

## CONFERENCE REPORT – THE THIRD SOUTHERN AFRICAN PSYCHOLOGY STUDENTS' CONFERENCE, JUNE 2013

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The third biannual Southern African Psychology Students' Conference (24-28 June 2013) was the largest yet since its inception in 2009 Gaborone, Botswana. Boasting a total of 163 presentations the conference was jointly hosted by the Psychology departments of the University of South Africa and the University of the Witwatersrand.

The theme for the conference, *Psychology in(action)* provided the backdrop to a three-day dialogue amongst students, academics and practitioners on the possibilities and limits of psychological thought and practice. The programme included a mix of pre-conference workshops, symposiums, lunchtime talks, *People Behind the Papers* interviews – and introduction of *People Behind the Dissertations* interviews.

The ten pre-conference workshops took place over two days and were aimed at introducing and engaging students on the conservative divide between practitioner and academic. The themes covered ranged from everyday realities of psychological practice, psychotherapeutic techniques, occupational assessment practice to academic research and publishing. Highlighting ontological and methodological realities of psychological research, the parameters and relevance of academic publishing, these workshops proved to be one of the key highlights of the conference, with consistently good attendance. Grappling with the often murky and pressurising communities of practice – both professionally and academically – is an obvious and pressing concern for many postgraduate students in the discipline. The two lunchtime talks were focused on engaging two primary areas of interest for many students of psychology: the challenges of navigating the job market, and accessing funding for study and research.

Two key highlights of the conference bear mentioning: the *People Behind the Papers* and *People Behind the Dissertations* interviews<sup>1</sup>. The former project is a continuing online initiative aimed at introducing students and scholars more generally to the research scene through interviews with established and published scholars. Through such initiatives, scholars share their personal research journeys, the challenges and successes, their own engagement with the research terrain in South Africa. Professors Sumaya Laher and Brendon Barnes from the University of the Witwatersrand were the recent established scholars interviewed in this continuing archival project. The current

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the project and how you can participate, visit <http://www.peoplebehindthepapers.co.za>

terrain of psychological assessment research and work in South Africa, conducting cross-cultural research, interdisciplinary work in the area of Public Health and psychological practice, professionalization as research psychologists were some of the core issues discussed in both these sessions. A recent addition, the *People Behind the Dissertations*, is focused on highlighting the research journeys of developing scholars who have recently completed their MA dissertations and doctorate theses. These interviews engage with the processes of research writing, from identifying the topic, dilemmas of research design to support systems available for the student in this process.

The more conventional papers ranged from primarily theoretical-oriented discussions to in-depth empirical foci and spanning diverse disciplinary areas of focus: from cognitive-neuropsychology, social and community psychology to psychotherapeutic research. A surprisingly vibrant space was apparent in the participation of the students throughout the three-day event. What is certainly evident here is the potential for such a space to re-ignite an active and animated researcher-practitioner community where students may not only come to experience a sense of belonging but also further entrench an engagement with the discipline that moves beyond “typical” student interaction that is often isolated. In the words of the conference coordinator, Dr Puleng Segalo, it was the “absence of student voices” that sparked the preliminary idea for such a space in 2007. From the energetic participation that was evident in the week-long event the potential for increased student contribution and membership in the community of practice remains positive.