, 2008, p. 28); and the Human Resource Development Strategy, 2001, coordinated jointly by the Departments of Labour and Education (Kay & Fretwell, 2003, p. 25).

### Counseling in Noneducational Settings

In South Africa, the Department of Labour provides career information, as well as guidance and counseling services, for registered work seekers through the Employment Services Directorate in each of the nine provinces. Employment-based guidance and counseling services are offered by companies and private providers who seek accreditation as education, training, and development (ETD) practitioners and government refunds for skills development levies. Individuals may register as ETD practitioners upon completing recognized qualifications (unit standards that pertain to guidance and counseling) through the Education, Training, and Development Practices (ETDP) Sector Education and Training Authority (SETA). However, ETDP SETA does not assist them with general career choices, but only with the development of their careers within the company concerned (Kay & Fretwell, 2003, pp. 30–31).

Despite the role of employer organizations and trade unions in the structuring of the Skills Development Act via the National Economic Development and Labour Council, not one of 16 unions surveyed by Kay and Fretwell (2003) had either

identified it as a priority or developed career guidance and counseling policies (see also Watts & Fretwell, 2004, p. 19).

Approximately half of the 5,000 clinical, counseling, educational, and industrial psychologists registered in South Africa in 2003 were private practitioners who, with the possible exception of clinical psychologists, all offered career and personal counseling, as well as therapy and educational support, at a fee of 300 to 1,500 South African rands (Kay & Fretwell, 2003, p. 34).

Only one of 18 large private employment agencies surveyed by Kay and Fretwell in 2003 (p. 35), Chart DMB, provided career guidance services, whereas the rest provided recruitment services for employers.

A large number of nongovernmental career guidance organizations (NGOs) flourished in the 1980s and 1990s. Unfortunately, the national association of these NGOs, the South African Vocational Guidance and Education Association, consisting of 24 members countrywide in 1994, had only three of its original members in 2003: the Careers and Information Centre in Cape Town, the Careers Resource Centre, and the Center for Entrepreneurship and Education Development in KwaZulu-Natal (Watts & Fretwell, 2004, p. 22; see also Kay & Fretwell, 2003).

The decrease in membership was due to a change in donors’ funding priorities during 1994, when financial support for structures that facilitated and mediated professional counseling in South Africa dwindled, and the majority of these structures disappeared. Although few NGOs currently exist, many NGO policies and programs have been assimilated into government policies. The Joint Education Trust, for example, works with the government, the private sector, international development agencies, and education institutions to improve the relationship between education, skills development, and professional counseling, including the world of work (Kay & Fretwell, 2003).

## ■ Counseling-Related Issues Experienced by People in South Africa as a Result of Historical and Current Contexts

The majority of people in South Africa experience a number of counseling-related issues, which result from the country’s historical and current contexts. We discuss some of these issues in the following paragraphs.

### Barriers Within the Counseling Profession

Watson and Fouche (2007) have grouped a number of present-day threats to the counseling profession into three broad themes: (a) doubts about the professional status of the counseling profession, (b) the potential isolation of the counseling profession, and (c) macrosystemic issues that could negatively affect the profession’s service delivery.

The microsystemic issues include the professional status and potential isolation of the counseling profession. The moot merging of clinical, counseling, and educational psychology has given rise to heated debate in South Africa, because coun-

selling and educational psychology enjoy less prestige than does clinical psychology. Watson and Fouche (2007) referred to this lack of prestige as the counseling profession's "Cinderella status" (p. 160). In addition to the threat of isolation resulting from misunderstanding the counseling profession, few Blacks enter the profession, possibly also because of language barriers (Watson & Fouche, 2007):

On the grossest level one of the major barriers . . . was the fact that the white counselors did not speak a black language [i.e., an indigenous language]. Furthermore there were times when the black counselors did not themselves speak the child's home language, although they could usually make themselves understood. (Straker, 1988, p. 18; see also Leach et al., 2003)

Regrettably, this is still by and large the case in South Africa. The majority of clients still receive counseling in English, their second or third language.

The recent attempt to introduce a lower level counselor category with only 2 years of training has raised concern about the "devolvement of the profession to less-qualified individuals" (Watson & Fouche, 2007, p. 160), despite the need for basic level counseling services. An exacerbating factor is the worldwide emergence of life coaching. The issue of life coaches is both an internal (counselors already in the profession increasingly offer coaching in addition to therapeutic services; Brain & Austin, 2002) and an external phenomenon (life coaching is developing as "an identifiable, legitimate profession in South Africa"; Rostron, 2007, Coach Training and Certification section, para. 2).

Whereas the majority of professional counselors in South Africa are still White (even though approximately 88% of the population is Black), there is a worrying lack of evidence of significant transformation of the staff and student components of many academic departments at universities across the country. Creative and bold new initiatives need to be devised and put in place to overcome the divide that exists between the situation of a small number of Black staff members and students and the ideal situation (80% Black, 20% White). These departments still draw only on institutional pools of talent available, instead of the national pool, when staff members are appointed, although the long-term viability of the departments ultimately depends on their vision and ability to freely and vigorously debate the significance and implications of this approach.

#### Barriers External to the Counseling Profession

First, the legacy of the past and its current destructive manifestation in the country need to be understood if the prevailing violence and dislocation are to be adequately addressed (Hamber, 1999). The high level of violence in South African schools can be traced to the fragmentation of many families because of the absence of one or both parents (Burton, 2008). The violence that characterized the apartheid era, especially during the 1990s, and an inept criminal judicial system have

led to vigilantism and self-administered justice, which are undermining South Africa's relatively new human rights culture. The counseling profession's responses to deal with the problem of violence should include, for example, storytelling and needs to be based on a culture of sharing (Maree & Molepo, 2005), as well as consideration of the socioeconomic context and acknowledgment of the "legacy of violence and mistrust within communities themselves and not merely between the state and its citizens" (Hamber, 1999, p. 125).

Second, the HIV/AIDS pandemic is affecting productivity, public services, family structures, child mortality, and poverty levels (Maree & Ebersöhn, 2006), resulting in a rapidly escalating need for professional counseling; however, counseling services remain inadequate and focus on directive rather than on client-centered pretest and posttest counseling, with hardly any ongoing counseling (Petersen, 2004). Despite past efforts to promote internationalization and multiculturalism in counseling, the situation in South Africa is thus no different from that in the United States, where an increasing understanding exists among American counselors "that the current state of the field is [still] ethnocentric and psychologically emic, and that counseling psychology in the US may not be the 'state of the art'" (Leong & Leach, 2007, p. 170).

## ■ Counseling Responses Essential to Helping South African People Cope With Concerns

A number of counseling responses are necessary for helping South African people cope more effectively with concerns such as those expressed earlier.

#### Promoting a Social Justice Agenda

Blustein, McWhirter, and Perry (as cited in Nicholas et al., 2006, p. 8) argued that an activist social justice agenda will enhance the potential of counseling "to improve the education and working lives of all people [in South Africa]." This is not a novel concept in South Africa because the Carnegie Poor White Commission report led to social reforms aimed at protecting the advantaged position of Whites by addressing their economic and social needs (Miller, 1993). Counseling in South Africa, therefore, as in the United States, was influenced by the same international phenomena, namely, industrialization, migration, World War II, economic depression, and digitalization (technological development; Pope, 1997), but its growth in South Africa was directed by race-related issues (Leach et al., 2003). Clearly, as a result, various barriers within and external to the counseling profession still hamper the successful development of the counseling profession in South Africa.

Whereas, currently, all tertiary institutions offer a range of counseling and academic support services to students and prospective students (Kay & Fretwell, 2003), it seems essential to create more relevant counseling theories and practices and to reconsider research efforts to enable counselors to position counseling within a context and framework that is more suited

to the idiosyncratic needs of all South Africans. Professional counseling interventions should be based on the following three broad principles, which collectively address the pivotal issue of diversity:

*Equity.* There should be no untoward privileging in counseling for any specific group on the basis of gender, resources, socioeconomic constraints, culture, language, or demographic constraints.

*Redress.* Counselors should understand the need to find ways to effect redress given the historical imbalances still prevalent in South Africa.

*Access.* Ideally, counseling should be freely available to everyone. As far as possible, all clients should receive counseling in their native tongue. Conversely, all professional counselors should be able to speak at least one indigenous language. Whatever the case may be, counseling in clients' second or even third language in particular deserves to be treated with due circumspection.

As a way to facilitate these interventions, community service needs to be extended to all graduates in the field of professional counseling. After all, counseling has the potential to prevent or promote transformation (Swart as cited in Dryden, 1990; Leach et al., 2003). Prilleltensky (as cited in Nicholas et al., 2006) believed that an emancipatory communitarian approach by South African counselors could bring about social change. On a microlevel, Watson and Fouche (2007) called for a profession that is assertive in its advocacy, that will become more integrated, and that will address diversity as well as theoretical and research issues. On a macrolevel, scholars are calling for a creative rather than a reactive approach to the current technological society and for international networking to meet the needs of marginalized groups such as the unemployed, individuals with disabilities, and contract workers (Watson & Stead, 2002).

### Creation of More Relevant Counseling Theories and Practices

A theoretical framework that combines facets of a quantitative approach with career construction, the postmodern approach has become essential in South Africa since its introduction (Amundson, 2006; Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2002). Such a framework could promote counseling in traditional South African society where the focus is on the group, storytelling, and *ubuntu* (openness, connectedness to others), thus empowering counselors to assist individuals to achieve self-completion and make social contributions through work (Savickas, 2007b). The search is on for a viable, 21st-century approach to professional counseling in South Africa that yields results demonstrably related to life success. The realities of the 21st century should dictate assessment strategies and guide client feedback. The time for applying a test-and-tell approach (based on trait and factor theory) in isolation (in career counseling, for instance) has passed. What is needed

in professional counseling is an approach that includes elements of both a positivist and a qualitative approach to help clients see meaning in their lives, accept responsibility for their actions, and become lifelong learners who can adapt to new demands. Clients should be encouraged to become critical thinkers, creative problem solvers, and skilled decision makers. Higher education institutions must play a pivotal role in creating a South African society that is locally relevant and globally competitive, focusing on, among other issues, the current unacceptably high dropout rate at tertiary and secondary level institutions of learning.

Because theories in the counseling profession have generally been accepted in South Africa with much of their application focused only on White South Africans (Stead & Watson, 1998), few psychometric tests have been designed specifically for South Africa's diverse population. Research endeavors should focus on developing new assessment instruments and strategies based on the approach referred to in the preceding paragraphs. In addition, counseling in South Africa traditionally has an objective (positivist) orientation. The rapidly changing global situation necessitates a new approach to counseling requiring counselors to adjust their theory and practice to accommodate a rapidly changing and changed context. The modified discipline needs to reflect innovative methods, techniques, and structures to ensure effective counseling (Maree, Bester, Lubbe, & Beck, 2001).

We believe that the scope of career counseling in particular should be broadened to include the full continuum of diversity in South Africa (e.g., class, gender, religion, creed, and race), with the emphasis on actively engaging people in constructing meaning for planning the future (see Amundson, 2003). In attempting to facilitate growth and development, counselors should view adolescents as active agents in their own personal development: The counseling profession should therefore continue to address the needs and diversity of individual persons.

### Conclusion

The developments highlighted in this article form part of an ongoing investigation into how counseling theories and practices in South Africa can best address the challenges posed by an evolving global world. Whereas professional counseling as an area of specialization is growing rapidly in this age of globalization, in South Africa, it is still based largely on mainstream European and American counseling approaches. Professional counseling in South Africa needs to move beyond its apartheid past and overcome the micro- and macrosystemic challenges it faces. It should discard its Cinderella image to ensure a transformed 21st-century identity through global consultation, research, and collaboration.

We believe that a strong need exists for South African professional counselors to renew their practice, revise counselor training programs, create more relevant counseling theories and practices, and refocus their research efforts to reflect the realities of the 21st century (e.g., facilitate a counseling approach that incorporates both

the positivist [quantitative] and the narrative [qualitative] approach) and link counseling practice and theory with global realities to best suit the needs of the majority of the South African population and its collectivist origins (ubuntu). In doing so, counselors could expand the theory base of professional counseling in South Africa into one that is increasingly all-encompassing, holistic, context based, and appropriate for large and small groups.

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