

**RELEVANT KNOWLEDGE: CONTENT ANALYSIS OF RESEARCH
CONDUCTED BY SOUTH AFRICAN PSYCHOLOGY MASTERS STUDENTS
(2008 – 2012)**

Research article submitted by

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ABSTRACT

In South Africa, Psychology has had a chequered past mainly due to its role in the justification of apartheid policies. Due to apartheid's socio-economic injustices, confidence in the applicability of psychological knowledge to South Africa's social problems was insufficient. Psychologists attempted to raise consciousness of the social relevance of psychology by contributing relevant knowledge and being reactive to social inequalities and related psychosocial issues affecting South Africa. This study aimed to conduct a content analysis of trends in research produced by Psychology Masters' students in the fields of Clinical, Counselling and Research psychology over a period of 5 years (2008-2012). The corpus of data was then compared with the key issues raised in the *United Nations Development Programme's* South Africa human development report (2003), along with a focus on articles published by Macleod (2004) and Macleod and Howell (2013).

It emerged that Empirical Qualitative studies, based on post-modern frameworks, as well as HIV/AIDS, Knowledge Production, Assessment and Measurement and Programme development and evaluation, dominated psychological research. Participants were mainly urban, middle class adults living in the 3 wealthiest provinces. University students were the most popular participant group.

While it is encouraging that students were attempting to engage with psychosocial issues, the limited number of key social issues addressed, the under-representation of

certain sectors of the South African population, as well as the impact of socioeconomic status on well-being requires greater attention at Masters' level to ensure Psychology's psychosocial relevance.

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Thank you Dad and Mom for encouraging me to always strive for what brings happiness and setting the example of being true to self and others.

If anything is worth doing, do it with all your heart.

Buddha

PERMISSION FOR FINAL SUBMISSION

I, the supervisor of this study, declare that the article written by Tracey Whitehead reflects the research conducted by her on the subject. I hereby verify that all the necessary changes as requested/indicated by the examiners have been made and am satisfied that this copy is the final electronic copy. I hereby verify that I have reviewed the final electronic version and have determined that it is an accurate representation of the article. I hereby grant permission for the final submission of the article and thereby confirm that it fulfils the requirements for the degree Master of Arts in Counselling Psychology.


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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	ii
Plagiarism declaration	iv
Acknowledgements	v
Permission for final submission	vii
List of tables	ix
Section A: Journal selected and specifications for authors	x
Journal selected	x
Specifications for authors	x
Section B: Article submitted for examination	xii
Title of Article, Author and Contact particulars	xii
Abstract	1
Key words	2
Introduction	2
Research questions and Aims	10
Ethical Considerations	11
Method	11
Procedure	11
Sampling	12
Data Analysis	12

Results	14
Discussion	20
Future critical challenges in Psychology research	25
Limitations	25
Acknowledgements	26
References	27
Appendices	
Appendix A: full Specifications of Journal	32

List of Tables

Areas of foci in UNDP-2003	9
Table 1. <i>Topics</i>	15
Table 2 <i>Types of theses</i>	15
Table 3 <i>Theoretical resources</i>	17
Table 4 <i>Province</i>	17
Table 5 <i>Participant age</i>	18
Table 6 <i>Data sources</i>	19

Section A: Journal selected and specifications for authors

Journal Selected

The Masters in Counselling Psychology research article content and technical requirements are in accordance with those prescribed by the *South African Journal of Psychology (SAJP)*. The *SAJP* publishes contributions in English from all fields of psychology. Whilst this journal places emphasis on empirical research, it also accepts theoretical and methodological papers, review articles, short communications, book reviews and letters commenting on articles published in the journal. Priority is given to articles relevant to Africa and with focus on psychological issues of social change and development.

Specifications for Authors

- All manuscripts should be written in English
- Should include an abstract of not more than 250 words
- New submissions are limited to 5500 words, including references, tables, figures, etc.
- Writing of a high grammatical standard
- Writing to follow technical guidelines provided on the SAJP website

- American Psychological Association 6th edition (APA 6th) must be followed
- Double spaced text throughout
- Left and right hand margins a minimum of 3 cm
- Header and footer of 5cm
- Text standard 12-point

Appendix A contains a full copy of the specifications.

Section B: Article submitted for examination

Title of Article, Author and Contact Particulars

Title: Relevant knowledge: Content analysis of research conducted by South African Psychology Masters students (2008-2012).

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ABSTRACT

In South Africa, Psychology has had a chequered past mainly due to its role in the justification of apartheid policies. Due to apartheid's socio-economic injustices, confidence in the applicability of psychological knowledge to South Africa's social problems was insufficient. Psychologists attempted to raise consciousness of the social relevance of psychology by contributing relevant knowledge and being reactive to social inequalities and related psychosocial issues affecting South Africa. This study aimed to conduct a content analysis of trends in research produced by Psychology Masters' students in the fields of Clinical, Counselling and Research psychology over a period of 5 years (2008-2012). The corpus of data was then compared with the key issues raised in the *United Nations Development Programme's* South Africa human development report (2003), along with a focus on articles published by Macleod (2004) and Macleod and Howell (2013).

It emerged that Empirical Qualitative studies, based on post-modern frameworks, as well as HIV/AIDS, Knowledge Production, Assessment and Measurement and Programme development and evaluation, dominated psychological research. Participants

were mainly urban, middle class adults living in the 3 wealthiest provinces. University students were the most popular participant group.

While it is encouraging that students were attempting to engage with psychosocial issues, the limited number of key social issues addressed, the under-representation of certain sectors of the South African population, as well as the impact of socioeconomic status on well-being requires greater attention at Masters' level to ensure Psychology's psychosocial relevance.

Keywords: Content analysis, Psychology in South Africa, Psychology Masters theses, psychosocial issues, relevance

One main purpose of Psychology is arguably to contribute to the wellbeing of humanity by improving the human condition through research and practice (Long 2014; Louw, 2002). In this regard the American Psychological Association (APA) (2017) sets out the principles of beneficence and non-maleficence as the moral duties of psychology, together with refraining from discrimination on the basis of race, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation and social background.

In South Africa (SA), Psychology has had a chequered past mainly because of the role it played in the justification of apartheid policies, that it catered exclusively for white South Africans and because of its reliance upon research and theories that stemmed from

Europe and North America (Holdstock,1981). Western and Eurocentric psychological frameworks, methodologies and theories were deemed to be universal and relevant, regardless of social context, race and gender, and were focused on the well-being of the individual (Holdstock, 1981). Though this suited the white minority, the majority of South African's held a more holistic approach to life, one which valued fauna, flora, dreams, individuals, communities and ancestors (Nwoye, 2015). Researchers (Holdstock, 1981; Mpofu, 2002; Nwoye, 2015) argued that culture influences individuals and therefore psychology needs to respond to the various affecting phenomena in a relevant manner. The relevance of Psychology has, therefore, long been debated in SA in order to make Psychology more reactive and sensitive to social and cultural issues. Sher and Long (2012) examined the relevance debate from 1974 to 1994 and found social turmoil influenced the social receptivity of the discipline. Objection to the apartheid system and the social ills caused by apartheid would have been relevant for Critical psychologists during the 1980's and yet psychologists seemed to shy away from research that challenged the status quo of the apartheid government, and neglected to research the needs, attitudes and values of black South Africans (Biesheuvel, 1991; Macleod, 2004; Seedat, MacKenzie, & Stevens, 2004; Sher & Long, 2012). Psychology in SA during its early years was aligned with and even promoted the discriminatory and oppressive legacies of apartheid (de la Rey & Ipser, 2004; Nwoye, 2015; Seedat, 1998; Suffla & Seedat, 2004).

Due to the socio-economic injustices of the apartheid government, with their rationale based on the psychological knowledge produced in the West, there was little confidence in the applicability of psychological knowledge to the social problems within a multilingual and multicultural SA (de la Rey & Ipser, 2004; Long, 2013; Nwoye, 2015). To restore confidence, Psychology needed to become culturally fair and it was only after 1994, in democratic SA, that Psychology began to focus on developing and influencing policies that were fairer regarding mental health and addressing the racial disproportion of predominantly white psychologists in a predominantly black society (de la Rey & Ipser, 2004; Foxcroft, 1997). The field of Psychology in SA needed to become more relevant by addressing and finding solutions to the various social issues affecting all South Africans (de la Rey & Ipser, 2004; Duncan, van Niekerk, & Townsend, 2004; Holdstock, 1981; Macleod, 2004; Sher & Long, 2012).

Seedat (1998) offered a descriptive characterization of pre-democratic South African Psychology by extracting, by means of a content analysis of seven journals, the themes and trends of psychology in SA from 1948 to 1988. Seedat (1998) noted that white males dominated knowledge production that English was the main language of production and that participants were mainly white. The findings suggested that the field of Psychology neglected black peoples' psychosocial experiences and alienated black South Africans and women of all groups from knowledge production (Seedat, 1998). He

asserted that enabling or encouraging research in the area of social issues is important to the improvement of the human conditions of everyone in SA (Seedat, 1998).

Stevens (2003) examined how psychology in SA responded to 'race' and racism in the South African Journal of Psychology (SAJP) from 1990 – 2000. Stevens (2003) found that knowledge production was shifting in democratic SA in relation to 'race' and racism by being less conservative and traditional to a more reflexive and reflective social relevance stance.

In 2004 a Special Issue (SI) of the SAJP critically reflected on the role and relevance of psychology in SA, from 1994-2003, in the context of progress, challenges and issues regarding social transformation following the advent of democracy in 1994. These critical reflections focused on the restructuring of tertiary institutions, post-apartheid policy, Critical Psychology and Psychology's future in SA, as well as psychology's responsiveness to earlier relevance debates. Research and publication trends of psychology in SA were examined in the Special Issue. Duncan, van Niekerk and Townsend (2004) and Shefer, Shabalala and Townsend (2004) examined trends in authorship since 1994 and women's authorship respectively, finding racial and gender skewed patterns of knowledge production.

Ahmed and Pillay (2004) and Mayekiso, Strydom, Jithoo and Katz (2004), focused on selection and training in Psychology, concluding it needs to be redressed to respond to the issues of equity in SA university selection procedures for clinical

psychology training. Mayekiso et al. (2004) found that addressing the selection imbalances was essential for transformation. By training more black and male students, the white and female dominated profession demographic would be altered.

In the Special Issue, Macleod (2004) focused on research in Psychology, specifically the trends in topics covered in the SAJP for the period from 1999-2003. The trends were compared to the key issues raised in the *United Nations' Development Programme's* South Africa human development report (UNDP-2003). One of the most urgent social and health concerns bearing on SA society in the early years of democracy was HIV/AIDS (Schneider & Stein, 2001). Macleod (2004) found that only 2% of 147 articles in the SAJP addressed HIV/AIDS, concluding that psychological research could improve on its appropriateness and relevance to SA if psychologists acknowledged the link between individuals and their socio-political environment, which perpetuate mental health provision inequalities (Macleod, 2004). Mental health care, as well as concerns of access to water, electricity and sanitation, were highlighted during this period of investigation, as were concerns of race, racism and the relevance of commonly used diagnostic categories and assessment practices (Macleod, 2004). Macleod (2004), found, furthermore, that SA Psychology research under-represents the majority of the SA population, while university students are over-represented.

Practitioners of Psychology need to be mindful to ensure that the field of Psychology changes along with society and continues to benefit the welfare of those who

access it (Louw, 2002; Macleod, 2004). In keeping with this, Macleod and Howell (2013) found that articles in the SAJP and PsychInfo continued to under-explore social issues like unemployment, poverty, physical health and mental health systems and various other social issues faced by SA.

Psychology concentrates on middle-class participants, but could be of value to all/everyone by contributing relevant knowledge and being reactive to psychosocial issues affecting the lives of marginalised and disenfranchised people (Macleod, 2004; Nwoye, 2015; Sher & Long, 2012). Therefore, psychological research needs to focus on related psychosocial issues (depression, anxiety, sexual abuse and violence, poverty, education, inequality, etc.) that afflict under-served, poor and black groups (Macleod & Howell, 2013; Seedat, MacKenzie, & Stevens, 2004).

The UNDP-2003 provided guidance to some of the key social concerns in SA at that time, namely poverty, income and wealth inequalities, access to quality and affordable water, electricity, sanitation and health services for all citizens, unemployment and under-employment, land reform, housing, education, HIV/AIDS and black economic empowerment. The UNDP-2003 recommends creating a people-centered approach enabling decision making within the communities. Seedat, MacKenzie and Stevens (2004) supported the development of integrated and participatory community psychology, noting its marginal inclusion in both academic and professional arenas at the time.

More recently in the relevance debate, Long (2013), proposed that Psychology's focus on social relevance should address emancipating those communities that are oppressed. Macleod and Howell (2013) stated, furthermore, that knowledge in Psychology must transcend socio-political concerns and resolve social inequalities and psychosocial issues related to these inequalities.

Long (2014) reflected on 'social relevance' from its inception as a concept related to Psychology's value to society and its changing meaning over time. He explored the importance of knowledge production that is socially useful to the challenging changes in developing countries, motivated by political crises and change (Long 2014). Long (2014) found that 'social relevance' would never have a single meaning, as it is firmly embedded in the social, economic and political needs of the time. Subsequently Barnes and Siswana (2018) and Long (2018) have entered 'decolonisation of psychology' into the relevance debate in an attempt to understand how decolonisation is viewed and written about in the realm of psychology in SA.

There has been a lot of focus on knowledge production in Psychology journals in relation to the relevance of Psychology in SA and its socio-political concerns, however to date, to the researcher's knowledge, no studies have investigated the research production of Psychology Masters' students in SA. As such it is imperative to establish if students' research contributes to overcoming social inequalities and the related

psychosocial issues, as students are viewed as the future practitioners, policy writers and decision makers of the discipline of Psychology.

This study forms part of a broader content analysis examining Counselling, Clinical and Research Psychology Masters' theses submitted to university library online repository systems from 2008-2017. The study attempts to determine the trends of psychology masters theses' topics and compares them to the psychosocial issues raised in the UNDP-2003 and the National Development Plan Vision 2030 (UNDP-2030). It further examines if the Masters studies were responsive to earlier identified psychosocial issues. This article presents the findings regarding the first five-years (2008-2012) of the broader study.

Democratic South Africa has 17 publicly funded universities. Universities were selected for this study if they offered Masters in Clinical, Counselling, and Research Psychology and had access to theses on their online library repositories. It was reasoned that university online repositories provided a good indication of research in this discipline. This study evaluates whether Psychology Masters' theses address social and related psychosocial issues related to SA society, mentioned in Macleod (2004) and Macleod and Howell (2013) and UNDP-2003. Seedat (1998) contends that enabling or encouraging research in the area of social issues is important for the improvement of the human condition in SA. By assessing the broad trends in Masters theses, this study adds a new dimension to the relevance debate by drawing attention to the trends of research

produced at postgraduate level and determines how they relate to the pressing inequalities and related psychosocial issues at the time.

SA is currently in its third decade of democracy and to ensure the reconstruction initiative of the 1980's is continued, critical examination of progress needs to be maintained. By examining the trends in Psychology masters theses one is able to determine relevance by comparing and contrasting trends with the UNDP-2003 report, as well as the Macleod (2003) and Macleod and Howell (2013) articles.

Research Question and Aims

The central question of this research might be stated as follows: "What are the trends in topics being researched, the populations samples are drawn from, methodologies employed, and the theoretical frameworks used?", and "Are Masters theses addressing the concerns raised in UNDP-2003?"

The aim was to identify the types of knowledge produced and the extent to which national psychosocial issues were addressed. The results were then compared and contrasted to the psychosocial issues highlighted in the UNDP-2003, as it encompasses the psychosocial issues pertinent to SA at that time (Adelzadeh, 2003). The UNDP-2003 highlighted poverty and inequality and found HIV/AIDS increased poverty and job loss and reduced the ability of the poor to cope with the disease. For this reason the UNDP-2003 argued for a comprehensive response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic encompassing prevention, treatment and care. Following on from UNDP-2003 was the UNDP-2030,

developed in 2011, with the key foci being ways to eliminate poverty and reduce inequality.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations for this research project were to ensure 'doing good and avoiding harm' to participant, self and institution (Iphofen, 2015). This study did not involve human participants and no identifying information was disclosed, resulting in no direct risk of harm to any person and safeguarding the reputation of universities where theses were accessed. The units of analysis were freely available via the online repositories and therefore privacy of publication was not expected and use of data without obtaining consent was permitted.

Method

An unobtrusive method was utilised as archive materials were accessed to investigate in an explorative qualitative study (Bryman, 2012). The researcher investigated a relatively unknown area, utilising content analysis as the theory and method of analysis. This investigation determined the trends in knowledge produced and about whom the knowledge was produced.

Procedure

The Research Project Ethics Review Committee (RPERC) of Rhodes Psychology Department granted ethical approval to conduct this study. The relevant theses submitted from 2008 to 2012 were downloaded from the universities' online repositories and filed

in a document folder. Once the sample was obtained the data was extracted and stored in *Microsoft Excel* for analysis of content and trends.

Sampling

The researcher utilised a convenience sampling procedure as the sample, Psychology Masters theses from 2008-2012 in Counselling, Clinical and Research courses, was readily available and accessible (Bryman, 2012).

The researcher determined that the focus of research in Educational and Industrial Psychology would focus on issues pertaining to education and industry and were therefore excluded. The selected fields provided an adequate volume of data, consisting of N965, to establish trends. The data are freely available to registered students and academics from any SA university through the online institutional repositories, therefore gatekeeper's permission was not required.

Data analysis

A qualitative content analysis approach was utilised for the purpose of cataloguing areas of content and trends within Psychology Masters' theses submitted from 2008 to 2012. Content analysis attempts to quantify content in terms of categories utilising a systematic and replicable procedure (Bryman, 2012). Qualitative content analysis does have a quantitative component as it provides a quantitative description of the actual content of the data (Bryman, 2012). Descriptive data from each thesis was entered in a table using *Microsoft Excel*. Along with the topics, further content of

theses was coded following Macleod (2004) and Macleod and Howell's (2013) deductive, descriptive categories such as: the type of university (traditional or comprehensive), type of Masters degree (clinical, counselling, research by thesis, research by coursework and thesis), type of thesis (e.g. empirical qualitative, empirical quantitative, review etc.), theoretical resources ('hard'-science frameworks, Individual-focused theory, systems-oriented theory etc.), data sources, participant demographics, participant socio-economic status, participant race, gender and age. The researcher analysed each unit (thesis) and was able to draw conclusions on the entire body of data during this period, as to its relevance to SA psychosocial issues listed in the UNDP-2003. This content analysis will contribute to the relevance of Psychology debate by providing supporting, or non-supporting, evidence by means of quantitative tables of data and qualitative interpretation of data.

By selecting an appropriate unit (all theses available on-line for the period), this ensured the credibility of the content analysis, as it was large enough to determine trends (Krippendorff, 2013). Reliability was established by measuring inter-rater consistency and validity bolstered by adhering to Macleod (2004) and Macleod and Howell's (2013) coding categories (Bryman, 2012).

The main focus was on the inductive category, namely, "Topics", as the analysis established if certain trends existed within the topics and whether they related to psychosocial health concerns. Categories were tabulated, using *Microsoft Excel*, and

represented quantitatively in the form of values or numbers. The author and two assistants coded the same randomly selected 10% of theses in the respective data tables using *Microsoft Excel*. The coded data was then exported into the *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS v.25)* to determine inter-rater reliability and the intra-class correlations. Overall inter-rater reliability as determined by Cronbach's Alpha was .72. Intra-class correlation average measures of .72 indicate a high intra-rater reliability between the three researchers. Correlations were .83 or higher for each category, except 'sources of data' with a .69 inter-item correlation. Correlation was .98 for Topics.

Results

From 965 theses, 85 topics were identified, the most common being HIV/AIDS, followed by Knowledge production (process, completion and challenges of research/knowledge production, as well as research capacity building), Assessment, Measuring scales and Measuring instrument development and Programme evaluation. Topics appearing in ten or more theses and the overall percentages are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. Topics

Topic	<i>N</i>	% of <i>N</i>	Topic	<i>N</i>	% of <i>N</i>
HIV/AIDS	77	8.00	Psychobiographies	18	1.90
Knowledge Production	59	6.10	Trauma	16	1.70
Assessment	58	6.00	Romantic relationships	16	1.70
Measure development	52	5.40	Career/Career development	15	1.60
Programme evaluation	40	4.20	Intimate partner violence	15	1.60
Psychopathology	34	3.50	Intra-/intergroup relations	15	1.60
Parenting/mothering	31	3.20	Professional training	14	1.50
Reproductive health	30	3.10	Sexuality	14	1.50
Resilience	30	3.10	Sexual abuse/rape	13	1.40
Substance use and abuse	25	2.60	Educational concerns	13	1.40
Violence/crime	24	2.50	Child care	12	1.30
Counselling/psychotherapy	24	2.50	Race/ethnicity/culture	12	1.30
Identity	25	2.50	Masculinity	11	1.20
Self-concept/esteem	21	2.30	Stress/burnout	10	1.04
Quality of life/wellness	20	2.00	Risk behaviour	10	1.04

Categories reflected in Table 2 were used to differentiate the type of thesis with Empirical qualitative being most prevalent (55.50%).

Table 2. Types of thesis

Type of thesis	% of <i>N</i>	Type of thesis	% of <i>N</i>
Empirical Qualitative	55.50	Comment	0.40
Empirical Quantitative	32.00	Methodological	0.30
Empirical Mixed	10.70	Theoretical	0.30
Review	0.80		

Categories reflected in Table 3 were used to differentiate the theoretical resources into 5 broad frameworks (Macleod, 2004).

1. 'Hard' science frameworks (positivist, psychometric, neuropsychology, psychiatric, evolutionary psychology)
2. Individual-focused theory (e.g. attitude, identity, personality, wellness, moral development, risk/resilience)
3. Systems-orientated theory (e.g. socio-ecological, cultural, community, health systems, organisational)
4. Classic theories (existentialism, phenomenology, psychodynamic, hermeneutic, cognitive behavioural)
5. 'Postmodern' frameworks (social constructionism, post-structuralism, post-colonialism)

'Post-modern' frameworks (28.80%) were most common, followed closely by 'Hard' Science (23.00%) frameworks.

Table 3. Theoretical resources

Theoretical resources	% of <i>N</i>	Theoretical resources	% of <i>N</i>
Post-modern frameworks	28.80	Classic theories	15.50
'Hard'-science frameworks	23.00	Individual-focused theory	10.10
Systems-oriented theory	16.60	Mixture	6.00

Table 4 confirms the largest percentage of knowledge was generated in main cities and provinces in which most universities are located. The category Not Applicable (NA) includes data from documents and other media and not human participants or case studies.

Table 4. Province

Province	% of <i>N</i>	Province	% of <i>N</i>
Gauteng	25.80	Free State	1.50
Western Cape	22.20	Mpumalanga	0.30
KwaZulu Natal	12.50	Northern Cape	0.20
Eastern Cape	9.50	Unclear	9.60
North West	6.30	NA	4.00
Limpopo	3.70	More than one	3.40

Socio-economic status (SES) of the sample reveals 1.80% from Middle-class only and 14.50% from Working-class or poor only backgrounds, while 53.35% were categorised as Unclear.

60.50% of theses had Male and Female participants, while 18.40% had Female only. Female-only participants were greater in number than Male only participants (9.60%), which is in line with the demographics of the country as females were just over 50% of the population (Stats SA, 2012).

The three most commonly represented age ranges (Table 5) were Adults in General (47.60%), Teenagers (13.60%) and Early Adulthood (13.50%). The largest participant groups include university students, presumably because they are easily accessible and can provide consent, as were high school scholars.

Table 5. Age

Age range	% of <i>N</i>	Age range	% of <i>N</i>
Adults in general	47.60	Mixed adults and children	5.50
Teenagers	13.60	Primary school-age children	3.10
Early adulthood	13.40	Late adulthood	1.80
Children in general	6.90	Middle adulthood	1.20

Research was reliant upon traditional and convenient sources of data (Table 6), therefore universities, schools, hospitals and clinics were the most common sources of data. These sources gave access to data on the main topic HIV/AIDS.

Table 6. Data sources

Data sources	% of <i>N</i>	Data sources	% of <i>N</i>
Universities	18.00	Organisations in the private sector	2.60
Convenience	15.80	Government department	1.60
Schools	15.10	Unclear	1.30
Multiple	11.50	Referrals	1.20
Specified sampling	11.00	Adverts	1.20
Hospitals/clinics	9.50	Clubs	0.80
Documents	4.90	Childcare institutions	0.30
Non-governmental organisations	3.90	Postal survey	0.30

As universities are situated in urban areas it is no surprise that Urban-only (76.80%) is the most common participant location. The majority of the population also reside in urban areas in South Africa, with urbanisation found to increase over the 2001 and 2011 censuses (Laldaparsad, 2012). Rural-only constituted 3.20% of the sample,

which is low when statistically around 35% of the population resided in rural areas and face challenging social issues. The results show 6% of participants were from a mixture of locations, while 8.90% of theses did not specify the location, which should not greatly affect the trend of participant location.

Of the total participants used in Masters' student theses, 47.10% included participants from all racial categories, while Black African-only (16.10%) was the largest represented racial category. The other represented racial categories are: White-only (6.30%), Coloured-only (2.20%), Indian-only (1.30%), and 22.90% Not specifically specified.

Discussion

The content analysis of 965 Psychology Masters' theses identified the trends in research topics from 2008-2012. Our study found that a broad scope of topics were covered and the trend portrayed social issues, like HIV/AIDS, were addressed. HIV/AIDS comprised 8% of the thesis topics whereas MacLeod (2004) reported 2% in SAJP between 1999 and 2003, which indicates that Masters' students and their supervisors engaged better with this social issue. The UNDP-2003 report emphasised HIV/AIDS as an important focus area, since it was found to contribute to the rise in poverty, which influences other social issues like unemployment and homelessness (Mbirimtengerenji, 2007).

Masters' research percentages mirrored Macleod (2004) on the following topics: 'Race'/Ethnicity; Child care; Career development; Counselling/psychotherapy; Quality of life/wellness and Reproductive health, yet the amount of research conducted in these areas is disappointingly low. 'Assessment' received from 6% to 13.6% across the studies which is encouraging, as is the increased attention by Masters' students to Reproductive health, Identity and Self-concept/esteem, which play a role in psychosocial well-being.

Traditional topics like Knowledge production, Assessment, Measuring scales and Measuring instrument development and Program evaluation, psychopathology and counselling/psychotherapy were researched. It is encouraging that psychological research, falling under Knowledge Production, has moved towards researching topics which should be inclusive of all South Africans. Due to practical limitations participants were largely drawn from urban areas, thereby neglecting to be fully inclusive of all SA social strata.

The UNDP-2003 highlighted the lack of access to quality and affordable healthcare services, high poverty, extreme income and wealth inequalities, unemployment and community development, yet these received collectively around 10% of the research interest. Integral to the sustainable development process, according to UNDP-2003, were processes that are inclusive, transparent and democratic and include the poorest of the population, as all communities are critical in the service planning process. Communities are the users of the services, have local knowledge and are able to

contribute to policy planning, development and delivery, as well as playing a role in monitoring and evaluation of the services and are therefore integral to the sustainable development process.

This study found the majority of theses were evidence based (98.20%), which Kagee (2006) posited is important to remain relevant to SA society by providing evidence based interventions to the users. The majority of participants (47.10%) selected were from racially mixed samples and in terms of gender, the studies employed male and female subjects (60.50%). Female-only participants (18.40%) were greater in number than male-only participants (9.60%). These focused largely on urban participants, probably due to convenience, thereby neglecting many members of the population experiencing psychosocial distress as highlighted by the UNDP-2003.

The majority of theses used a qualitative approach employing 'post-modern' frameworks, as qualitative research seeks an in-depth understanding of peoples' lived experiences. One can only speculate that SA students opt for this type of research to gain deeper understanding of the topic. By utilising critical thinking skills, they are able to explain the 'how' and 'why' of a particular phenomenon, which is important when addressing psychosocial issues (Ponterotto, 2005).

The findings of Macleod (2004) and Macleod and Howell (2013) are corroborated in Table 4, which shows that knowledge was largely generated within the wealthiest provinces (Gauteng, Western Cape and KwaZulu Natal) where most of the

universities are located, with an under-representation in certain areas of great need of research exploration. This study, like Macleod (2004), found an over-representation of university students and urban environments with a noticeable lack of research in poor and under-resourced provinces. 9.60% of theses did not name the province where the study was conducted and ten of the theses focused on countries other than SA.

The participants recruited by Masters' students were predominantly Black-only participants located in Urban-only areas, thereby neglecting the large population in Rural (35.00%), Coloured (2.20%) and Indian-only (1.30%) populations in SA. According to *Stats SA Census in Brief* (Stats SA, 2012) report the Coloured population was larger than the White population during this period, which indicates that Master's research was not adequately focused on psychosocial issues of SA's Coloured population nationally.

Socio-economic status (SES) is an important issue in social relevance and by fact that the researchers did not specify participants SES (Unclear group 53.30%) infers that the impact of socio-economic issues on social and psychological well-being were unrealised. The percentage of participants from working-class or poor backgrounds seemed to decrease from 1999 at 18.20% (Macleod, 2004), to 15.80% (Macleod and Howell, 2013), descending to 14.50% in this study. The UNDP-2003 highlighted poverty as a key challenge, so it is disappointing that this group was not adequately addressed. Focus on and consideration of SES could improve to realise impact of SES on mental health provision inequalities.

According to Statistics South Africa (2012) 35.00% of SA population was rural and about 66.00% were below the national poverty level for the period, which indicates that there was a glaring under-representation in research. This highlights the accusation of Psychology as a profession that serves the elite, urban-based population (Macleod, 2004):

According to the UNDP-2003 report sustainable high growth rates are dependent on the eradication of income inequality and poverty by means of land redistribution and social grants, for example, yet there was a dearth of studies exploring these during the period of this study.

The UNDP-2003 report placed emphasis upon society as a whole to creatively change in order to generate sustainable development in SA. The formulation and implementation of initiatives was to be inclusive and involve engagement from all stakeholders with the aim to include the poorest sections of SA population. Universities could have assisted by increasing focus on psychosocial issues, e.g. poverty, income and wealth inequalities, health services, education, to name a few, and broadening the sampling population. Macleod and Howell (2013) found that social issues relevant to SA continue to be under-explored, in SAJP and PsychINFO, which mirrors the finding of this study.

Psychology Masters' students would make greater progress if they engaged more fully with the relevant psychosocial issues highlighted in national reports, but a lack of

master's research funding and demands of coursework impacts knowledge generation in poorer provinces and rural areas where psychosocial issues are most prevalent. This study found there is still scope, through research and practice, to improve the human condition in SA if masters' students had the guidance, as well as the luxury of time and funding to engage fully with the variety of people in SA.

Future critical challenges in Psychology research

Tertiary institutions as a whole, and Psychology departments in particular, should be open to assessing the social relevance of their post-graduate research. Practical issues, like lack of funding, prevent greater research focus on those largely under-researched provinces, population groups and remote rural areas. In order to move away from convenient urban sampling, universities will need to provide funding for students willing to take up the challenge of bringing psychological research to the under-researched areas, thereby improving the relevance of psychology in SA.

An overview of research trends with focus on future periods of time will give an indication of universities taking up the challenge of making psychology socially relevant to the prevailing SA psychosocial issues.

Limitations

The scope of this study did not permit inclusion of all fields of psychological study. Excluding masters theses in the fields of Education, Research and Neuropsychology may have swayed results. Further limitations are that master's students are

under-resourced, have limited time, are under financial constraints and are influenced by the supervisor's research interest. The results of this study, however, adds value to the overarching research study determining the overall research trend in relation to SA psychosocial issues.

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