

INTERVIEWING THE PsySSA PRESIDENT

*Rachel Prinsloo
talks to
Anna Strebel*

Anna Strebel (AS). Firstly, on behalf of the readership of **PINS**, I would like to congratulate you on your historic election as first President of the new Psychological Society of South Africa (**PsySSA**). Could you tell us what you think the significance of your election to this post is?

Rachel Prinsloo (RP). I would like to interpret the willingness of the close to six hundred delegates at the January 1994 launch conference to elect a Black woman from an historically black institution as president of **PsySSA** as signifying a number of issues, and will briefly list them for you as I understand them.

1. An acknowledgement that an alternative reality has always existed that is more representative of the legitimate silenced majority.
2. The preparedness to take risks and to redefine traditional notions of "academic and professional leadership". Unlike broader society, our constituency does not have a "political majority", indeed only 10% of this country's registered psychologists are Black, and neither does the profession and discipline enjoy overwhelming public support.
3. Those present at the conference represented all the different ideological persuasions and even the political spectrum to some extent. More importantly, they were committed to reconstituting the organized face of psychology and of deliberating a transformed foundation for its future. I know of delegates' previously uninvolved, who sacrificed bonuses to be able to come down to Cape Town. This groundswell of goodwill and the belief that we have an important role to play inspires me and all executive and council members.
4. When I have sleepless nights and feel overwhelmed by the enormity and complexity of the tasks and challenges that lie ahead, I remind myself that I must have been elected because I believe in and practice organisational accountability and as a "maverick activist" have always been engaged in similar progressive and constructive initiatives.

I am truly honoured to be an instrumental catalyst for change and wish to remind ourselves that it should be a shared responsibility. Let us know what your concerns are

and complain when you see us diverting from the road we should travel along. We are all equally responsible for charting the course and designing the map for the future.

AS (PINS). There have been concerns voiced about the composition of the newly-elected Executive? What is the status of the current office-bearers?

RP (PsySSA). The Committee for the Reconstruction of Psychology (CRP) which consisted of all the important role players had agreed to the election procedures to be implemented at the launch annual general meeting on 28 January 1994. In retrospect we should have debated more carefully the pros and cons of proportional representation, proxy voting, postal votes or simple majority votes of those delegates present. The fact that not all constituencies were equally well prepared to participate in a modified version of democracy caused some real problems. Many of the reconciliatory attitudes were undermined and the old fears and tensions were brought into stark relief again.

Given the CRP's rather naive approach to the politics of transition - the assumption that a culture of democracy, trust, cohesiveness and openness would suddenly prevail at the first historic get together of black and white psychologists - the first executive meeting spent much time grappling with how to ensure representation of all key role players. In recognition that the processes in the election of office bearers left much to be desired and contradicted the spirit of reconstruction, and the further fact that at a number of points the present composition of the executive is in conflict with the constitution, the following decisions were taken:

1. The present committee should be regarded as an interim transitional one whose chief task should be to continue the reconstruction phase.
2. The meeting of 28 January 1994 should be regarded as the "foundation meeting" of **PsySSA**, whilst the forthcoming meeting (scheduled for April 1995) should be treated as the first official AGM of **PsySSA**.
3. Despite the fact that a "President-Elect" was voted in at the foundation meeting, it has been agreed that *all* portfolios should be voted anew at the first AGM once adequate voting procedures and adequate notice of potential candidates are agreed upon in advance of such an AGM.
4. The present constitution be considered to have interim "draft status" only since there are structural and procedural anomalies which prevent it from being fully implemented at this stage. The Council Standing Committee on Constitutional and Organisational Matters has been requested to prepare the necessary revisions for ratification in April 1995.

AS. PsySSA was born at a time of significant political development in SA. Do you see any parallels between the new SA and the new psychology structure: are there risks of the old order continuing, only with new faces at the helm?

RP. As I have indicated earlier we experienced major problems with the elections, but then so did the IEC a few months later! But more seriously, I too am intrigued by

parallels in our processes of reconstituting the society and the current political rearrangements. Essentially transforming institutions of society, confronting the politics of reconciliation and creating a shared vision of how to proceed are more difficult than "taking over power" unconditionally. The former process ensures that we take collective ownership of our histories and do not suffer from social amnesia. We may yet be able to offer the world unique experiences through learning how to bring together different organisational cultures and ways of being in the world, essential pillars of a true democracy.

To answer the second part of your question, I think that in some ways we have managed to minimise the risks of the old order continuing with newer faces. The constitutional parameters quite clearly sets out our commitment to transformation and redressing the silences in South African psychology to serve the needs and interests of all the citizens of this country. Both the executive and council have agreed to a process of reconstitution based on the principles of inclusivity, representativeness and transparency in all governance structures.

For example, instead of my nominating chairpersons we have approached convenors and co-convenors for all structures and have provided them with guidelines and a diverse list of people with whom to consult. This built-in accountability is an attempt to ensure that members have access to all channels of decision-making. The Council Standing Committees, Regional Branches and Divisions have all been reconstituted in this way.

By the beginning of December 1994 all structures should have reviewed their domestic rules and by-laws to ensure that the new constitutional principles are addressed explicitly. We also envisage that the standing committees of council would redefine their tasks and parameters in order to promote the discipline and profession of psychology and to clarify its usefulness for society. The Committee for the Advancement of Psychology in the Public Interest is crucially important in this regard and serves to articulate our human welfare agenda, as well as acting as a conduit for the opinions and concerns of civil society. A policy workshop is being planned by this group for September 1994 in Cape Town to provide an opportunity for psychologists and policy-planners to engage in a process of information sharing and for identifying the strategic implementation phases of current policy positions.

AS. Has the new organisation managed to unite South African psychologists?

RP. We are striving to build the capacity to develop a strong and dynamic society and to create a legitimate and credible identity. Have we united psychologists, you ask? We are still trying to understand why 60% of our potential membership has never been prepared to be affiliated to any professional or progressive service society! At least 20% of this number are psychologists who had been involved in alternative, progressive organisations who are also finding it strange to consider their "professional development" or to take guild interests seriously, coming from a history of commitment to providing accessible and affordable services to neglected sectors of the community as activists rather than professionals.

Perhaps the more crucial question should be - is there a role and function for a professional society at this stage of our country's history? Given that only 10% of the

country's registered psychologists are black, and that most training programs still only accommodate a negligible percentage of black students it is imperative that we review who we train and for what purposes. I believe that we need lots of discussion and debate and some real creative thinking about a range of diverse professional options and possibly the development of specialised regional centres of academic excellence so that potential students could make informed choices about the kind of training they would prefer instead of the present scramble to get in at any institution - preferably as a clinical student. Wouldn't it be marvellous if institutions could share resources and strengthen each other more sensibly rather than remain strangled in their Apartheid creations with the history of discriminatory resource allocations?

If we are serious about the progressive development of the discipline and practice of psychology we need rigorous assessment and credentialling procedures which promote and enhance institutions, as well as provide clear minimal training guidelines and opportunities for capacity building.

AS. What do you think has been achieved so far? And what have the problems been?

RP. We have been successful in affirming for ourselves the importance of continuing with the processes of building the new society, and have been encouraged and inspired by the amount of goodwill and willingness of colleagues to participate in which ever way they can.

Organisationally the following structures are now in place - Council Standing Committees, all Regional Branches as well as guidelines for transforming old Divisions and the establishment of new ones. The following people have been elected as regional chairpersons:

KwaZulu/Natal: Mr Robin Hylton Farman; Tel (0331) 260 5856; Fax (031) 202 6191.

N Tvl: Prof P Franks; Tel (0152) 268 2645; Fax (0152) 268 2873.

E Cape & Border: L B Worsfold; Tel (0431) 473 573; Fax (0431) 472 827.

Pretoria: Prof K F Mauer; Tel (012) 429 8003, (012) 991 1753 (h); Fax (012) 429 73424.

OFS: Mr B Anderson (Regional Forum Convenor); Tel (051) 401 2853; Fax (051) 483 201.

W Cape: Mr Amien Abrahams; Tel (021) 231 922 or 231 206, (021) 788 2639(h); Fax (021) 234 576.

W Tvl: Prof N R Mathabe; Tel (0140) 892 077; Fax (0140) 25 775.

WITS: Mr Ian Moll; Tel (011) 716 5259; Fax (011) 339 3956.

I believe that this broad base of membership differs from the old arrangement where divisions and professional specialities were regarded as more important than common organisational interests. We have seen a commitment to the establishment of strong

cohesive regional structures which are ideal for feeding into overarching concerns and general policy directives, as well as for retaining a groundedness and sensitivity to local issues. Some regions have already consulted with premiers and other ministers to identify how they could contribute to the reconstruction and development of their regions. A striking example has been the preparedness of private practitioners in one region to devote some of their time, facilities and resources to referrals from communities who have never had the benefit of such services.

We do not need the implementation of national health systems and public policies to enable us to be responsive and caring. The willingness to take risks and reach out is going to be of vital importance if we are to build bridges, repair scarred lives and heal traumatised systems. We also need to join hands with other professional societies, non-governmental organisations and service providing agencies for embarking on joint campaigns, initiating psycho-educational programmes and to position ourselves to contribute to processes for drafting fundamental revisions to statutory acts and for proposing new ones.

One of the major problems has been the need to recruit members and to build the capacity for implementing the new vision. Something of a catch-22 situation exists. Potential members are cautiously observing whether this is what they are prepared to be identified with while we desperately need their affiliation and subscriptions to survive. We have also identified the importance of distributing information to members to keep them abreast of developments and to ensure effective communication channels throughout the organisational infrastructure. We have repeatedly requested that contact be made with any of the executive members, the central office or regional structures and that names of persons, agencies and relevant organisations be forwarded so that we can establish a viable network.

[The particulars of all office bearers and the secretariat is available at the end of this interview.]

We would furthermore welcome any items for the agendas of the executive meetings (scheduled dates being September 1994, December 1994 and early in February 1995 - confirm with secretariat), as well as council meetings. Any recommendations on constitutional fine-tuning, policy directives or proposals/working documents for the various divisions or council standing committees to consider would be highly appreciated. We are attempting to create and keep open channels of communication during this transitional phase.

AS. What do you see as the priorities of the new organisation?

RP. Very succinctly, the following priorities have been identified:

1. Building the new society into a cohesive, credible and legitimate organ of civil society.
2. Balancing the tensions of responsible professional development and assertiveness about guild issues in relation to our human welfare agenda which insists that we redress the silences, be advocates for ensuring the optimal development of all sectors of our society and protest where basic human rights are being ignored or abused, and access to human material and psychological resources are being obstructed or denied.

3. Actively recruiting membership.
4. Establishing effective channels of communication.
5. Ensuring transparency and accountability at all levels of decision-making and governance.
6. Marketing and fundraising to sustain growth and development.
7. Positioning ourselves to proactively contribute to the formulation of public and political policy-making in related spheres.

AS. What about contact with psychology structures outside South Africa?

RP. Exciting opportunities for re-establishing links with various local and international sister institutions have been followed up. We have made submissions for formal affiliation to the International Union of Psychological Science (IUPsyS); The association of Black Psychologists (ABPsi); and The Zimbabwe Psychological Association. The latter have proposed that we host an African Regional Conference in the near future - a wonderful prospect for us.

We are also pursuing strengthening our relationships with the American Psychological Association (APA), The British Psychological Society (BPS), the Australian and Canadian Societies; and have recently been contacted by the Indian Psychological Association.

A number of colleagues who have gone abroad during the winter recess have also agreed to act as ambassadors for **PsySSA** and to investigate opportunities for formal agreements. Delegations to Spain, Latin-American centres and the IACCP (International Association for Cross-Cultural Psychology) have all set up meetings with their executives to inform them of developments here and to discuss proposals of mutual benefit for the future. If readers have information of societies or agencies they would wish us to pursue, they could contact me directly at the Department of Psychology, University of the Western Cape, Private Bag X 17, Bellville, 7530, Telephone: (021) 959 2283/2453.

I have intentionally structured such re-integration into the wider community as a second stage only after we have to some extent managed to get our own house in order. I imagine that in the very near future we are going to have to contend with interpreting the consequences of our country's readmission to a number of political institutions. We have much foundational work to do in terms of renewing our present statutory and legislative arrangements in response to these initiatives. Our Constitutional and Organisational Affairs Committee will in all likelihood play a vital role in this regard. Colleagues interested in contributing their expertise are strongly encouraged to let myself or the office know of their availability.

Anna Strebel. **PINS** and structures like **OASSSA** originated during the Apartheid era as alternatives to establishment journals and organisations. Do you think that a journal like **PINS** still has a role to play in the new order?

Rachel Prinsloo. If the new order is to be characterised by new metaphors and the acceptance and promotion of divergent discourses, as I am sure it will be, the need for

creating more spaces and support for critical and challenging voices must continue. Whether "alternative formations" should remain peripheral or be accorded the recognition given to "establishment media" needs to be confronted and debated. I am aware that the Publications Committee is currently reviewing its relationship with the Bureau for Scientific Publications and is critically examining whether it would choose to remain constrained by the various restrictions in the agreement.

The fact that a number of psychology departments regularly produce materials not "dressed-up" enough for journal consumption, and that a range of extremely useful journals are being voluntarily circulated, leads me to the conclusion that we need a transformed mechanism of "knowledge-broking". PINS has demonstrated the usefulness and importance of publishing articles which do not conform to traditionally accepted formats and has always had a healthy disregard for the "purely" scientific and positivistic.

If we are serious about promoting debate and disseminating knowledge as meaningfully as possible we should work towards extending the range of "official" journals and ensuring that they receive all the benefits of formal accreditation without sacrificing or diluting "standards of excellence". The politics of who determines and defines criteria of scientific acceptability, and indeed of how others may be excluded through this process has been clouded by a culture of oppositional contestation and the destructive withholding of resources. If instead, we devote our energies to creating foundations upon which various forms of knowledge production may flourish we might succeed in encouraging colleagues and students, practitioners and consumers to publically participate in expressing their opinions and sharing their experiences and ideas - the cornerstones of any true democracy.

This interview was conducted in August 1994, in Cape Town.

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