

# CONFERENCE REPORT

## **The Third Southern African Students' Psychology Conference Johannesburg, 24 to 28 June 2013**

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The following account is an endeavour that seeks to articulate the profound experiences acquired during the 2013 bi-annual psychology conference held at Wits University. This prestigious event was a five-day thriller held in conjunction with Unisa's psychology department. It started on Monday, June the 24th and ran until the Friday of the same week. Reflecting on those five days, I can confirm that these are moments I will live to cherish forever. Simply put, they are the epitome of my young career life as an aspiring psychologist. But quite paradoxically, the fulfilment and realisation of this almost impossible dream did not come at a cheap price. Allow me to take you through this journey...

In an unprecedented expedition, my journey began when the inside out-outside in group, a small interest group founded by, and comprising of, Unisa psychology lecturers and others, decided and actually mandated me to present a paper that I had been working on for almost a decade. Being an honours student, I was quite thrilled at the prospect, yet overwhelmed at the sudden level of expectation to which I had to adjust. Perhaps it was a mere sense of apprehension if not ‘performance anxiety’. Oh! Also the challenge of presenting a rather sensitive and controversial issue.

So, here I was, in unfamiliar territory with loads and loads of strange, but seemingly interesting, people. Some faces were familiar enough, I could recognise them immediately, some were not. Delegates at the conference were truly South African – warm, receptive, kind-hearted – and it was precisely at this moment that I felt at home and welcomed. It is also this warmth, receptiveness and kindness that gives this conference the theme of ‘a flat structure’. And by this, I refer to the attitude displayed by our lecturers and professors. The boundaries that spell ‘you are here, I am there’ were almost non-existent. For the first time, at the conference, one could literally mingle and interact with people you would normally come across in study guides and DVDs! Of course, to some, this may be trivial and not something worth relishing upon, but to some of us, especially Unisa students, rubbing shoulders with our role models is motivation enough to propel us to accomplish our fullest potential.

This was truly an incredible experience, and pretty much a first because of Unisa’s Open and Distance Learning (ODL) mode. So, having all the broad spectrum of psychology students and lecturers under one roof was truly an enriching experience and it meant a great deal to me. Furthermore, as per my expectation, I knew that attending the conference would provide me with the necessary exposure and platform to learn about what issues of immediate concern within the discipline are currently being investigated and which require immediate attention... and indeed, this did live up to my expectation. Two words can describe it, priceless and simply unforgettable.

Prior to, and leading to, the beginning of the main conference on the Wednesday, I also enjoyed the opportunity of attending a variety of pre-conference workshops. These came in very handy. At R20 each, they taught me a valuable lesson in terms of practical facilitating skills and previewing the do’s and the don’ts before my actual presentation. So, Monday and Tuesday were basically all about that: preconference workshops, preparations, including ensuring that delegates adhere to and familiarise themselves with logistics. After the keynote address by the guest speakers who officially opened the conference, the spirit of camaraderie permeated the air, allowing for a smooth flow of the conference. Rules were simple enough: The duration of each presentation ought to be a maximum of twenty five minutes broken down into fifteen minutes for the actual presentation and ten minutes of discussion and the answering of any questions the audience might have. For my presentation, I had prepared no more than three PowerPoint slides, a little bit of reading here and there, but the substantial content was pretty much oral and second nature.

In what seemed to be forever, the time and day of my presentation finally came and I was scheduled to take to the podium as the third speaker. Surprisingly, and almost unexpectedly, I noticed that the audience were starting to fill up the lecture hall. Initially, when I saw them coming in I was uncertain to where they were all heading. ‘Had they come to listen to my presentation?’ I asked. ‘No, there must be some kind of a mistake’ I replied, ‘They must be lost’. Naturally, realising they weren’t lost, my body temperature quickly slumped to sub-zero levels, my mouth went completely dry, and my heartbeat took off in a frenzy, accelerating from zero to hundred beats per second! From here onwards, going forward, I had to devise a plan and the blueprint was to survive the first five minutes. I knew I could do it. According to previous experience, all it takes is a matter of taking that first tentative step... and I did. Never before have I seen time fly so fast; before I knew it, I was done. I went out of the hall, and all I can remember were people flocking around me and congratulating me on a job well executed. At the time, inundated with praises, from complete strangers to people I knew, I couldn’t process any of their comments because my stomach was still tied up in huge, but not so painful, knots! So to unravel these knots, I drank two cups of strong coffee back-to-back. And with them came this huge sigh of relief. In no time I was back to my old usual self again, went back to the lecture hall, and it was business as usual.

As I silently sat there, listening to other works by fellow presenters, the one question I kept asking myself was, ‘given another opportunity, how could I have done things differently?’ This little piece of information was crucial feedback in that, later during the same day, the inside out-outside in team was expected to continue with a post-presentation discussion, although at a more informal level. This time around it was a group collective effort. Trickle of attendees, here and there, mostly of whom were present during my first presentation showed up for the lunch hour break discussion. The essence of the dialogue captured most of what was discussed earlier, ideas were subsequently formed, but of significance was the networking that had been created among those who had attended. Contacts were exchanged; there was information sharing and dissemination. And for me, the objective of the conference had been fulfilled – an important inroad was made, right there.

Thursday was relatively much of the same as Wednesday. Nothing out of the ordinary. Presentations were still coming through, thick and fast, and the originality and creativeness had not been compromised either. But more importantly, I guess the biggest highlight for me on Thursday and what really intrigued me, and I guess many of those who had attended, was the presentation regarding the debate between the supremacy of Clinical Psychology over Research can testify and share my sentiments. This was indeed a mouth-watering and thought-provoking debate. Subsequently, with this brainstorming session came the realisation that polarised thinking can somehow be limiting. Such critical evaluations invariably point out to the direction that there is always a shade of grey area. Because of our perceptions

and beliefs, attitudes had been formed leading to the assertion that one is better off than the other. Obviously, this created a huge ‘uproar’ and raised a few eyebrows within the discipline. Little did I know about the existence of this distinction and the impression created on me was that this was sowing divisions amongst practitioners.

Sadly, on Friday, due to work commitments I could not attend the prestigious closing ceremony – but judging from the reports I have received, it was worth attending. Friday was also set aside as the deciding day for the overall winners of the best poster and paper presentations. Well, I did not worry myself too much about that. In any case, it would have been wishful thinking to even think I stood a chance; after all, there were some really outstanding and deserving candidates out there with exceptionally mind-blowing and thought-provoking papers. Now, because my expectations were neither here nor there, it came to me as an honour and huge astonishment to learn that I had won, jointly with someone else the first prize for the best paper presentation. Can you imagine the excitement? It was unfathomable, and frankly speaking, the less I speak about it the better! But hang on, that’s not where the fairy tale ends... as the winner, the price includes among other things, presenting yet again, the same paper but this time around at the Psysa conference in September this year. I mean, how awesome can it get? But for now, I hope this: together with many more other questions will be answered at the upcoming Psysa conference. To be continued...

For more details about the inside out-outside in interest group visit [www.insideout-outsidein.org.co.za](http://www.insideout-outsidein.org.co.za).

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE



**Mbongiseni Mdakane** is currently completing his Master’s Degree in Research Consultation with Unisa. His interests are deeply rooted in community psychology and the psychology of imprisonment. As an agent of change, it is his personal obligation and social responsibility not only to dispel myths and stereotypes commonly associated with incarceration, but more importantly, to carve inroads towards the treatment, betterment and rehabilitation of offenders.