

The Relevance of Psychology in South Africa: A Content Analysis of Psychology Masters Theses from 1998 to 2017

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Abstract : Recently, debates surrounding the social relevance of psychology in South Africa have focussed on how the growing neoliberal rationality within academia has again resulted in the discipline catering to the needs of powerful social groupings to protect its own economic interests, rather than producing socially relevant knowledge. Consequently, this study aimed to conduct a content analysis of the recent research output of psychology masters students, to establish whether it has produced research that addresses local and national psychosocial issues and as such deemed socially relevant knowledge. The study sampled clinical, counselling, and research psychology masters theses from 16 South African universities submitted between 1998 and 2017. Overall, 2001 theses were sampled, which were analysed using qualitative content analysis predominantly based on the descriptive categories identified in similar studies using published journal articles. Results indicated that empirical qualitative theses, using systems-oriented theory and post-modern frameworks were most prevalent. Further, traditional topics within psychology had relatively more weighting compared to more social topics. Although a significant number of theses recruited participants from working-class or poor backgrounds, there was an overreliance on participants from urban areas located in some of the country's wealthiest provinces. Despite a strong adult-centric focus, trends regarding participants' race and gender roughly resembled current population demographics. Overall, the results indicate that psychology in South Africa, at least at university-level, is to some extent trying to engage with national psychosocial concerns. However, there are still several key areas which need to be addressed to ensure the continued social relevance of the discipline.

Keywords : adult-centric, content analysis, relevance, psychosocial

Conference Title : ICP 2019 : International Conference on Psychology

Conference Location : Prague, Czechia

Conference Dates : September 05-06, 2019