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Sumaya Laher

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Editorial

From scope to scale: reframing psychology careers in South Africa

Sumaya Laher

As I write this editorial for the third issue of the 2025 volume of the *South African Journal of Psychology* (SAJP), universities across the country are in the midst of selection processes for the 2026 master's cohort. Year after year, we witness the same tension: a growing number of capable, passionate graduates vying for far fewer spaces than are available. The result? Waves of distress, anxiety, and uncertainty among those who have invested years in the discipline of psychology, yet find themselves without a clear 'next step' in the profession. For many, the rejection letter lands like a verdict on their professional worth. It should not be this way.

We have, for far too long, allowed the profession to perpetuate a dangerously narrow narrative: that 'real' psychology happens only when you enter a professional master's programme, register as a psychologist, and work within the strict borders of scope-of-practice categories. This is not only untrue – it is harmful. It funnels talent into a bottleneck that leaves brilliant graduates stranded and disillusioned.

The irony is that the world beyond those borders is hungry for exactly the skills our graduates possess. The people skills, research expertise, and deep understanding of human behaviour that psychology instils are invaluable across fields. From public health and education to business, policy, and even computer science and artificial intelligence, psychology graduates bring a depth of insight and methodological rigour that is increasingly critical in a complex, interconnected world. To imply that these graduates' training is irrelevant outside the therapy room is to deny the realities of an increasingly interdisciplinary world.

The diversity of articles in this issue and across the SAJP offers evidence to support this. They reflect the many ways psychology-trained professionals are shaping knowledge, systems, and communities often in spaces far removed from what our regulatory categories imagine. And in the face of a mounting mental health crisis, the most impactful work may not happen in one-on-one therapy, but in scalable, innovative interventions developed in collaboration with other fields.

Take, for instance, the scoping review on *Technologically-assisted interventions for neurological and psychological applied outcomes* (Eardley & Cassimjee, 2025). This work maps how digital

Department of Psychology, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Sumaya Laher, Department of Psychology, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, Private Bag 3, Wits, Johannesburg 2050, South Africa.
Email: sumaya.laher@wits.ac.za

platforms, assistive devices, and virtual environments are enabling scalable, accessible solutions for cognitive rehabilitation and mental health support – often outside the clinical consulting room. These interventions reach populations where traditional therapy is logistically impossible, demonstrating how psychological expertise can be embedded into technology to solve public health problems at scale.

Other contributions push psychology into the terrain of global health communication. The cross-country study on *COVID-19 Infodemics* illustrates how misinformation contributes to psychological distress, and how understanding cognitive and emotional responses to information overload can inform public health messaging (Adu et al., 2025). This is psychology operating as a public mental health safeguard, shaping communication strategies that protect communities during crises.

Migration and displacement are often seen as the domain of political science or social work but are addressed in the research on *Post-migration stressors and predictors of PTSD in refugees in Cape Town* (Booysen et al., 2025). This work not only offers clinical insights but also has direct implications for urban planning, refugee integration policy, and non-governmental organisation (NGO) support programmes, again showing that psychology's reach extends into governance and human rights.

Closer to home, studies on violence highlight urgent intersections between psychology, law, and community health. The Limpopo research on *childhood violence and adult intimate partner* violence (Ross et al., 2025) and the Johannesburg study on *IPV and antiretroviral therapy adherence* (Phiri-Sithole et al., 2025) offer evidence for integrated interventions that span the justice system, public health clinics, and community advocacy initiatives. In both cases, the findings require multisector action – precisely the kind of collaborative problem-solving in which psychology-trained professionals excel.

Even topics that appear highly individual such as *self-image among women with polycystic ovary syndrome* (Hartmann & Roomaney, 2025) are deeply societal. This research bridges psychology with endocrinology, reproductive health policy, and feminist advocacy, underscoring how body image concerns intersect with systemic gender health inequities. The study on *rumination, depressive symptoms, and mindfulness among orthopedic patients* (Amanambu et al., 2025) reimagines clinical psychology's contribution to physical rehabilitation. By integrating dispositional mindfulness into post-surgical care, psychologists can work alongside physiotherapists, surgeons, and occupational therapists to promote holistic recovery.

Meanwhile, research on *dark triad traits, motivation, mood, and exercise dependence* (Rathilal & van Niekerk, 2025) on *inclusive or empowering leadership in hybrid workplaces* (Mohase et al., 2025) and Empowering Leadership, Playful Work Design, and Work Engagement (Peral & Weitz, 2025) speaks directly to corporate wellbeing, leadership development, and workplace policy, fields that have traditionally been dominated by business disciplines but benefit enormously from psychological science.

Collectively, these examples dismantle the myth that psychology's value begins and ends with professional registration. They show psychology's contributions to refugee mental health initiatives, co-designing of artificial intelligence (AI)-based rehabilitation tools, shaping corporate leadership cultures, informing national violence prevention strategies, and designing community resilience frameworks. The discipline's relevance is everywhere, but only if we teach our students to look beyond the box. Let me be clear in that I'm not advocating to undermine the psychologist registration categories or the scope of practice but rather to request that academics and graduates think more creatively about the skill set that psychology degrees provide and how these can be put to use outside of the traditional categories of psychologist registration.

We owe it to our students to name this truth plainly: scope-of-practice categories are regulatory tools, not career destinies. They cannot and must not define the limits of what it means to 'be' a

psychologist. If we continue to teach as though the only worthy endpoint is professional registration, we are complicit in gatekeeping that stifles potential, slows innovation, and limits psychology's contribution to society. Our role as educators, researchers, and practitioners is to help graduates recognise that psychology is not a closed box; it is a launchpad into countless avenues for social impact, innovation, and change.

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