Unisa College of Human Sciences

Department of Psychology

2018 master’s and doctoral research focus areas

Please note that this information is subject to change.

Academics in the department engage in a wide range of research projects, most of which relate to three broad themes:

- **Psychology in society** (reflecting on psychology as a discipline and a profession in the context of current South African and global realities)
- **Psychological science** (cognitive and neuropsychological research)
- **Therapeutic psychology** (approaches to health, well-being and developmental psychology, and to psychotherapy)

To address these themes, we currently have the following focus areas in the department:

**Focus area 1: Scholarly development of students in psychology**

**Focus area 2: Social justice and inclusion**

**Focus area 3: Hidden histories of psychology**

**Focus area 4: Neuroscience and neuropsychology**

**Focus area 5: Therapeutic contexts and lived experiences**

**Focus area 6: African psychologies and epistemologies**

**Focus area 7: Health, wellbeing and developmental psychology**

**Focus area 8: Forensic psychology**

**Focus area 9: Cognitive and experimental psychology**

**Focus area 10: Artistic creativity in South Africa**
Focus area 1: Scholarly development of students in psychology

Initiative 1.1 – Perceptions of the teaching and learning of psychological research.

Lecturers and Associates interested or working in the field:

Angelo Fynn, Eduard Fourie, Cathrine Govender, Errolyn Long, Helena Erasmus, Hugo van der Walt, Herman Janse van Vuuren, Itumeleng Masisi and Harold Ncongwane

The aims of this series of studies are (1) to describe the curriculum themes across South African universities programmes in research psychology, and (2) to explore the perceptions of programme leaders, students and lecturers towards research as a subject area in terms of training, the discipline and the needs of the market. We also want to critically assess the changes that have occurred in South African research psychology curricula over the past decade.

Examples of possible M & D topics

1. A survey of students’ attitudes towards and perceptions of undergraduate and post graduate research training
2. A critical comparison of course work Master’s programmes in research psychology
3. Work integrated learning in research training: A case study

Initiative 1.2 - Exploring the value of discussion forums: Students’ perspective

Discussion forums are increasingly utilised by most universities in delivery of their courses, especially within the Open Distance Learning (ODL) context. Advances in ODL field has resulted in greater developments in the delivery of higher education as it has permitted greater flexibility for students and enables them to study anywhere, at any time. Discussion forums position the student as an expert/facilitator at the centre of the learning process and the lecturer as an overseer of the dialogue. The model is an innovative approach to learning that draw students into online learning processes by encouraging them to take a more active and central role in their learning. The study aims to look at, and explore the introduction of discussion forums as a student centred, and peer e-learning environment at a distance learning institution in South Africa. Furthermore, we intend to explore the students’ perspectives on the usefulness of online discussion forums as a tool used in student online learning. Using qualitative research approach, we hope to have a sample of students registered for the ‘Being a Professional Teacher’ (BPT) module at a university in South Africa. The first 50 students who respond will be taken as participants. Purposive sampling will be used as the study is focusing on a specific module and form of contact/subject. We hope that the study will assist us in our exploration of how using online discussion forums contribute to the value of studying the BPT module.

Examples of possible M & D topics

1. Exploring the perceptions of E-Learning amongst students within an ODL context
2. Exploring trends and developments within Distance/open learning
3. Relationships between Students’ Preferences and Performance within Online and Offline Assessments
4. Maintaining Interest when Learning Online: Exploring the relationship between Potential Motivation and Performance benefits
5. Exploring the impact of using E-learning tools within an ODL context
6. Exploring lecturers’ experiences/perceptions of teaching within the ODL context

**Initiative 1.3 – Students as knowledge producers: The Southern African Students’ Psychology Conference & New Voices in Psychology**

**Lecturers and Associates interested or working in the field:**

Khonzi Mbatha, Eduard Fourie, Puleng Segalo, Angelo Fynn, Martin Terre Blanche, Christine Laidlaw, Janice Moodley, Masefako Gumani, Itumeleng Masisi, Fana Simelane, Sindi Dladla and Harold Ncongwane

The Department of Psychology has established a number of initiatives aimed at enhancing the role of students in generating academic knowledge, rather than being purely consumers of knowledge. This include facilitating the publication of aspects of theses and dissertations in the form of journal articles, the biannual Southern African Students’ Psychology Conference (http://www.studentsconference.co.za/), and the journal New Voices in Psychology (http://www.newvoicesinpsychology.co.za), which is aimed at providing publication opportunities for senior students and young academics. We have published a number of articles and book chapters on this process and are keen for M and D students to do further research on the topic.

**Examples of possible M & D topics**

1. Thematic content analysis of papers presented at the biannual South African Students’ Psychology Conferences
2. A comparative analysis of student presentation opportunities in psychology and other disciplines
3. Student experiences of the academic review process
4. Peer assessment mechanisms: Successes and stumbling blocks
5. My first publication: A phenomenological analysis
6. Mentoring in academic psychology: Some case studies
7. Old voices and new voices: The process of becoming part of re-imaging psychology

**Initiative 1.4 – The development of training opportunities for psychological counsellors**

**Lecturers and Associates interested or working in the field:**

Masefako Gumani, Maria Papaikonomou, Juan Nel, Keit Shirinda-Mthombeni, Elsje Cronje, Hugo van der Walt and Gloria Makhuza

**Examples of possible M & D topics**

1. An historical perspective on the development of the BPsych Equivalence Programme at Unisa and the career paths of registered counsellors
2. Experiences of registered counsellors: The relevance of the practicum placements, training and supervision in becoming a registered counsellor
3. Registered counsellors: Their relevance and future in South Africa
Focus area 2: Social justice and inclusion

Initiative 2.1 – Hate Crimes

Lecturers and Associates interested or working in the field:

The Unisa team consists of Juan Nel and Khonzi Mbatha. They are assisted in their research endeavours by Unisa postgraduate students and others, including Ubora Research Solutions (Yolanda Mitchell and Hanlie van Wyk, both alumni of Unisa).

This is a large, externally funded project of the Hate Crimes Working Group (HCWG) – a multi-sector workgroup that was established in late 2009 with the common goal of lobbying for interventions to address hate crime in South Africa – of which the Department of Psychology is a founder member.

Guided by the objective of contributing to the full enactment of the Hate Crimes Act once legislated, the Unisa Department of Psychology, in 2010, initiated a project aimed at strengthening the advocacy efforts of the HCWG. The Hate Crimes Monitoring Project, which aims to determine and describe the nature and extent of hate crimes in South Africa, is managed by the research sub-committee of the HCWG, led by the Unisa Department of Psychology and supported by Ubora Research Solutions together with local and international experts. The HCWG Hate & Bias Crime Monitoring Form and its accompanying User Guide is a rigorous research instrument developed by the research sub-committee, in consultation with the member organisations of the HCWG, and piloted across sectors and in different settings before its finalisation. The Monitoring Form is currently utilised by the HCWG, acting under the auspices of ethical clearance obtained from Unisa, in partnership with key civil society organisations in five provinces (Eastern Cape/Gauteng/KwaZulu-Natal/Limpopo/Western Cape) to provide a baseline record for a five year longitudinal study (2013 – 2017). The Monitoring Form has also recently been developed into an online system to track real time events.

Examples of possible M & D topics

1. Strengthening interventions aimed at minimising the psychosocial impact of hate crimes in South Africa
2. Understanding the psychological factors contributing to hate crimes in South Africa

Initiative 2.2 – Inside-out Outside-in prison experiences and communities

Lecturers and Associates interested or working in the field:

Martin Terre Blanche, Eduard Fourie, Khonzi Mbatha, Bongi Mdakane, Janeen Prinsloo, Janice Moodley, Masefako Gumani, Puleng Segalo, Christine Landman, Cily Tabane, Bianca Parry, Itumeleng Masisi and Lontinah Nchabeleng

This community engagement initiative (www.insideoutoutsidein.co.za) seeks to apply community psychology approaches and perspectives to the diverse communities that exist in and around correctional systems.

We are particularly focused on initiatives that cross the boundaries between the inside and outside of prisons. Examples are the development of tertiary education opportunities for prisoners, issues
of social reintegration and recidivism after release, issues relating to the families and relatives of prisoners, and the collaborative generation and dissemination of knowledge about prison experiences and circumstances.

**Examples of possible M & D topics**

1. The experiences of motherhood among male offenders in a maximum correctional centre
2. A thematic analysis of South African and international social integration programmes for former offenders
3. An auto-ethnographic account of prison life and life after release
4. An auto-ethnographic accounts of life as a correctional official
5. Experiences of being a psychologist / social worker in a correctional centre
6. A psych biographical study of ... [a public figure who was in prison or under house arrest]
7. Experiences of and programmes for police members in correctional facilities
8. Victim-offender dialogue
9. A discourse analysis of how ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ are constructed in newspaper reports about correctional services

**Initiative 2.3 – The Psychology of Sexuality and Gender in Africa**

**Lecturers and Associates interested or working in the field:**

Juan A. Nel, Niel Victor and Melanie Judge

Psychology professionals in South Africa, individually, are making a significant contribution in several contexts where sexuality- and gender-related concerns are pertinent.

Whether the discipline of psychology, per se, is, however, currently doing enough to optimise its contribution to healing of our traumatised society and, for instance, responding to the endemic nature of gender-based and sexual violent crime, is another matter. Although merely a beginning, it should come as good news that the Unisa Department of Psychology has led a process to establish the Sexuality and Gender Division of the Psychological Society of South Africa (PsySSA). As part of this project the aim is to develop a Unisa post-graduate psychological course in African perspectives on sexuality and gender to be presented as a pilot in 2017. The focus of the envisioned course will be on sexuality, inclusive of sexual minorities, and specifically on the various roles of psychology within the field of sexology.

**Examples of possible M & D topics**

1. Towards the inclusion of sexology in the Unisa MA Clinical Psychology curriculum
2. Developing a curriculum for an African postgraduate course in the psychology of sexuality and gender
Initiative 2.4 – LGBTI – affirmative psychological practise

Lecturers and Associates interested or working in the field:

Juan Nel, Niel Victor, Dalene van Dyk, Suntosh Pillay, Liesel Theron and Christine McLachlan.

In South Africa, psychology as a profession has made great strides in promoting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI)-affirmative practices as well as in using its voice as an instrument to promote good governance and legislation based on scientifically grounded, evidence-based knowledge. The Psychological Society of South Africa (PsySSA) in its quest to develop the discipline of psychology nationally and internationally as a means of enhancing the human well-being of all, has, for instance, since 2007 been a member of the International Psychology Network for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Concerns, Transgender and Intersex Issues (IPsyNET), housed at the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Concerns Office of the American Psychological Association (APA). As the sole member in Africa, PsySSA, however, has the responsibility to lead in the work of IPsyNET on the continent and began to commit itself to this leadership role since 2008. The Arcus Foundation is the primary funder since 2012 of a project to enhance collaboration between IPsyNET and PsySSA, towards PsySSA becoming a stronger regional organisation, a model ‘regional hub’ so to speak, to promote capacity and membership of other psychological associations throughout Africa in the work of IPsyNET. In accordance with the objectives set out in the detailed work plan of the project, the idea behind the so-called ‘PsySSA African LGBTI Human Rights project’ is to foster active and vocal participation from the perspective of psychology in current and anticipated debates globally about LGBTI issues and concerns.

Another objective of the PsySSA African LGBTI Human Rights project is the development of Affirmative Psychological Practice Guidelines for Sexual and Gender Diversity. As a precursor to the Guidelines, a working group, led by the Unisa Department of Psychology, has developed a related affirmative position statement on for psychology professionals in South Africa, under the auspices of PsySSA. The aim of the position statement is to outline a clear affirmative stance regarding particularly LGBTI concerns in psychology and discuss specific themes for consideration in such an affirmative stance.

Examples of possible M & D topics

1. Strengthening an affirmative approach to sexuality and gender diversity in Africa
2. Enhancing scientifically grounded, evidence-based knowledge to inform (South) African Psychological Guidelines for LGBTI-Affirmative Practice

Initiative 2.5 – Towards LGBTI Health and Well-Being in Tshwane, Gauteng, and South Africa

Lecturers and Associates interested or working in the field:

Juan A. Nel, Vasi van Deventer, Sean Hagen, Azwihangwisi Mavhandu-Mudzusi and OUT LGBTWell-Being.

Community-based civil society service organisations (CSOs) play a vital role in enhancing the well-being and psychological sense of ‘community’ among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) persons. There has been significant collaboration since 1998 between a CSO, OUT LGBT Well-being (OUT), and UNISA resulting in the development of comprehensive
programmes for a much marginalised societal group (that is, LGBTI persons and communities) and the alignment of several academic and scientific outputs to the needs of this group. Examples include the first quantitative research studies on the experiences of LGBT persons in three provinces of South Africa (2002 – 2006); successful completion at UNISA of at least four related theses/ dissertations (2005 – 2012); being at the forefront of securing the right to same-sex marriage (2006); and using a UNISA Strategic Projects Fund and South African Netherlands Project on Alternatives in Development (SANPAD) research process and related findings to establish LGBTI services in the North-West province (2010/1). The general aim of this project is to consolidate this long-standing relationship between OUT and UNISA in the interest of high quality LGBTI research, and related teaching and learning, towards the advancement of LGBTI health and well-being through evidence informed and sustainable community-based services, developing a body of knowledge and policy reforms.

**Examples of possible M & D topics**

1. Heterosexual attitudes toward same-sex marriage and lesbian/ gay parenting’, as part of a cross-national study by the University of Liège (Belgium), Alliant International University (San Francisco, USA) and Unisa (South Africa)
2. Surveillance of use of OUT STI/ HIV Clinic towards up-scaling of related OUT services
3. Good Practice models in Community Engagement addressing the needs of LGBTI South Africans

**Initiative 2.6 – Gender and Feminism**

**Lecturers and Associates interested or working in the field:**

Puleng Segalo, Christine Laidlaw and Catherine Govender

Several Psychology Department staff members have an active interest in feminist issues. This is an open-ended project and students are encouraged to do research in this field after discussion with team members.

**Examples of possible M & D topics**

1. Exploring South African women’s perceptions of intimate partner violence
2. Exploring students’ constructions of female sexuality presented in the media
3. Health beliefs amongst Indian women
Focus area 3: Hidden histories of psychology

Initiative 3.1 - People behind the Papers

Lecturers and Associates interested or working in the field:

Khonzi Mbatha, Martin Terre Blanche, Eduard Fourie, Puleng Segalo, Angelo Fynn and Melusi Mbatha

The People behind the Papers project (http://www.peoplebehindthepapers.co.za) aims to interview a wide cross-section of South African psychologists to explore the human element in research and publication. The purpose is to demystify the professional and personal processes that go into the production of academic knowledge. Students and others are often intimidated by the ‘finished’ quality of journal articles and textbooks, and struggle to imagine the larger processes that inform these texts. The project moves beyond the theoretical confines of methodology textbooks, to help define, discover and represent the uniquely South African and African traditions in social science research.

Examples of possible M & D topics

1. Women researchers in psychology: A narrative analysis
2. The ‘back story’ of doing research and getting published: Common themes and unique experiences
3. ‘People behind the dissertations’: Lived experiences of M and D graduates

Initiative 3.2 – Mapping psychology in South Africa

Lecturers and Associates interested or working in the field:

Eduard Fourie, Joshua Nyamande, Martin Terre Blanche and Masefako Gumani

This project entails the quantitative and qualitative ‘mapping’ of past and current psychological research and practise in South Africa. We work with existing datasets such as lists of current M and D topics in the Department, the Unisa database of completed theses and dissertations, and the websites of Southern African Departments of Psychology to provide an overview of methodologies, topics and controversies in the discipline. The project aims to map the terrain of research and practise, allowing students, academics and practitioners to locate themselves within a larger context. It aims to identify areas currently considered important in South African psychology, but also to highlight gaps and silences.

Examples of possible M & D topics

1. A meta-analysis of published historical writings on Psychology in South Africa
2. A quantitative content analysis of completed M & D dissertations and theses in South Africa
Focus area 4: Neuroscience and neuropsychology

Initiative 4.1 – Neuroscience development

Lecturers and Associates interested or working in the field:

Catherine Govender, Franco Visser, Louise Henderson and Angelo Fynn

A number of initiatives have been created to encourage African researchers to contribute their skills and knowledge to the neurosciences. Training opportunities offered by institutions such as the Southern African Neuroscience Association (SONA) and the International Brain Organisation (IBRO) are quickly being absorbed by eager African researchers. However, training must be supplemented by access to facilities in order for South Africa to benefit from the momentum building in the neurosciences. One of the platforms for translational neuroscience research is psychophysiology, which examines the interaction between psychological and physiological variables in well-being and disease, using various techniques. We believe that it is important to invest in systems for measuring bio signals, specifically EEG and autonomic functioning. With such a focus, Unisa will be in the unique position of being able to engage researchers from Gauteng, around the country and even neighbouring countries in multi-, inter- and trans-disciplinary neuroscience research. This is likely to flourish into engagements in other forms of research, which could only benefit Unisa’s reputation, training and research output. Such research naturally lends itself to engagement at community level as well. Specified therapeutic communities and illness populations could be educated in a practical manner with their own results. This would be one way in which health literacy of patients could be uplifted.

Examples of possible M & D topics

1. Migraine without aura: Psychological and genetic aspects (students must have at least an undergraduate human biology / physiology / genetics background)
2. Pain sequelae of traumatic brain injury
3. Autonomic functioning and temperament in adolescents born at extremely low birth weight
4. Developmental neuropsychology
5. Trauma and the brain
Focus area 5: Therapeutic contexts and lived experiences

Lecturers and Associates interested or working in the field:

Johan Kruger and Nico van Zyl

A very active area of enquiry in the Department of Psychology concerns therapeutic interventions and lived experiences. This is mostly conducted by MA (Clinical Psychology) students and their supervisors, but others in the department also on occasion engage in this type of research.

Examples of possible M & D topics

1. Understanding language as a potential barrier in psychotherapy: Experiences of training clinical psychologists
2. Lived experiences of family members of dementia patients
3. Autoethnographic, ethnographic, narrative and other types of qualitative inquiry. Johan Kruger

Focus area 6: African psychologies and epistemologies

Several Department of Psychology staff members are involved in theoretical and empirical work relating to African Psychology and the role of Psychology in Africa.

Example of possible M & D topics

1. Constructions of psychotherapy in South African context (Melusi Mbatha)

Focus area 7: Health, wellbeing and developmental psychology

Initiative 7.1 – Psychological perspectives on and approaches to HIV and AIDS

Lecturers and Associates interested or working in the field:

Alta van Dyk, Helena Erasmus, Keith Shirinda-Mthombeni, Fana Simelane and Louise Henderson

Examples of possible M & D topics

1. The Department of Psychology has a considerable track record of research and publications in the field of HIV and Aids. Any related projects with a psychological focus will be considered.

Initiative 7.2 – Violence, injury prevention and coping with trauma caused by violent crime

Lecturers and Associates interested or working in the field:

Masefako Gumani, Johan Kruger, Helena Erasmus and Vhuhwavho Nekhavhambe, Petro van der Merwe
Examples of possible M & D TOPICS

1. Causes of violence
2. Violence prevention programmes
3. Electronic media technology and youth violence
4. Emotional intelligence as an intervention against crime and violence

Initiative 7.3 – Developmental psychology

Lecturers and Associates interested or working in the field:
Ilse Ferns, Petro van der Merwe and Helena Erasmus

Examples of possible M & D topics

1. Childhoood and adolescence
2. Adulthood
3. Parenting
4. Emotional intelligence
5.

Initiative 7.4: Body, mind and spirit

Lecturers and Associates interested or working in the field:
Johan Kruger, Janice Moodley, Keit Shirinda-Mthombeni and Ilse Ferns

Examples of possible M & D topics

1. Exploring Resilience among girls at risk in foster care in Tshwane
2. Spiritual Intelligence
3. Any topic related to researching and facilitating positive mental and physical health will be considered
4. Health psychology within the developing country context
5. Sport psychology

Initiative 7.5 – Social, racial and gender issues

Lecturers and Associates interested or working in the field:
Janice Moodley

Examples of possible M & D topics

1. Critical health psychology at the intersection of poverty, race, gender and class
2. The use of critical discourse analysis in exploring the political context of health inequality and injustice within a developing country context
Initiative 7.6 – Relationships

**Lecturers and Associates interested or working in the field:**

Masefako Gumani and Ilse Ferns

**Examples of possible M & D topics**

1. The social construction of marriage, including polygamous and commuter marriages
2. The role of social media in marriage
3. Loneliness

Initiative 7.7 – Community Psychology and Resilience

**Lecturers and Associates interested or working in the field:**

Keit Shirinda-Mthombeni

The aim of this qualitative research project is to enhance resilience in children, adolescents and women in collaboration with Mental Health and Community NGO’s (Tshwane).

**Examples of possible M & D topics**

1. Enhancing Resilience among girls at risk in foster care in Tshwane (Project)
2. Gaining entry into communities
3. Not-knowing position of therapist within the community context
4. Ensuring viable structural coupling with a community by gaining entry from a respectful Position of informed not-knowing
5. Ecological perspective of community psychology
Focus area 8: Forensic psychology

Lecturers and Associates interested or working in the field:

Elmarie Visser, Franco Visser and Nikki Themistocleous

Forensic psychology is an exciting and developing area of special expertise in the Department of Psychology that, in its present form, is a module within the MA (Clinical Psychology) programme with associated community outreach services rendered to the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development. In principal the sub-speciality registration category of ‘Forensic Psychology’ has been agreed to by the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA), although the registration category is currently not active. The Department of Psychology has as its members both national and international experts in the field of Forensic psychology. Current research relating to the field of Forensic psychology being conducted include Conflict Management in Post-Divorce Disputes, Towards Psychological Risk-Profiling in Serial and Fatal Interpersonal Violent Crime in South Africa, and Forensic Psychology Assessments in Primary Residency and Contact Disputes.

It is recommended that any research in the field of Forensic psychology is focussed and conducted within the South African context, as little scientific research data exists that are focussed on, and original to South Africa.

Examples of possible M & D topics

1. The role of the Forensic Psychologist in a South African Context
2. Challenges facing Forensic Psychology in South Africa
3. Cultural Sensitivity and Forensic Psychology in South Africa
4. High-risk Offending Demographics in South Africa
5. Psychology Scope of Practice and Forensic Psychology in South Africa

Focus area 9: Cognitive and experimental psychology

Lecturers and Associates interested or working in the field:

Chris Janeke, Piet Kruger, Louise Henderson and Monika Dos Santos

Students interested in doing either a theoretical or empirical (quantitative or qualitative) research project on an aspect of cognitive or experimental psychology are invited to submit their research topics for consideration. Although this is a very broad research area, research proposals on most topics in cognitive psychology or cognitive science will be considered, provided that a viable research methodology for investigating the research question(s) is described in the proposal.

Examples of possible M & D topics

1. Reasoning and decision making; Logical and practical reasoning
2. General intelligence
3. The use of heuristics in practical reasoning
4. Problem solving
5. Expert knowledge; Investigating the development of expertise (e.g. in chess or physics)
6. Creativity
7. Psychology and art; the neuropsychological aspects of art creation
8. Philosophy of mind
9. The role of embodiment and social systems in cognitive processing
10. Formal models of mind (e.g. computational modelling, neural nets and information processing)
11. Memory systems; narrative memory
12. Emotion and cognition; emotional intelligence
13. Social cognition
14. The link between perceptual and motor skills
15. Analysing thinking skills in education or the business sector

Focus area 10: Artistic creativity in South Africa

Lectures and Associates interested or working in the field:

Fred van Staden

Research interest is focused on the interface between inspiration, creativity and culture as expressed in the visual arts in South Africa.

Emphasis is placed on African Cultural legacies and present day expressions with reference to painting, sculpting and jewellery making as products of the expressive process.

The research approach in this focus group is analytical and does not include therapeutic or counselling applications.