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Academic inbreeding and isolation in South African psychology

Summary

Several factors have contributed to the fact that academic inbreeding and isolation have reached almost epidemic proportions at South African universities. Although this phenomenon has been described as a cancer in tertiary education, almost no data are available regarding the specific prevalence of inbreeding and isolation in academic psychology in South Africa. The present study aims to make a contribution in this regard. More than 1 000 questionnaires were distributed to academics and professionals to determine how many of them have obtained their qualifications from a single university; whether they were, at the time of the study, employed at a university from which they had graduated; what overseas training they had had; how many were members of international psychological associations; their attitudes towards continuing education, and to what extent they utilised computer networks. The findings are presented and recommendations made.

Akademiese inteling en isolasie in akademiese sielkunde in Suid-Afrika

Verskeie faktore het daartoe bygedra dat akademiese inteling en isolasie feitlik epidemiese afmetings by Suid-Afrikaanse universiteite aangeneem het. Hoewel hierdie verskynsel beskryf word as 'n kanker in tersiêre onderwys, is feitlik geen data beskikbaar rakende die spesifieke omvang van inteling en isolasie in akademiese sielkunde in Suid-Afrika nie. Die huidige studie het daarom ten doel om 'n bydrae in hierdie verband te maak. Meer as 1 000 vraelyste is versprei om vas te stel watter hoeveelheid akademiese hulle sielkundekwalifikasies by slegs een universiteit ontvang het, of die akademikus werksaam was by die Universiteit waar hy of sy 'n graad verwerf het, in welke mate akademiese buitelandse opleiding ontvang het, hoeveel akademiese lede is van internasionale sielkundeverenigings, wat hul houding jeens voortgesette opleiding is, en in watter mate hulle van rekenaarnetwerke gebruik maak. Die bevindings word aangebied en aanbevelings word gemaak.

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Academic inbreeding and isolation have played a peculiar and perhaps even unique role in the general academic setting in South Africa. Several factors have contributed to this:

First, the geographical isolation of South Africa led to exclusion from the regular and almost daily exchange of new ideas taking place among various (sub-)cultures on continents such as North America and Europe. This was especially true before the introduction of new technologies such as fax machines and computer networks. The situation was aggravated by the fact that many new philosophies and paradigm shifts were distorted and even censored by the news and other media of the apartheid regime. The fact that South African scientific knowledge was considered far superior to that of neighbouring countries and no significant scientific enrichment was believed to be offered by interaction with them was a further isolating factor.

Secondly, political appointments at all levels of education over several decades led to an academic blinkeredness and stagnation which has had a cancerous effect on academic progress. Not only has this inbreeding led to one-sided training and indoctrination, but it has often been presented by academics whose political affiliation, rather than academic credentials, was the determining factor in their appointment. The general political-cultural climate has also contributed to the situation. Many academics have operated within a limited "inner circle" due to practical factors (such as lack of fluency in a second language), personal factors (an unwillingness to identify with the political-cultural value system of certain academic institutions), or politico-legal factors (for instance, blacks were not allowed to teach at most universities).

Thirdly, regardless of what the overall and especially the political advantages may have been, the sanctions imposed during the apartheid era exacerbated academic inbreeding and isolation in South Africa. For example, South African academics were not welcome at many international conferences, most prominent foreign scientists were unwilling to accept appointments in South Africa or even to visit the country, and some publishers and book distributors refused to supply publications to South Africa. These factors all took their toll.

Fourthly, in contrast to countries such as the USA where an appointment at one's *alma mater* is strongly discouraged and, indeed, only allowed in exceptional cases, such appointments are almost the order of the day in South Africa. It goes without saying that the exposure of both learners and academics to such a limited mindset and academic framework can only be detrimental to the development of critical and creative thought. In this regard Conrad & Wyer (1982: 46) summarise the most important arguments against academic inbreeding:

institutional vitality [may] be harmed [...] institutional parochialism and reduced productivity [may] result [...] traditions may remain unchallenged, change may be hindered, and intellectual life and research efforts may become increasingly narrowed and stunted.

Conrad & Wyer concluded from their analysis of existing research that the majority of studies showed that academic productivity, external professional recognition and promotion opportunities are significantly greater for academics who are not inbred.

In this context it is disconcerting that almost no data are available on the extent of inbreeding and isolation in South African psychology. The aim of the present study is therefore to make a contribution in this regard.

1. Methodology

1.1 Participants and procedure

In order to put the inbreeding and isolation of academic psychologists in perspective, it was decided to compare their data with that of non-academics and, where applicable, that of students. The participants therefore comprised:

- Academic psychologists (academics employed in departments of Psychology)

The departments of Psychology at all 21 South African universities participated in the research project.

- Master's degree students in the professional courses

The heads of departments and/or course co-ordinators at all 21 universities were contacted in order to involve students in the research project.

- Non-academic psychologists

The Interim National Medical and Dental Council of South Africa was approached for a detailed list of registered psychologists actively involved in private practice. A random sample was drawn from the list, in such a way that psychologists from all provinces were included. Personal contact was also established with the directors of psychological services in the police, correctional and military services. With their assistance, psychologists in these directorates were also incorporated in the investigation.

For practical reasons, only psychologists and students in the clinical, counselling and research categories of registration were involved in this investigation.

Where possible, questionnaires were delivered by hand. The rest were distributed by mail, following the guidelines outlined by Bailey (1987). As far as possible, participants were encouraged by means of follow-up correspondence and telephone calls to complete and return their questionnaires. The study was completed by the end of 1997.

As indicated in Table 1, more than 1000 questionnaires were distributed. The response rate of 40.8% can be regarded as good (Bush & White 1995; Allan 1995). However, the data should be interpreted in the light of the fact that there are about 4000 registered psychologists in South Africa and about 250 students in the categories mentioned. Although the researchers went out of their way to assure a sizable and representative sample, caution should be exercised in generalising the results. In particular, it should be taken into account that about 60% of the targeted participants did not respond, which may have influenced the representativeness of the sample.

Table 1: Response rate

Participants	Distributed	*Received	%
Academics	411	149	36,2
Non-academics	425	157	36,9
Students	203	118	58
Total	1039	424	40,8

1.2 Measuring instruments

Three structured questionnaires (each in both English and Afrikaans) were used as measuring instruments for the three groups of participants.

Categorical (nominal) scales were used. Participants were also encouraged to add additional information, observations, criticism and/or recommendations. Adequate space was provided on the questionnaire for this purpose.

1.3 Pilot study

A pilot study highlighted certain problems that had to be addressed before the study proper. A provisional questionnaire was sent to several prominent South African academics and opinion-makers in the field. As a result of their feedback, certain questions had to be reformulated, especially in terms of relevance and format.

1.4 Data analysis

The SPSS computer software programme was used in the quantitative analyses in this study. The probability of differences was calculated in terms of the *chi*-square. The qualitative analyses were performed by hand.

2. Results and discussion

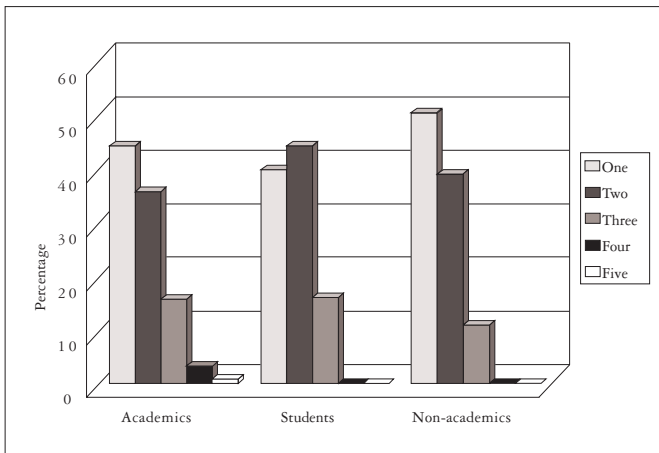
To facilitate the interpretation of data, the researchers decided that only differences of 20% or more among the proportions within a single group would be regarded as significant enough to warrant discussion (see Cohen 1988). Where there were statistically significant differences (at either the 1% or the 5% level) among the three independent variables/groups of participants (namely, academics, students and non-academics), the most important intra-group and inter-group results were summarised, as far as possible, in tabular format. The row percentages in the various tables refer to intra-group results, while the column percentages refer to inter-group results. Where statistically significant differences were not found to obtain among the independent variables/groups of participants, only the most important intra-group results were reflected.

We shall now present our analysis of the number of universities at which respondents obtained their qualifications, the prevalence of respondents employed at universities from which they graduated, psychological training overseas, continuing education, and the use of computer networks.

2.1 Inbreeding

The extent of inbreeding was determined, *inter alia*, by means of a survey of the number of universities at which respondents obtained their psychology qualifications. These survey results are summarised in Figure 1. The calculated *chi*-square value for the variables in Figure 1 was 15.787 with 8 degrees of freedom. This value was significant at the 5% level, which indicates that there was a reasonably significant statistical difference in the proportions of the three groups of participants.

Figure 1: The number of universities at which participants obtained their psychology qualifications

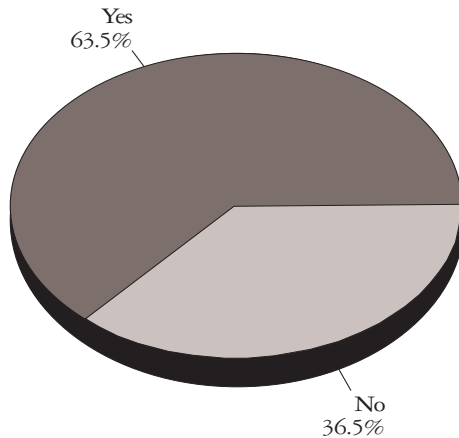


It is clear from Figure 1 that a relatively large proportion of academics (44.2%), students (39.8%) and non-academics (50.3%) obtained their psychology qualifications from a single university. Although these percentages are lower than anticipated, they are still significantly higher than in the USA where this form of inbreeding is the exception

to the rule. Information was solicited from international colleagues by publishing a question in this regard on the Teaching of Psychology e-mail discussion list <tips@fre.fsu.umd.edu>, on 11 May 1999. Feedback came almost exclusively from the USA where the phenomenon is “almost considered to be incestuous!” (<taylor@teetot.acusd.edu>, 11 May 1999).

Inbreeding was further investigated by means of a question pertaining to whether the academic was currently employed at the time of the study at a university from which he/she had graduated. The responses are summarised in Figure 2.

Figure 2: The extent to which academics had graduated at the university at which they were employed



It is clear from Figure 2 that a high proportion of academics (63.5%) had indeed graduated from the universities where they were employed.

Furthermore, respondents indicated which degree(s) had been conferred by the universities where they were employed. From a total of 90 academics who responded to the question, it appears that about half (N=46) had obtained all their qualifications (undergraduate and post-graduate) from the university where they were employed. A significant number of academics (N=37) had completed their post-graduate studies at the university where they were employed. The rest indicated that they were employed at the university where they had completed their

undergraduate studies (N=6). It therefore seems that a relatively high proportion of academics had obtained some qualifications at the university where they were employed. This state of affairs indicates a high measure of academic inbreeding at South African universities. However, it is possible that some academics may have obtained a degree from the university at which they were employed at the time of the study, but been employed at other universities in the interim.

It is clear from the literature that universities in other countries (especially the USA) attempt to avoid inbreeding, and to promote "cross-pollination" (Keith-Spiegel 1991; Melsaeter 1991; Over 1991). However, there are arguments for and against inbreeding, because some individuals function optimally in constantly changing circumstances, while others prefer stability and permanence. However, Louw (1991) emphasises the need for South African universities to prevent inbreeding by ensuring, for example, that not more than 50% of a department's staff were trained in that department. However, the pool of South African universities is limited. For this reason, the USA cannot be used as a direct comparison in this regard.

It is nonetheless strongly recommended that departments of Psychology express their opposition to academic inbreeding in order for this destructive tendency in the South African academic world to be completely eradicated. The following proposals are made in this regard:

- A department should ensure that not more than 50% of its staff have completed more than 50% of their studies in that department. This goal may be achieved, for example, by giving preference to candidates from other universities when appointments are made, and by engaging in the active recruitment of such individuals. Moreover, a department may also decide not to employ individuals who obtained their post-graduate qualifications in that department, unless they have gained experience and/or obtained qualifications elsewhere.
- The current tendency for departments of Psychology largely to select their own students for master's and doctoral degrees ought to be reconsidered. A possible solution would be for departments to select only 50% of their own students for these degrees (including the so-called professional master's degree course). Sacrifices would have to be made by both departments and students, but weighed

against the academic disadvantages of inbreeding, this would not seem excessive.

2.2 Isolation

As a measure of academic isolation among psychologists in South Africa, the following themes were investigated: overseas training, international psychology associations, continuing education, and the use of computer networks.

2.2.1 Overseas training

Respondents had to indicate whether they had undergone any formal training overseas. The results are summarised in Table 2. The calculated *chi*-square value for the variables in Table 2 was 27.556 with 2 degrees of freedom. This value was significant at the 1% level, which indicates that there was a statistically significant difference in the proportions of the three groups of participants.

Table 2: The extent to which participants had undergone formal training in psychology overseas

Frequency (N) Row % Column %	Satisfied	Uncertain	Row Total
Academics	33* 22.3 67.3	115 77.7 30.8	148 35.1 -
Students	3 2.5 6.1	115 97.7 30.8	118 28.0 -
Non-academics	13 8.3 26.5	143 91.7 38.3	156 37.0 -
Column Total	49 11.6	373 88.4	422 100.0

*In all cases, the upper value in each cell (with the exception of the "row total cells" and "column total cells") refers to the frequency (N). The middle value refers to the row percentage and the bottom value to the column total.

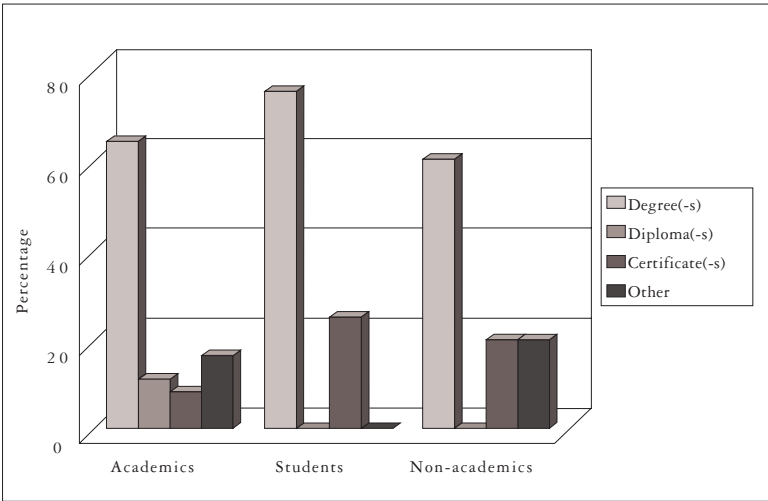
It appears from the intra-group results in Table 2 that the greater proportion of academics, students and non-academics had not received any formal training in psychology overseas (77.7%, 97.5% and

91.7%) while a minority had indeed undergone such training (22.3%, 2.5% and 8.3%). It is clear from these findings that, as far as formal training overseas is concerned, a high measure of academic isolation exists among the three groups of participants.

However, the inter-group results indicate that a higher proportion of academics (67.3%) than students (6.1%) or non-academics (26.5%) had indeed received formal training in psychology at overseas universities. It therefore appears that they were to a lesser extent victims of academic isolation.

The nature of the formal training received by respondents at overseas universities is reflected in Figure 3. The calculated *chi*-square value for the variables in Figure 3 was not significant, which indicates that there was not a statistically significant difference in the proportions for the three groups of participants.

Figure 3: The nature of formal training overseas



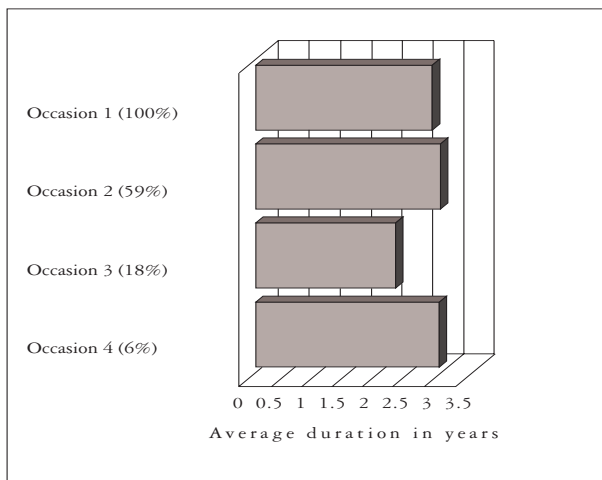
It is apparent from Figure 3 that most of the respondents who received formal training in psychology overseas obtained degrees there (63.9% of academics; 75.0% of students and 60.0% of non-academics). The rest obtained diplomas, certificates and other qualifications (11.1%, 8.3% and 16.7%, respectively, of academics; 0.0%,

25.0% and 0.0% of students, and 0.0%, 20.0% and 20.0% of non-academics). The “other” qualifications included the following for the various groups:

- academics: courses and workshops in family therapy, training in group therapy and psycho-drama;
- non-academics: training in psychotherapy and group therapy.

Respondents who had received formal training in psychology overseas further specified the number of occasions and the duration of the training. The responses of all three groups are summarised in Figure 4. The figure in brackets reflects respondents who completed this particular option in the questionnaire as a percentage of the total who had received training overseas. No significant differences were found.

Figure 4: The number of occasions and the duration of training overseas



It appears from Figure 4 that most of the respondents who had received formal training in psychology overseas did so on one occasion only (100%), as opposed to those who had done so on two occasions (59.0%), three occasions (18.0%) and four occasions (6.0%). The average duration of such formal training appears to have varied between 2 and 3 years. More specifically, the average duration of the first opportunity appears to have been 2 years and 9 months, of the second

opportunity 3 years, of the third opportunity 2 years and 3 months, and of the fourth opportunity 3 years.

It therefore appears that where formal training in psychology was obtained overseas it was reasonably lengthy.

Membership of international psychological associations is also a measure of the level of isolation of academics and professionals. Participants in the study primarily indicated that they were members of the following international psychological associations:

- academics: the American Psychological Association (N=17) and the British Psychological Society (N=12). Thirty-four associations were mentioned. 45.6% (N=68) of academics were members of international psychological associations.
- students: the Society of Behavioural Medicine (N=2). Only two associations were mentioned. 1.9% (N=3) of students were members of international psychological associations.
- non-academics: the British Psychological Society (N=3). Nine associations were mentioned. 8.5% (N=10) of non-academics were members of international psychological associations.

From these findings, it is clear that a higher percentage of academics than students or non-academics belong to international psychological associations.

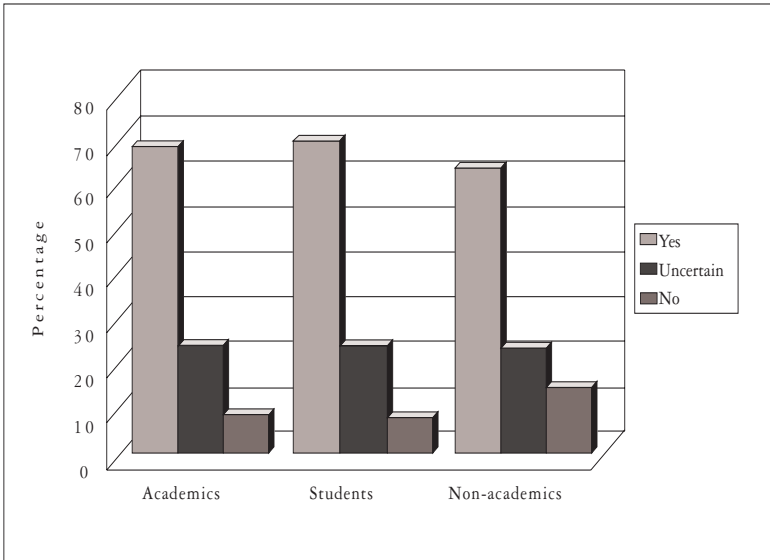
2.2.2 Continuing education

One way to ensure that psychologists are exposed to the latest developments in their field, and at the same time to combat the impact of inbreeding and isolation, is to introduce continuing education. This would imply that a psychologist would only be able to re-register once he/she had earned a specific number of credits by means of further training in a specified area. Continuing education as a precondition for re-registration as a psychologist was implemented in the USA several years ago, while the system has recently been introduced in South Africa for the medical profession. The system is, among others, being considered by the Professional Board for Psychology and PsySSA.

Participants in the present study were required to indicate whether they would be in favour of a similar system in South Africa.

The aim was to determine to what extent local psychologists and students were receptive to academic renewal and specialisation. The opinions of the three groups are presented in Figure 5. The calculated *chi*-square value for the variables in Figure 5 was not significant which indicates that there was not a statistically significant difference in the proportions of the three groups of participants.

Figure 5: The degree to which participants were in favour of continuing education



It is clear from Figure 5 that most academics (67.6%) were in favour of a system of continuing education in South Africa, while a small proportion were uncertain (24.1%), or against such a system (8.3%). The same appears to apply to students; the greater proportion were in favour of continuing training (68.7%) as opposed to uncertain (23.5%) or against it (7.8%). Moreover, the majority of non-academics were in favour (62.8%), in comparison to 23.0% who were uncertain and 14.2% who were opposed to such a system. These results coincide with those of authors such as Van der Westhuyzen & Plug 1987, Louw 1992, Edwards 1994, Van der Ryst 1995 and Olivier 1995. This clearly indicates PsySSA and the Professional Board

for Psychology well advised in introducing continuing education as a strategy to combat stagnation among psychologists.

2.2.3 The use of computer networks

Computer networks are much more than just a fad; they represent one of the most effective means of broadening horizons, reducing isolation and combatting stagnation (Pryzwansky & Wendt 1987; Custer 1994; Azar 1994). Participants' use of psychology-related networks is summarised in Table 3. The calculated *chi*-square value for the variables in Table 3 was 249.413 with 4 degrees of freedom. This value is significant at the 1% level, which indicates that there was a statistically significant difference in the proportions of the three groups of participants.

In terms of inter-group differences, it appears that most academics (70.6%), as compared to students (22.4%) and non-academics (7.1%), were indeed part of international networks. Most students (74.0%), as compared to academics (24.0%) and non-academics (1.9%) were only part of a local network. The greater proportion of non-academics (64.3%) were not connected to such networks at all, as compared to 26.9% of academics and 8.8% of students.

Table 3: Participants' use of psychology-related computer networks

Frequency (N) Row % Column %	International (including local)	Only local	None	Row Total
Academics	60 41.1 70.6	25 17.1 24.0	61 41.8 26.9	146 35.1 -
Students	19 16.4 22.4	77 66.4 74.0	20 17.2 8.8	116 27.9 -
Non-Academics	6 3.9 7.1	2 1.3 1.9	146 94.8 64.3	154 37.0 -
Column Total	85 20.4	104 25.0	227 54.6	416 100.0

As far as intra-group differences are concerned, an equal number of academics were part of international computer networks (41.1%) as were not (41.8%). A smaller proportion of academics (17.1%) were

part of a local network only. Most students were part of a local network only (66.4%), as opposed to 16.4% who were connected to an international network, and 17.2% who were not connected to any network. In the case of non-academics, the majority were not connected to an international network (94.8%), while 1.3% were connected to a local network only.

In an era when anybody not connected to a computer network is regarded as almost illiterate in many circles, the present finding that relatively many academics, students and non-academics fall into this category is cause for serious concern. The findings regarding academics and students are particularly worrying. These are not only the flag-bearers of academe; they also have the necessary facilities at their disposal. What is more, they work in a "culture" where such knowledge and expertise are expected of them. However, non-academics should not feel that they are exempt from expectations related to these and other professional or technological developments. Although factors such as time and money do constrain them significantly more than academics or students, non-academics should also realise that their exposure to new ideas and knowledge can only benefit their patients. Time and money are no excuse. Universities should address their lacunae as a matter of urgency by offering training to academics and incorporating computer courses in the syllabi of post-graduate students. One way of accommodating non-academics would be to acknowledge such courses for credit in the continuing education programme. All psychologists could also benefit from an awareness programme on the advantages of incorporating this technology into their professional armoury.

3. Conclusion

It is widely accepted that genetic inbreeding can reinforce negative traits and characteristics in most species, including humans (Passarge 1995). South African psychologists should take care that this somewhat extreme metaphor does not also become applicable to their discipline and profession. Factors such as departmental inbreeding, geographical isolation and a relatively small pool of universities, which impede the introduction of new academic blood, create a potential breeding-ground for this. However, the most important aspect is

probably that too many academics do not fully realise the consequences of inbreeding and isolation, or even have a *laissez-faire* attitude towards it. The true danger of inbreeding and isolation lies in their insidiousness: their negative consequences are often not known until it is too late. It is therefore of the utmost importance and urgency that the phenomenon should be addressed. Although it goes without saying that departments of Psychology (via the Heads of Departments Committee, in particular) should collaborate with the Professional Board of Psychology and PsySSA on this issue, they should not hesitate to take the lead themselves. By making a determined effort to end internal inbreeding, and to promote national and international contact and collaboration, departments themselves can to a great extent neutralise the process.

The good news, which also provides a good basis for launching the campaign against inbreeding and isolation, is the finding that the vast majority of academics, students and non-academics were in favour of continuing education. This reflects an attitude receptive to change and renewal. What is required now is an active and dynamic impetus on the part of leaders and organisations in the field to create an awareness of the dangers of inbreeding and isolation. This will enable South African psychologists to hold their own in the international community.

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