

The Status of Research Psychology in South Africa

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Research psychology as a field appears to be currently sidelined in South Africa. Despite the fact that many universities still offer programmes in research psychology and that research psychology exists a field of registration with the HPCSA, the field is extremely underrated. Therefore this study seeks to establish the status of research psychology in South Africa at present with a view to increasing awareness and activity in the field as well as to informing current developments in the field of psychology particularly with regards to the proposed framework for psychology.

INTRODUCTION

As indicated in the abstract, this study sought to determine the status of research psychology in South Africa at present. It was thought that one of the most effective ways of doing this was to consult the major stakeholders in the field. Thus tertiary institutions by virtue of offering programs in research psychology were identified as a vital source of information. Practitioners in the field would also yield important information. HPCSA documentation relating to the profession was also deemed important for assessing the status of research psychology in South Africa. The outcomes from each of these spheres will be presented. Limitations identified in each sphere will also be addressed. Finally points for discussion and debate will be presented with a view to providing a way forward for the research psychology as a field.

UNIVERSITIES

In determining the status of research psychology it was thought that one would need to establish its current status within psychology departments at the various institutions. One would need to establish whether individuals were still being trained in the field, how many were being trained and the nature of the training. Some information on the course students follow after training is also useful in terms of assessing the effectiveness of training in the field of research psychology particularly in terms of job and practice opportunities. Thus a questionnaire consisting of 9 questions, each assessing some aspect of the areas mentioned earlier was e-mailed

to all heads of psychology departments at all universities in South Africa. The form could be completed electronically or in hard copy.

E-mail addresses were located by visiting university websites or by using pre-existing lists obtained from DRM Executive members. DRM members were also asked to submit the questionnaire to the relevant person/people in their departments. 5 institutions responded, viz. Rhodes University, University of Cape Town, University of Natal – Pietermaritzburg campus, University of Pretoria and the University of the Witwatersrand.¹

Feedback from these institutions indicated that the questions required records that were not necessarily kept particularly in terms of the various things graduates did on completion of their programs and/or the sectors they proceeded to work in. UCT, UKZN and WITS managed to estimate the percentage of students pursuing further studies, working, etc. post their research psychology program as well as the percentage of students in the various sectors. This could however have been a limiting factor for some universities and may have impacted on the decision not to participate in the study.

From the information provided by the four tertiary institutions, it is evident that all five institutions provide a training in research psychology. Primarily this is done on a full time basis and can be done as an MA in research psychology by coursework and dissertation or by dissertation only. WITS was the only university offering both courses on a full and part-time basis.

Students are still pursuing studies in research psychology as evidenced by the numbers of students registering for the courses this year as well as from 2001. More students are opting for an MA in Research Psychology by coursework and dissertation rather than an MA by dissertation only.

Despite the difficulty in providing information on students progress following their MA's, the estimates provided suggest that at least a quarter of all research psychology graduates pursue postgraduate studies most likely a PhD or an MA in another area of psychology. At least a fifth to a quarter of the students obtain employment in government or work for NGO's. 10% - 30% of graduates work for

¹ The response rate may also have been influenced by the recent merging of institutions. Some questionnaires may not have arrived at the appropriate destinations.

private companies. UCT and Rhodes report at least 40-50% of graduates being self employed while WITS reported only 15% and UKZN none.

In terms of the sectors that graduates work in, the UCT estimates suggest that majority of the graduates work in the education (30%) and health (20%) sectors, respectively. UCT also reports that 5% of graduates work in the financial and accounting sector, the information systems sector, the personal care sector, the police and private security sector and the sports, arts, culture and entertainment sector. 2% are estimated to work in the diplomacy and intelligence sector. Although WITS has no record of this, the researchers' experience with the students at WITS over the years would suggest a similar pattern. Most students work in the education and health sectors. The researchers' experience would suggest though that 10% of the students would work in either the financial and accounting sector or the information systems sector. At least 5% work as researchers in the police and private security sector and the sports, arts, culture and entertainment sector.

Universities were also asked to respond to an open ended question on the status of research psychology within the new framework. The general view espoused by UP, UKZN and WITS was that research psychology did not have the same status as other categories. The HPCSA disempowers research psychologists as guidelines are too restrictive. An example cited is that research psychology students cannot undertake any work with neuropsychological tests unless registered in the clinical field as well. Since research psychologists do not undertake diagnosis or intervention, the need to register was questioned. Students in research psychology graduate with skills that enable them to work within psychology as well as within a diverse array of fields, hence a number of students do not need to register. They can practice their skills without registering with the HPCSA. Only students wanting to research and construct psychological tests might want to register with the HPCSA. WITS also questioned the ruling that people completing an MA in Psychology by dissertation only could not register even if they did complete an internship.

PSYCHOLOGISTS

Research psychologists were identified as individuals who are best positioned to provide input on the status of research psychology in South Africa. A questionnaire was developed requesting age, gender, race, current employer, employment sector, HPCSA registration category/ies, psychology field/s of practice, number of years registered as a research psychologist, institution at which degree was completed,

nature of degree (full time/part time), nature of course (coursework, dissertation, internship), and current research fields. This information was regarded as pertinent as it assists in identifying who research psychologists are and where they are primarily located. Psychologists were also asked to respond to an open ended question on the status of research psychology within the new framework.

Questionnaires were either e-mailed or posted to all registered research psychologists. The list was obtained from the HPCSA. 85 questionnaires were e-mailed and 118 were posted. Questionnaires were also e-mailed to all members on the DRM mailing list. 33 responses were received.²

Age in this sample ranged between 26 and 66 years with a mean age of 43.12 years (SD = 10.78). 10 (30%) males and 23 (64%) females responded. Majority of the sample are from the white racial grouping (n = 29, 88%). Only 2 Indians (6%), 1 Coloured individual (3%) and 1 Black (3%) individual responded. In terms of employment most individuals are employed by government (n=17, 52%) and of these most are academics at tertiary institutions. 1 person is employed at an NGO (3%), 7 are employed in private companies (21%) and 8 are self employed (24%). 2 individuals are self employed and work for a tertiary institution. In terms of sector, most individuals are employed in the Education, Training and Development sector (n=22, 67%), followed by the Services sector (n=5, 15%). 2 individuals (6%) work in the Health and Welfare and Police, Private security, Legal and Correctional sectors respectively while 1 individual (3%) reported working in the Construction sector and the Media, Advertising, Printing and Publishing sector, respectively.

All individuals except 3 (9%) are registered as research psychologists with the HPCSA, i.e. 91% of individuals are registered (n=30). 2 individuals (6%) are registered as clinical psychologists, 3 (9%) as counselling psychologists, 1 (3%) as industrial psychologists, and 2 (6%) as educational psychologists. 88% of individuals practice in the field of Research Psychology (n=29). 1 individual (3%) practices in Clinical Psychology, 5 individuals (15%) in Counselling Psychology, 11 (33%) in Industrial Psychology, and 3 (9%) in Educational psychology.

The number of years registered in the field of Research Psychology ranged from 1 to 26 years with a mean of 9.22 years and a standard deviation of 7.15. In terms of

² A potential limitation with regards to the response rate could be the datedness of the HPCSA list. At least 12 e-mail addresses were incorrect and 3 questionnaires were returned to sender

institutions, individuals appear to have completed their degrees at various institutions. 8 individuals (24%) completed their degrees at UP, 6 individuals (18%) completed their degrees at WITS, 3 individuals (9%) at UCT, 2 individuals at Rhodes, UDW, Stellenbosch and UWC, respectively (24%) and 1 individual at RAU, UPE, UNISA, respectively (12%). The nature of their degrees varied as well. 16 individuals completed a coursework component as part of their degree (48%), 29 individuals (87%) completed a dissertation as part of their degree, 20 individuals completed an internship as part of the degree (60%). There were two individuals (6%) who registered as research psychologists based on their experience in the field.

In terms of current projects being undertaken by the sample, it is evident that research psychologists work in diverse fields. 2 individuals are doing research in Clinical Psychology, 1 in Counselling Psychology, 5 in Community Psychology, 6 in Educational Psychology, 8 in Health Psychology, 12 in Industrial Psychology, 2 in Neuropsychology, 12 in Research Methodology, and 1 in Consumer Psychology. Some individuals reported fields in the 'Other' category. 2 individuals are doing research in the Cognitive Psychology field, 2 individuals are in Marketing Research, 2 in Psychological Assessment, 1 in Social Psychology, 1 in Gender, 1 in Spirituality, 1 in Career Counselling, and 1 in Business, training and human resources (not psychology-specific). No respondents reported research in the field of sports psychology.

In response to the open-ended question on the status of research psychology, the general consensus was that research psychology and research psychologists are an important part of psychology and are essential in transforming and improving psychological practice in the unique and diverse context of South Africa.

Respondents indicated that research psychologists were essential in developing new theories and evaluating existing theories in psychology. They have a role to play in supporting practitioners in the field with research as well as enhancing the quality of research output from other practitioners in the field of psychology. Research psychologists have an important role in the training of all psychology graduates to promote a culture of research as well as to ensure research competence amongst future practitioners.

Some respondents argued that registration with the HPCSA was not necessary in order to carry out the functions discussed above. The argument here is twofold. The first being that research psychologists don't carry out diagnosis or intervention. A

representative portion of research psychologists work in diverse fields that are not necessarily linked to psychology. For these individuals registration merely establishes credibility. However some researchers work in areas of direct psychological relevance, eg. the prevalence and/or etiology of psychological disorders, the development or evaluation of psychological tests. For these individuals registration may be necessary. Thus the distinction is made between the researcher with an interest in psychology and the psychologist with an interest in research with the suggestion being that it is more the latter that needs to register.

Some respondents though alluded to the contradiction in the HPCSA practice guidelines though where research psychologists are allowed to develop tests but cannot administer them. Generally respondents voiced dissatisfaction with the position of research psychology in the current HPCSA framework for psychologists. According to respondents there is no place for research psychology as the current model is clinical. It is too restrictive in terms of what research psychologists should and should not be undertaking. Research psychologists need to have a specialisation and registration in one of the other fields to make them more marketable. Some respondents are optimistic that the new framework should allow more scope for research psychology while others don't think so.

Generally respondents expressed the opinion that research psychology as a field and research psychologists are often marginalized. Research psychology should enjoy the same status as the other fields of psychology and research psychologists should attempt to do more to create an awareness of the field and its potential contribution to psychology.

HPCSA

Documentation pertaining to research psychology/ists was requested from the Professional Board for Psychology at the HPCSA. 5 documents were received, viz. F103, F107, F160, F227 and the code of conduct document. These are discussed below.

F103 – CRITERIA FOR THE TRAINING AND FOR THE ACCREDITATION OF INSTITUTIONS OFFERING TRAINING OF INTERN-PSYCHOLOGISTS

This document is general and the information pertains to all categories of registration. Of interest though are the criteria set out for the training program of intern psychologists.

"The Training Programme

The training of interns must take place within the following framework:

- (1) Evaluation techniques and control of psychological instruments - 30% to 40% of the programme.
- (2) Application of psychological techniques such as assistance with the correction of problems and development - 10% to 35% of the programme.
- (3) Personal moulding and tuition by a mentor, participation in discussion, visits, etc. - 10% to 35% of the programme.
- (4) Other professional-orientated activities - 10% to 20% of the programme.

Further, interns must have access to a spectrum of cases which is sufficient to ensure the variety of exposure required by the programme."

While this is quite general and could be moulded to fit an internship in any of the psychology categories, point number 1 is of interest to research psychologists. Research interns may in their internships train in the use of psychological instruments. However once registered, they are prohibited from administering psychological tests.

F107 – INFORMATION FOR INSTITUTIONS WHICH WISH TO APPLY FOR RECOGNITION FOR TRAINING OF INTERN RESEARCH PSYCHOLOGISTS

This document details the necessary criteria for any institution wanting to be recognised as an institution for the training of intern research psychologists. Descriptions of requirements are provided under five broad headings, viz. staff, research activities, facilities, training program and collaborating university/ies. The document concludes with a section on the obligations of the training institution. These centre around inspection from the Council, quarterly progress reports and qualified supervisors. As with other documents, this one too is fairly general and an appropriate internship can be constructed in relation to this. However it is quite vague in terms of the requirements for the training program and one assumes that this is because the nature of the training program is addressed in the general document, F103.

F160 – POLICY REGARDING INTERN PSYCHOLOGISTS: GUIDELINES FOR UNIVERSITIES, TRAINING PLACEMENTS AND INTERN PSYCHOLOGISTS

This documents outlines the general principles for all psychology internships and deals with intern registration, intern and supervisor requirements, internship requirements, psychologist registration and unsatisfactory performance of interns. It is also general and applicable to all categories. There are no specifications for research psychology in particular.

F227 – CRITERIA FOR REGISTRATION AS A PROFESSIONAL RESEARCH PSYCHOLOGIST FOR PERSONS WHO DID NOT COMPLETE AN INTERNSHIP

This document is the only one that specifies criteria unique to registration as a research psychologist. The document sets out clearly defined criteria as indicated below.

“To comply with the conditions for registration in the category research psychology, persons who did not complete an internship must satisfy all three requirements of the following criteria:

1. Research training:

A Research Master’s degree in Psychology that is recognized by the Professional Board for Psychology, or a Doctoral degree in Psychology awarded on the basis of research.

2. Research experience:

Employment for at least 18 months in a full time research post in psychology; or employment for at least three years in a lecturing or research post in a university department of psychology.

3. Research competence:

At least two full length research articles or, at least, four short communications (empirical, theoretical, or methodological) with the applicant as only or first author, published in the South African Journal of Psychology or any psychology journal listed in the Social Science Citation Index or equivalent research products.

The institute for Academic and Research Psychology hereby requests the Professional Board for Psychology to refer applications to it. IARP will evaluate each application on the basis of the criteria stated above, and recommend whether it can be approved or not. The recommendation will be conveyed to the Professional Board.”

A similar set of criteria for research internships could assist in establishing a general standard of training for all psychologists in this category. This will maintain a national standard but will also clarify the future role/s of the research psychologist and could assist in broadening the practice area for this field.

ETHICAL CODE OF PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT

This document outlines the roles and responsibilities of psychologists registered with the HPCSA under the broad headings of: General Standards, Wellbeing of clients and other professional relationships, Confidentiality, Fees and financial arrangements, Assessment procedures, Psycho-legal activities, Violations of law, Advertising and other public statements and activities, Teaching, training supervision, research, and publishing, and Resolving ethical issues. It is a document that is phrased rather generally so as to be applicable to all psychologists across the categories of registration. No reference is made to the limits and duties of any particular psychologist.

DISCUSSION

From the results presented above, it is evident that research psychology as a field still exists. Universities offer courses in research psychology and from the registration information provided, the number of students registering for these courses is comparable to the numbers registering for other MA programs in psychology.³

Despite the fact that all the universities are not represented in this study, one can assume that a large number of institutions offer an MA course in research psychology from the responses obtained from registered psychologists.

Psychologists reported completing their degrees at various institutions but UP, WITS and UCT are the institutions at which most individuals in this sample completed their degrees. In terms of tertiary institutions, research psychology is still a recognised and viable option.

However HPCSA registration in the field of research psychology is not consistent with the number of students completing an MA in research psychology suggesting that most individuals are choosing not to register. This is borne out by the age of the individuals in the current sample in comparison to the age of graduates as well as by the size of the HPCSA list of registered research psychologists used in this study.

This trend towards non-registration suggests a number of aspects that were

³ This is based on the 5 universities that responded. It is possible that other universities that have not responded may have fewer registrations on these courses.

highlighted in the open-ended responses in both the university and psychologist surveys. The first being that registration is not essential to pursuing a career in research. Registration may provide credibility and may be useful to have in academia but it is not essential in terms of finding a job. It also suggests a possible disillusionment with being registered as this only provides a restrictive box in terms of practice. From the responses to the psychologist survey, it is clear that even though majority of the sample are registered as research psychologists, a substantial number practice in other fields as well, most notably industrial psychology. It is also evident that some people opt for dual registration as this provides them with a wider scope in terms of practice.

The view espoused in both the university and psychologist surveys is that research psychology and research psychologists are sidelined in the current framework. The HPCSA documentation also appears to pay little attention to research psychology. The HPCSA then does appear to be too located within a clinical model and not taking enough cognisance of research and industrial psychology as suggested by some respondents.

More should be done to create awareness of the utility of the field and respect for the field. Responses on both surveys indicated the fundamental contributions that research psychology makes towards psychology as a whole as well as to the other categories in psychology.

A view espoused by some psychologist respondents was that the creation and adoption of the new practice framework would go some way towards mainstreaming research psychologists. However it is unclear within the framework as to whether research psychologists would be subsumed under a 'general / industrial psychologist' or a 'specialist psychologist'. The specialist psychologist requires a PhD which some of the currently registered practitioners may have but a substantial number don't. It is more than likely though that research psychologists would be subsumed under 'general/ industrial psychologist' given that the requirement is an accredited Masters degree and an internship which is the same as the current requirement. However the core competencies specified are again located within a clinical model and no specification is made for other fields particularly in the 'Psychological Intervention' competency which specifies:

“Psychological Intervention

- Specialized, complex, advanced reconstructive and long term counselling
- Advanced psycho-education and training
- Promotion of primary, secondary and tertiary psychosocial well-being
- Psychotherapy”

Although this may be applicable to some research psychologists, the responses received on both surveys indicate that this is not applicable to most. Generally research psychology does not concern itself with diagnosis or psychological intervention of clients. It provides research in these areas and research psychologists may be involved in psycho-education and training as well as promotion of primary, secondary and tertiary psychosocial well-being but specialized, complex, advanced reconstructive and long term counselling and psychotherapy of clients falls out of the accepted role of the research psychologist.

However the new framework does provide more leeway for research psychologists in terms of psychological assessment. General / industrial psychologist core competencies for assessment are as follows:

“Psychological Assessment

- **Specialised** screening requiring **in-depth** interpretation of psychological dynamics and dysfunction (including the use of approved assessment instruments)
- Diagnosis (**in-depth** diagnosis of dynamics within an individual, couple, group, community, social system or organisation according to an accepted diagnostic methodology)”

As yet it is unclear from the new framework what happens to individuals completing an MA in Psychology by dissertation only. Currently these individuals are unable to register as research psychologists even if they do complete an internship. Thus research psychology still appears to be sidelined by the new framework.

WAY FORWARD

In terms of where research psychology is headed in the South African context then, it is clear as suggested earlier that research psychology needs to create a voice. The HPCSA needs to engage more with key stakeholders in the field to ensure that the new framework takes cognisance of the field. However given the number of people favouring non-registration, perhaps the engagement with the HPCSA should consider

whether research psychologists need to register at all and what the benefit of registration might be other than credibility. It may also be as suggested by some respondents on the surveys that only those individuals wanting to practice in areas of assessment, intervention or diagnosis need register while others who are practicing more in research whether it be in psychology or in any other field need not register. This seems to be a pattern already with a number of students not registering.