White Poverty and Psychology in South Africa: The Poor White Investigation of the Carnegie Commission

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The Second Carnegie Inquiry into Poverty and Development in Southern Africa, and its April 1984 conference in Cape Town, invited many rejoinders and comparisons to the first Carnegie Commission's investigation into poverty in South Africa. This first commission, from hereon simply referred to as the Carnegie Commission, was appointed in 1928 to investigate the phenomenon of the poor white in South Africa. Although social scientists often refer to the significance of this Commission's investigation for social science in South Africa, little or no attempt has been made to work this theme out in detail. Psychologists in particular have often overlooked the effect of this investigation on the development of their discipline.

In this rather brief paper, I would like to argue that the investigation of the Carnegie Commission, and their 1932 Report, formed an important divide in the development of psychology as a discipline in this country. The major thrust of the argument will be that the phenomenon of poor whiteism provided psychologists with an opportunity to demonstrate their usefulness in the solution of societal problems. That is, the poor white investigation was an ideal vehicle to bring the skills and techniques that psychologists possess in the public eye.

Psychology in Society 1986 Number 6 pp 47-62

This paper firstly presents a brief background sketch of the poor white phenomenon; followed by an indication of the concern social scientists showed with the problem; a description of the work of the psychologists on the Commission; the Commission's recommendations with regards to the fields of labour, education, and vocational guidance; and a final conclusion.

Background to the Carnegie Commission

The phenomenon of the poor white had a long history. A steadily increasing flow of landless whites to the cities occurred towards the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. Factors such as adverse farming conditions, pressure on white "bywoners" to leave the land to free more land for cultivation, the sub-division of farms, and the opportunity to earn wages, all contributed to this process. When these whites arrived in the cities, it was difficult for them to find employment, as they couldn't fit into the pattern of industrial relations at the time. The result was that a growing number of mainly Afrikaans speaking whites became progressively poorer, until people could refer to a distinct group - the poor whites. Black poverty had been an accepted feature of South Africa's way of life, but not white poverty. Thus concern was expressed from a very early stage about this "shocking" increase in the number of poor whites (but not about poverty among blacks). In 1892, for example, the Minister of Agriculture of the Cape of Good Hope was struck by the prevailing poverty amongst the white farming population. He discussed this with the Rev. Andrew Murray, who subsequently convened a conference of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) in Stellenbosch to discuss the "poor white problem" (Grosskopf, 1932).

In the years to follow, the poor white would continue to be a problem, and would periodically take centre stage in terms of attention received. In 1897, for example, the first Volksraad session of the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek was dominated by this issue; in 1906 an Indigency Commission was appointed. Also in 1906 the Cape parliament produced a report on the "poor white question". The Dutch Reformed Church organized two major conferences on this problem: in November 1916 in Cradock and in July 1923 in Bloemfontein.

Social scientists and the poor whites

During the 1920's, social scientists initiated attempts to intervene in the poor white problem. In the early 1920's E.G. Malherbe, an educational psychologist, went on a few months' leave to go to a rural community and find out what it was like for a teacher in an isolated rural community. It was during his leave period among the woodcutters of the Knysna forest, that Malherbe came face to face with the poor white problem.

In June 1921 he published an article in The Cape Times, in which he argued for a scientific investigation into the problem, for the 100 000 or so poor whites were becoming a menace to the self-preservation and prestige of white people, "living as we do in the midst of the native population which outnumbers us 5 to 1". The problem could only be solved by obtaining "thorough and first-hand knowledge of the causes underlying this malady ... only when we have made a correct diagnosis and are certain of the causes can we remedy

them". Such work, it was suggested, could only be done by men trained in psychology, economics and sociology. This belief, that a "scientific" approach could solve social problems, was widespread among scientists of the time - see for example Legassick (1976).

During the 1920's psychologists in particular started to pay attention to the poor whites. Examples are Fick and Black's mental survey of children at Losperfontein (an agricultural placement and rehabilitation settlement), Truter's mental survey at the Pretoria Mental Hospital, Reyburn's mental tests developed at the University of Cape Town, and Wilcock's vocational tests at the University of Stellenbosch. The standardisation of vocational tests (by Wilcocks) during this time was especially important, as these were aimed at occupations that poor whites would normally be expected to fill (e.g. tailors, dressmakers, apprentices, etc).

A minister of religion, Nepgen (1923) wrote on other aspects, besides testing, that indicated the importance of psychology for the poor white problem. To him the reason why all attempts to uplift the poor whites had failed, was that these attempts were psychologically unsound. Knowledge of the poor white was lacking, and "kennis van die sielssamestel en sielswerking van die mens" was essential (Nepgen, 1923, p 144). He advised a systematic, scientific investigation: "... om deur noukeurige waarneming (met inbegrip van eksperimente) die eigenlike 'feite' of trekke van die arme-blanke sielssamestel en werking te versamel, dan die nodige hipotese te ontwerp om te verklaar hoe die biesondere trekke by die blanke ontstaan en ontwikkel het" (p 146).

In 1927 Dr F. Keppel, president of the Carnegie Corporation, toured Australia, New Zealand and South Africa to find out how to administer money that Andrew Carnegie had set aside in his will for educational and social research projects in the British dominions and colonies. E.G. Malherbe knew Keppel fairly well since his days at Columbia University (Malherbe, 1981). When asked what the most urgent social problem was in South Africa, Malherbe indicated the poor white question. Keppel established a Carnegie Trust Fund for South Africa with the trustees being Patrick Duncan (later to become Govenor-General of South Africa), Sir Carruthers Beattie (the principal of the University of Cape Town), and Dr C.T. Loram (member of the Native Affairs Commission).

In 1928, the Carnegie Commission was appointed to launch an investigation into the poor white problem. It was to be a five-pronged investigation, with the following components: economic (by J.F.W. Grosskopf), psychological (R.W. Wilcocks), educational (E.G. Malherbe), health (W.A. Murray), and sociological (J.R. Albertyn, with Dr K. Butterfield of Amherst College, Dr Coulter of Ohio State University, and Mrs M.E. Rothman). The terms of the inquiry were clear: to establish the extent of the problem, and its causes, and to suggest means by which it could be cured and prevented.

The work of the psychologists

The investigation started in 1928, and the report was published in 1932 in five volumes, corresponding to the abovementioned aspects. The members of this Commission conducted a massive investigation, even

for today's standards. They travelled more than 16 000 km throughout the country; interviewing, testing and examining poor whites "wherever they could find them". Malherbe and Wilcocks, for example, tested more than 15 000 pupils, poor whites as well as others, in 170 schools (Malherbe, 1932).

For the educational and psychological reports, Malherbe and Wilcocks conducted interviews with 300 poor whites and 333 teachers, magistrates, welfare officers, farmers, ministers of religion, etc; obtaining information from state departments, and from historical sources; and tested thousands of poor white and other children with a number of tests. For testing of intelligence, they administered the South African Group Intelligence Test and the American Army Beta Group Test. The intelligence tests were necessary, because "ordinary observation" indicated that poor whites showed a lack of intelligence. This observation was, however, not a satisfactory means of determining this group's level of intelligence. They in fact obtained enough data to standardise the SAGIT (Malherbe, 1981).

To measure scholastic and educational achievement, they used the Arithmetic Ability Test of Coetzee (1926), the Afrikaans Vocabulary Test from the Kaap-provinsie Indiwiduele Intelligensie Skaal vir Afrikaanssprekende Kinders, and the English Vocabulary Test as drawn up by Terman in "The Measurement of Intelligence". The intelligence tests served as a measure of general ability, the arithmetic test gave an indication of the effects of ad hoc schooling and instruction; and the vocabulary test "represents probably the best single scale for ascertaining the level of the cultural or intellectual milieu of a particular community" (Malherbe, 1932).

The extensive use of psychological tests in this investigation is the first noteworthy link with subsequent developments in South African psychology. An examination of the Commission's recommendations will reveal more factors of importance. Here I would like to highlight only a few remarks of the Commission pertaining to the role that psychology could play in the societal domains of labour and education.

Labour

The Commission made a number of statements on labour matters, and on applications of social science knowledge to these matters.

The importance of selection received emphasis in more than one volume of the Report. One of the most successful agricultural settlements of poor whites was at Kakamas, and Wilcocks suggested that this was because they were selected. For example, application to settle there would be approved only it was accompanied by certificates of the applicant's indigency, membership of the Dutch Reformed Church, and good character. Wilcocks advised that the initial selection be more rigorous to lessen the "weeding out" that occurred after initial placement. Wilcocks gave the following information from the Union Department of Lands on settlers at another settlement (in Magalieskraal): settlers were placed in three classes according to decreasing degrees of suitability. This was based on the Department's experience with each individual in actual practice. The criterion was the average number of places at which they had previously lived, and those who had moved about less were taken as more suitable. "It is also advisable

that use be made of the methods offered by modern applied psychology to select those who possess the qualities required for becoming successful agricultural settlers" (Wilcocks, 1932, p 117).

Malherbe (1932) argued that psychological tests, like the vocational tests standardised at Stellenbosch, were invaluable for selection. He advocated their use more at the industry end than at the school end of the selection process. For Grosskopf (1932) reliable selection was essential where a rural population that had not kept pace with economic change had to adjust itself to modern industry.

Linked to selection, was the type of work that different people performed best. The poor white child, on average, emerged from the tests as more suited for work of a mechanical kind than the white population as a whole. In fact, although the poor white child was 0,75 of a year behind the normal child, he/she was considerably nearer to the average white child in mechanical skill in simple number operations (Malherbe, 1932). This corroborated the observation that poor whites were often "useless" in types of work requiring judgement and reasoning, e.g. in independent farming. But they could be effectively and usefully employed in the routine operations of industry, reported the Commission. In fact, one of their recommendaitons was that a good solution was to let the adult poor white work in the factories. They observed that the factories indeed offered a steadily improving field of employment - especially for poor white girls.

The utilization of labour, it was suggested, could also be improved by the "modern" methods of industrial and scientific management. "That the unskilled white man who is keen on obtaining work, can by methods of scientific management be more productively utilized, many managers have yet to learn ..." (Grosskopf, 1932, p 178), and "Industrial psychology with its methods can here play an important part" (p 179). The fact that the unskilled white man of rural origin reacted favourably to a system of piece-rate pay was consistently stressed; that is, the principle of pay according to results. Furthermore, it was said he is sensitive to treatment that takes his customs and attitudes into account, and he is often remarkably adaptable and teachable.

Education

Education, or rather the lack of it, was seen by the Commission as one of the major contributing factors to poor whiteism, and was therefore the focus of attention. Only one aspect of these recommendations is mentioned here: the role of vocational guidance.

The field of vocational guidance/placement by the early 1920's was not yet a field of psychological practice, as vocational placement was still taking place without psychological help. The work was being done mainly by the Juvenile Affairs Boards, established in 1915 to assist urban youth with finding employment. This is generally recognised as the first organised attempt to provide advice on careers and assistance in finding employment.

Psychologists responded quickly to this situation. The nature of their response established a very close connection between vocational

guidance and psychological testing in South Africa. A few examples would suffice. Both Stellenbosch and Pretoria Universities were developing vocational tests to determine which trades individuals were best suited for. At Stellenbosch University the emphasis was more on tests for personnel selection, which could be used for vocational guidance as well. For example: tests for determining an individual's suitability for becoming a carpenter, farm overseer, smith, shoemaker, etc. At Pretoria University the emphasis was on vocational guidance in particular, and on the testee's "total mental structure", rather than on singular qualities or mental functions. Another example was the proposal submitted to the University of Cape Town by the Cape Divisional Juvenile Affairs Board, in terms of which an industrial psychological bureau be established where juveniles could be tested as to their fitness for industrial occupations. The Department of Psychology proposed to appoint a special lecturer, to analyse the principal occupations in the Cape along psychological lines, to develop a set of vocational tests for each, to test boys and girls upon leaving school to guide them in their selection of occupations, and so on (Notes of the month, 1926).

Vocational guidance received strong emphasis in the Report of the Carnegie Commission. Noting the total absence of systematic vocational guidance in (especially) the rural areas, the Commission pleaded for its extension to these areas. In a world of increasing complexity, the child was thrust into it without proper vocational guidance. This was calamitous for the child, argued the Commission, and it also stood in the way of discovering and utilizing South Africa's human resources. The implication was rather straightforward: psychologists could assist

the individual in making a career choice in an increasingly complex occupational structure. Via psychological tests, it could be determined which occupations someone is best suited for, and the person could be guided toward such a career. In that career, he/she would be happiest, because the demands of the career would be commensurate with his/her abilities.

This connection between vocational guidance and the poor whites, who were predominantly Afrikaans speaking, strengthened the tendency of Afrikaans speaking psychologists to gravitate toward educational applications of psychology. It could be said that this is the second noteworthy consequence of the Carnegie investigation for psychology. There is evidence that in present-day psychology Afrikaans speaking psychologists are best represented in the fields of counselling and educational psychology, and psychometrics (see Langenhoven & Potgieter, 1977). It is not surprising that Afrikaans speaking psychologists were drawn to vocational guidance and psychological testing, as it provided a way of improving the lot of the poor white child. There is evidence for example that the Reddingsdaadbond, the Christian-nationalist organisation concerning itself with the Afrikaner worker, moved into the area of vocational guidance (see Pauw, 1944).

Conclusion

The involvement of psychologists (and other social scientists) in the poor white question via the Carnegie Commission is a good illustration of the interplay between forces in society and developments

in the social sciences. Their efforts showed that social scientists could intervene in societal problems in an attempt to solve them. Just like science could solve material problems (of, for example, production), so could social scientists perhaps solve social problems.

The Carnegie Commission's investigation and report obviously did not solve the social problem of poor whiteism directly. It did however add a significant "scientific" voice to the debate about the issue. The Report was apparently well received by the public, and a press campaign was launched for a congress to consider the proposals of the Commission. As a result, a "Volkskongres" on the poor white problem was held in October 1934 in Kimberley, but it did little to alleviate white poverty. It was left to economic and political processes to finally solve this problem towards the end of the 1930's: the rapid expansion of industry, combined with the legal protection offered to white labour (something that the Carnegie Report recommended as a temporary measure).

Three developments that were important for social services can however be linked directly to the Carnegie Commission's Report and the "Volkskongres". These were the establishment of three state-aligned bodies: a Social Research Section in the National Bureau for Educational and Social Research to solve the problems of black and white unemployment in the cities (Malherbe, 1981); a Department of Social Welfare in 1934; and the "Armesorgraad" in 1936 (Van Jaarsveldt, 1982).

For psychology, the implications (and benefits) of this investigation were far-reaching. Apart from the two mentioned earlier, these implications included the following:

(i) The Carnegie Investigation would contribute substantially to making the societal domains of education and labour accessible for psychological intervention. Vocational guidance, for example, at first occurred largely without the assistance of psychologists; but would increasingly become a field of psychological practice. In fact, psychologists later on would exercise close to a monopoly over vocational guidance. It must be kept in mind that vocational guidance also involves the labour domain, and the recommendations of the Commission touched upon at least three aspects: selection, type of work, and scientific management. Selection of personnel would eventually (around World War II) become the dominant feature of psychological intervention in the labour domain.

(ii) The way in which psychologists approached the investigation corresponded closely to the trend to search for knowledge that is useful through practice. Thus the investigation reinforced the tendency toward application of psychological knowledge. This tendency accelerated after the Second World War, and still characterizes South African psychology at present.

(iii) This increasing tendency toward application had another long term effect: the eventual professionalization of South African psychology. Once psychology ceased to be an academic

discipline only, its status as an applied discipline raised the possibility of professional practice. Formal recognition of this would, however, occur relatively late in South Africa.

An importance stage in the professionalization of a discipline is reached when attempts are made by the emerging professional group to justify their actions. "To justify" here refers to the attempts made to prove the relevance and competence of the group's actions in a specific domain. This justification very often occurs via a demonstration that the occupational group has the necessary skills and techniques to intervene in certain problem areas. The extensive use of psychological tests by the psychologists in the Carnegie investigation fulfilled this function; namely, it showed that psychologists had the technology to underpin their interventions in the domains of labour and education. Selection, placement and vocational guidance could all be facilitated by the use of these measuring instruments. Furthermore, by applying these tests, psychologists could demonstrate their competence and usefulness in carrying out these activities. It should therefore come as no surprise that psychological testing dominated South African psychology for such a long time - and perhaps still does.

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