

Studying psychology

Book review

Louw, J (1992) *What about studying psychology?* Pretoria: Academia.

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"Psychologists study so many things, and carry out such a wide variety of activities, that it bewilders even the advanced student of the discipline."(p1) Louw argues that in spite of this confusing picture, psychology is the most popular subject at university, based on registration figures. Part 1 of this book sets out to put this popularity in perspective, suggesting that prospective students believe that the study of psychology will equip them with a whole range of communication skills, the ability to conduct research and related to this, the ability to use statistics and computers. The expectation of psychology students that their interpersonal skills will be developed, is usually only met in post-graduate training. Other more general skills, related to a university education, include problem solving, critical thinking, organising information, adaptability, creativity and leadership.

Parts 2 and 3 of the book address undergraduate training and professional training in psychology, respectively. Part 3 attempts to differentiate between the five specialist categories recognised by the Professional Board for Psychology, and Louw makes the point that there is a great deal of overlap between the categories. There is an absence of criticism regarding the relevance of the status quo, with the tone being largely descriptive. A major criticism of psychology has been that it is elitist, serving only the needs of the white middle class. Psychology in South Africa has been an instrument of apartheid, largely turning a blind eye to the injustices perpetrated in the name of apartheid ideology. The new thrust in psychology, reflecting the transformation of society towards democracy, where transparency and accountability are keywords, seems to be to play a role in providing a relevant service to all people. Recipients of psychological services are likely to be given an opportunity to make a contribution to the development of the profession through a new psychological association. Clearly things are going to change.

Part 4 of *What about studying psychology?* surveys the career paths of 11 psychologists, all formally registered with the SAMDC. Presented at an anecdotal level, it makes interesting reading. One assumes that Louw canvassed a good few more than the 11 who responded. School counsellors should find it useful to refer pupils to this section of the book when asked the question: "what is it that psychologists really do?" While the

book is aimed at assisting people in making focussed decisions in terms of studying psychology, several of the psychologists surveyed confess to having had no such focus in the development of their own careers. One may therefore hypothesize that the 11 accounts may well confuse prospective students even further, but that many will register anyway to find their own answers.

In Part 5, a teacher-counsellor, an occupational therapist and a nurse relate how useful a major in psychology has been for the practice of their respective professions. Louw emphasises, in a Final Word that it was not his intention to promote the idea that psychologists are able to do almost anything, as they are collectively a very modest group of people.

The value of this volume lies in its usefulness to the teacher-counsellor at high school or the student counsellor at university. Its other contribution is to give a glimpse into the work of *some* psychologists in South Africa up to the early 1990s. Louw notes in his Final Word that "we do not know which way psychology in this country is going to turn." What we do know is that it must turn in order to survive as a relevant discipline.

At this moment, the Committee for the Reconstruction of Psychology in South Africa is preparing for the "Psychology and Societal Transformation" Conference which "heralds the dissolution of PASA and the concurrent birth of a new professional organisation, one explicitly committed to significantly broadening access to services and training for South Africa's oppressed population, and to combatting the legacy of racism, sexism and Eurocentric hegemony within the profession, its practice, training institutions, leadership and governance structures." (Call for Papers). The need for this direction echoes the sentiments of many contributors to **PINS** for a considerable time, and finally things are happening. These changes will present vital challenges to those of us whose job descriptions are represented by the practitioners' in **What about studying psychology?**