

## Andy Dawes on Johann Louw

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When I think of Johann's contribution over the years, six things stand out: 1) his historical work, 2) his contributions to the promotion of research ethics at UCT and more widely in the local psychological community, 3) of his pioneering role in promoting programme evaluation in this country, 4) and related, his methodological rigour. The remaining two should not be forgotten: 5) his love of a good company with a glass of red, and 6) the wonderful laugh that goes with his dry humour.

I first came across Johann the historian via the pages of that left wing pamphlet *Psychology in Society* (PINS to friends) in the mid 1980s. At the time he was based at UDW. One of his early contributions was in PINS Number 6 September 1986 reflects his longstanding endeavor to look inspect our discipline through the eyes of the historian. It was a critical eye too, one that revealed his measured critical gaze. The title was "*White poverty and Psychology in South Africa: The poor white investigation of the Carnegie Commission.*" The Commission was appointed in 1928 and the main report was led by E.G. Malherbe, an Educational Psychologist.

In his paper, Johann refers a letter by Malherbe's that appeared in the Cape Times in 1921 and well before the Commission, in which he expresses the view that poor whites were becoming a "menace to the self preservation and prestige of white people" (PINS, 1986, p. 49). To address the menace, scientific enquiry was required to diagnose the problem and recommend solutions. By the way the Commission recommendations led to a range of measures including strengthening the education of poor white children and the introduction of school feeding schemes for this population – but not for the black poor of course.

So here we have Johann drawing attention to early efforts to deploy the tools of our trade in the public interest – and of course the interests of a particular public some 88 years ago. Of course he has published a number of seminal historical papers over the years since he moved to Cape Town and that have often examined the vexed penetration of our discipline by Apartheid ideology and social policy.

Perhaps not so well known is his 1980s involvement with OASSSA - a collective of psycho-activists who occasionally did useful things in the struggle but who spent much time agonising over how we could be relevant to the revolution. It was evident all through that time that agonized comradely navel gazing was never going to be Johann's favourite thing. But his presence in those engagements meant that the historian stepped forward to contribute the only historical piece on OASSSA as far as I know (with Alan Flisher, Donald Skinner and Sandy Lazarus in the *Psychology of oppression* by Nicholas in 1993).

Also, we should not forget his leading role as historian in the celebration of our 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration in 1998 – even though the date was on the wrong side of history by a couple of years. Together with his students, he combed the UCT archives for newsclips of our illustrious forebears and mounted a wonderful exhibition. Johann even bought the commemoration T shirt. Sadly none of the exhibit graces the walls of the reconstructed Psychology space in the PD Hahn building as it seems to have gone missing.

Johann's more recent incarnation as one of our leading programme evaluation specialists, reflects his continued interest in the deployment of the discipline in addressing the social problems of the day. In this he does I believe, share the

approach of Karl Popper who famously said:

“The only course for the social sciences is to forget all about the verbal fireworks” ... (post-modernists beware) ... “and to tackle the practical problems of our time with the help of the theoretical methods which are fundamentally the same in all sciences. I mean the methods of trial and error, of inventing hypotheses which can be practically tested, and of submitting them to practical tests. A social technology is needed whose results can be tested by *piecemeal social engineering*.” (Popper 1945, p.222).

Unlike the mandarins of the Apartheid era and in my experience, Johann’s approach to these issues is not triumphalist and it is ethical. He has always impressed me with his quiet, reflective and rigorous approach to the possibilities and the limits of the discipline – and indeed of his own of his expertise – when considering how best to approach an evaluation challenge. I very much respect his attention to the practical: what can be done with this evaluation problem and how can we craft questions, design, method and output for optimal benefit of the user?

I think this comes through in our first collaboration in the late 1990s when we had fun putting together an edited collection with our dear friend and colleague David Donald - *Addressing Childhood Adversity* (2000) – which is still in use at Honours level in this Department. It was perhaps the first South African attempt to demonstrate the value of the emerging field of programme evaluation in measuring and improving our social programmes for children - and thereby contributing to evidence-based practice. A subtext was – it is not ethical to throw money at programmes for which there is no evidence – and here are some ideas about how you can address that situation.

Since that first collaboration it has been a privilege to work and learn with Johann on a number of projects that have sought to improve the evidence-base for early childhood programmes. Apart from the benefit to me, this work remains of influential in the South African ECD community.

As will be evident, efforts to undertake psychology in the public interest – relevant psychology if you like – and hopefully of the progressive type – has been the thread that has connected us (let Wahbie Long be the judge of that).

I have certainly enjoyed the journey thus far and hope it will continue in our mutual so-called “retirement.”