

CONFERENCE REPORT

The 3rd Southern African Students' Psychology Conference Johannesburg, 24 to 28 June 2013

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Whenever I walked toward a planning meeting for our student conference, I was reminded of bees buzzing in the garden: A sound of life and energy. The only feature distinguishing it as an unmistakably human gathering was the laughter that punctuated at irregular intervals. But, just like the buzzing of the bees, the laughter was full of vitality.

Being part of the organising committee for the student conference felt like a very responsible position. Working on planning the budget, talking about sponsorship, traveling to Wits and being received as a colleague there, reviewing manuscripts and organising pre-conference workshops were just some of the daunting tasks we shared. Thankfully, though, the expertise amongst the people on the committee was incredibly high and matched only by the willingness to help lighten the load when someone was stuck with extra marking or came down with the flu.

When the first day of the conference arrived I was so impressed by the level of participation from our students, even our undergraduate students, and their willingness to make their voices heard on important issues facing our profession. Offering emerging scholars a chance to learn the skills of scientific communication is something I dream about doing in so many of my lecturing spaces. To see it enacted at the conference was a confirmation that psychology can be a less theoretical subject. Walking the talk of getting our psychological community to be less inactive right from day one of studying is complicated in the teaching world, but events like this help remind me that it is not impossible and that it is happening in many different ways. There were students, practitioners and lecturers talking about psychology's relevance in today's Africa; offering solutions to our lack of mental health care services; challenging assumptions about every "normal" curve. And it was inspiring.

A highlight of the pre-conference workshops was the discussion around publication with a panel of well-published academics and journal editors ("Not the Oprah Winfrey Show"). Hearing about personal challenges and achievements put a great deal of the '*publish or perish*' imperative into perspective for me. The session on organisational development presented by Fatima Mbatha and Lauren Cohen from Investec captivated the audience so much so that we even ran out of time for additional questions at the end of the session.

My worst experience of the conference had to be my own presentation! Try as I did, the nerves would not play along and my self-calming techniques were fairly useless. The situation only worsened when I noticed my very supportive colleagues in the audience. Being in front of an audience that was going to give me feedback on my PhD strategy was really tough. By the time the last question came in about the reason for a choice of analysis technique, I was ready to forget that SPSS exists.

I could not pick a single favourite individual presentation. It was heartening to see so many students – some of them on a similar journey to my own and others that were students in my department – speak their truths in spite of their anxiety. I was struck by the amount of really useful information needing a platform, often discounted because it is supplied by students. The meta-communication about the value of research being linked to our construction of what expertise is goes a little against the grain of our push for innovative thinking and nurturing our up-and-coming researchers. For this reason I hope that the student conference continues to challenge our profession, and its neighbours, to put student research in the spotlight. It is only in doing so that we can improve the quality of our questions and build a truly scholarly community.



Catherine Govender is a lecturer and PhD candidate in the department of psychology at Unisa. When she is not at work or trying to make progress on her doctorate, she enjoys drawing on walls with crayons.