INTRODUCING AN INTEREST GROUP

Inside-out outside-in prison experiences and communities

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I asked the prison psychologist sitting in front of me, ‘Do you know of any prisoner that became a psychologist?’ ‘No’, she answered. ‘Well, you are looking at one . . . Bongi Mdakane, PsySSA Congress, 2013: ‘A day in the life of the South African offender’.

The incarceration of offenders has been used as the dominant form of judicial sentence to address the objectives of punishment and ultimately rehabilitate offenders. However, with recidivism estimated at approximately 70 percent, correctional centres in South Africa and beyond are faced with serious challenges. To help remedy these this project aims to create societal awareness around factors leading to recidivism and argues that purposeless incarceration has the intrinsic ability to desensitise habitual offenders which in turn leads to imprisonment losing its deterrent and rehabilitative value. The study is based on interviews with offenders that were analysed thematically. The broader context of the risk factors associated with the inclination to relapse is identified and isolated. Disrupting these interactional patterns carries the potential to shift the composition of the systems of which offenders form a part. For example, there are many offenders whose lives can transcend their immediate circumstances but because many support structures in prisons (whether psychological or educational) are either under-utilised or have depleted resources, it is not uncommon to expect a vicious cycle of reoffending. It is suggested that offender rehabilitation and transformation are not unobtainable constructs. Rather, comprehending the prisoners’ lifeworlds and keeping a focus on their strengths and healthy behaviours should be the cornerstone of interventions. This also requires the recognition that among those imprisoned there is an immense wealth of talent and potential abilities and that these should not go to waste.

Abstract: A day in the life of the South African offender – Bongi Mdakane
Romeo Palakatsela, Carien du Plessis, Sarah Uren, Elliot Masemola and Bongi Mdakane. Other members of the group include Janeen Prinsloo, Nandisa Tushini and Lilla van der Walt from Department of Correctional Services, Sally John from McCord Hospital and Edna Freinkel from the READucate trust.

The interest group links with the ‘Student publications imagined’ initiative in the Department of Psychology at Unisa, and aims to serve as a network and knowledge repository for anybody in the network of communities that deal with prisons and prison issues. More specifically, inside-out outside-in is a loose, inter-disciplinary grouping of South Africans interested in issues relating to prison experiences and communities. The group is not directly involved in any projects, but exists to share knowledge and experiences about projects, organisations, research, and theories. Essentially, this group wants to work with others to create a map of research, practice, role players and other relevant information regarding prisons. We are particularly focused on initiatives that cross the boundaries between the inside and outside of prisons and that deal with the connections and inter-dependencies between inside and out. 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.
We had the wonderful opportunity to present at the 2013 PsySSA Congress during a round table discussion session as part of the Scholarly Development Series and we received valuable feedback and a vast amount of interest. Our presentation was followed by Bongi’s presentation ‘A day in the life of the South African offender’. As part of his prize for winning one of the awards for best paper presentation at the Southern African Students’ Psychology conference, Bongi was invited to present at the 2013 PsySSA congress. Bongi also received great feedback and really stimulated robust discussion with his presentation at PsySSA. The inside-out outside-in presentation formed part of the Scholarly Development series of sessions as it was started as one of the Some student publications imagined initiative of the Department of Psychology at Unisa. This initiative aims to bridge the gap between the inside and the outside of psychology as a profession. The metaphor of inside-out, outside-in applies to psychology in the sense that as a psychology student, there is the perception of a very exclusive ‘inner’ circle of worthy academics and scholars. This group has the exclusive right to publish, to teach and to contribute. The student publications imagined initiative aims to bridge this gap between student and scholar, and wants to enable and encourage students to actively participate not only in robust discussions, but also to contribute to research and publications.

Various other projects in the Department of Psychology form part of this initiative, including: New Voices in Psychology (www.newvoicesinpsychology.co.za), People behind the papers (www.peoplebehindthepapers.co.za), Southern African Students’ Psychology conference (www.studentsconference.co.za) and also a book published by Unisa Community Psychology students, Some Communities Imagined (www.somecommunities.co.za).

Currently the group has a website, an interactive Whatsapp group, an email list and we would also present sporadic talks on subjects of relevance. For any further information or to join the group, please contact Carien du Plessis at admin@insideoutoutsidein.co.za. Also, please visit our website at www.insideoutoutsidein.co.za.

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Pictures were taken by Leana Meiring.
BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Carien du Plessis obtained her BA degree in Psychology and Criminology from the University of Pretoria in 2011, after which she completed her Honours in Psychology at Stellenbosch University. She is currently completing her MA Research Consultation degree at Unisa. Her research interests include health and pain, scholarly development and criminology.