



CONFERENCE REPORTS

1st Southern African Students Psychology Conference, Gaborone, Botswana

Yaseen Ally, Lebohang Letsela and Deanne Goldberg
UNISA Institute for Social and Health Sciences

The 1st Southern African Students Psychology Conference was hosted as a collaboration between the University of South Africa (UNISA) and the University of Botswana over two days, 26 and 27 June 2009, at the University of Botswana, Gaborone, Botswana. It was well attended by students from universities across South Africa and Botswana, as well as young and senior academics from various African countries, including Zambia, Dakar, Senegal and Malaysia.

The conference was opened by Professor Lydia Nyati-Ramahobo, Deputy Vice Chancellor of the University of Botswana. She noted that the conference was unique in its core commitment to making available to students of psychology a chance to make their voices heard. Confirming this, the chairperson of the Psychology Department at UNISA, Dr Matshepo Matoane, stated that the main objective of the conference was to bring together students to discuss the relevance of psychology in Africa, hence the theme *Re-imagining Psychology in Africa*. She asserted that psychology is very important in society because it brings out human perceptions and attitudes.

In a unique keynote presentation, Sean Hagen, a lecturer at UNISA who organised the conference, conducted an open interview with representatives of the psychology departments at both universities. Spanning a diverse range of topics, this interview allowed attendees a more intimate insight into the minds of some of the leaders of the field both on the continent, and internationally. The applicability of psychology as both a field of study and an applied science was emphasised, as was the critical role the discipline has to play in navigating and negotiating many of the issues facing the African continent. What emerged as a certainty was that the task facing those active in the field is the quest for a psychology that is inclusive and indigenous – a psychology relevant to Africa.

The conference provided an open platform to emerging voices in the field of psychology in Southern Africa. Eighty presentations were made over the two days by students. The presentations captured the theme aptly, and covered an array of theoretical and

philosophical questions, including presentations on various therapeutic approaches, HIV/AIDS, masculinities and help seeking, African philosophical thought, witch hunts and spirit possession, violence and racial discourses.

The engagement of students with various topics indicated the ever growing scope of psychology as a discipline in Southern Africa. This growth resonates with a signal that the social ills experienced by many people are being researched and attempts are being made to reduce the burden they cause in the lives of many. As stated by Professor Lisa Plattner, founding head of the Psychology Department at the University of Botswana, the conference stemmed from a need to bridge students' and lecturers' views. In addition, Dr Matoane stated that the 1st Southern African Students Psychology Conference had ushered in an important landmark for the calendar of psychology, with particular resonance on the African continent. She further stated that "a psychology that took its roots in Europe and the rest of the Western world is about to undergo a radical metamorphosis as Africa adds her voice with the 1st Southern African Students Psychology Conference".

The conference was a highlight of the University of Botswana Psychology Department's fifth anniversary, and also marked the first of the many Southern African Students Psychology conferences to come. The participants learned a lot from one another and left the conference keen to be part of the radical process that the African continent is experiencing in its understanding and utilisation of psychology.