

### **What's in a Name? Reflections at a Milestone Moment in African Safety Promotion**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

*The year 2020 marked 19 years since African Safety Promotion: A Journal of Injury and Violence Prevention (ASP) was launched. In this reflective account, I describe selected aspects of the journal's reach and published contents, with reference to the founding impulse and aims that shaped its vision and trajectory over almost two decades. Even though ASP was successful in its aim of attracting contributions that support the development of public health-oriented injury and violence prevention science, it did not gain the requisite traction with respect to its intention to serve as an Africa-centred dialogical space. Several factors appear to have influenced ASP's substantive trajectory, identity and progression, and the subsequent decision to change its name.*

**Keywords:** Africa; Knowledge; Safety; Science

#### **INTRODUCTION**

In July 2020, *African Safety Promotion: A Journal of Injury and Violence Prevention* (ASP) celebrated its 19<sup>th</sup> anniversary, with the collective that is currently leading the journal, resolving to adopt a new name for it, namely *Social and Health Sciences* (SaHS). The name change embodies an epistemic shift and a strategic reorientation aimed at deepening the scope, reach and appeal of the journal, while making a renewed commitment to activist scholarship. Responsive to the contemporary epistemological

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moment, co-editors Nick Malherbe and Ashley van Niekerk (2020, pp. 3–4) explain that the journal is a space for

*theoretical, empirical, applied and policy submissions on such topics as: violence in its multiple forms; the structural and social determinants of health, safety and peace; injury, health and safety promotion interventions; community engagement; health and safety economics; health and safety systems research; and knowledge production in the social and health sciences.*

While the name change does not imply a complete departure from the founding intentions of ASP, it does signal a call to reconsider thinking, research and writing practices in the social and health sciences in Africa and the global South more broadly. Van Niekerk and Malherbe (2020, p. 6) consider the renaming to be an act of academic insurgency, directed at containing and resisting dominant modes of knowledge, and promoting writings that concentrate on “understanding a social world in flux so that we can begin contributing to the development of a healthier, more equal and just world”. The act of renaming is an epistemic intervention which seeks to catalyse the foundational aims of the journal.

Drawing on my positionality as the founding editor and my subsequent role on the editorial board, I offer a few thoughts on the initiating aims and vision underlying the establishment of the journal, as well as the selection of the name *African Safety Promotion*. I describe the reasons for attaching ‘African’ to ‘Safety Promotion’, focus on the inspirations and challenges that marked my experiences during the formative years of the journal, and share a few rudimentary observations on parts of ASP’s thinking and record with respect to its original aims.

## FORMATIVE IMPULSES AND AIMS

ASP was initiated as an integral component of the work of the Institute for Social and Health Sciences (ISHS) at the University of South Africa (Unisa) and the Presidential Lead Programme on Violence and Injuries, launched in 2001, and jointly coordinated by Unisa and the South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC). The lead programme attempted to blend ISHS’s critical community psychology and theoretical orientation with SAMRC’s public health perspectives on injury and violence prevention research. The Programme reasoned that public health’s emphasis on the population as a unit of analysis, demography and epidemiology, mixed methods and prevention, could – through synergistic connections with critical community psychology’s emphasis on process and social dynamics, collective

relations, social justice, and participatory forms of change – generate multidisciplinary orientations to injury and violence prevention (see Butchart & Kruger, 2001). Wedded to such ideas of blending disciplinary traditions and methods, ASP was imagined as a vehicle to give substance to activist scholarship aimed at centring research, theories and practices situated within the multiple and sociocultural contexts within and experiences of Africa.

ASP's vision was organised around two interrelated aims:

*1) Adopting the logico-empirical reasoning of the public health perspective, the journal aimed to attract contributions that focused on the magnitude, risks, patterns and causation profiles of injuries and violence on the African continent. It sought to break the reliance on data produced elsewhere, and to support continent-wide empirical work that was alert to contextual particularities and responsive to the call to develop the regional injury and violence prevention sciences. The public health case for a coordinated and an evidence-based response to injury and violence depended on data-driven trends observed in other parts of the world. Much of what we knew about the magnitude, patterns and risks of injuries and violence was based on data produced in Euro-American contexts.*

*2) Dissatisfied and troubled by the persistent influences of dominant ways of creating knowledges about injury and violence, ASP was defined as a dialogical space for scholarship that would draw on Africa-situated knowledges, and the continent's socio-historical and structural multiplicities and particularities. Within this aim, ASP was framed as a medium through which to dislodge the dominance of journals from the global North, which privilege northern intellectual thought, priorities and research interests. Hence, Africa was understood as a multitudinous geographical location and a dynamic meaning-making terrain, while ASP was conceived of as an Africa-centred publication for situated scholarship on the theories, methods and practices of safety, borne out of diverse experiences on the continent.*

ASP was viewed as but one critical element of a complex organisational scaffolding which offers resistance to the dominance and generation of decolonial knowledges and practices. With the niche area of transnational collaborative research, a critical mass of scholar-activists with a shared commitment to centring African and southern experiences and priorities as well as creating fora for regular, robust intellectual exchanges, were perceived as the other critical elements of the organisational scaffolding and arrangements. In the spirit of this grand vision and intention, ASP invited contributions on the social determinants of violence and injury that theorised explanations beyond the behavioural-structural binaries and individual causation by engaging with the problematics underlying the depoliticisation and

secularisation of knowledge. Whereas the depoliticisation process manufactures science as ideologically neutral, secularisation separates the metaphysical from the material, and contradicts the interconnected ways in which the majority of the earth's people make sense of and navigate the world (Seedat, 2002). Perhaps naïve and not fully alert to the constraining influences of the epistemological and methodological claims underlying the public health approach (Stevens et al., 2003), in the inaugural issue of ASP, Seedat (2002) and Van Niekerk and Duncan (2002) suggested that the public health approach lends itself to multidisciplinary enquiry and research, as well as preventative actions. The public health logic that moves from, to and between magnitude and risks determination and causation, experimentation of 'what works' and large-scale intervention implementation, was assumed to be appropriate and relevant for according substance to the vision and objectives of the journal.

In hindsight, we now understand – notwithstanding the merits of the measurement logic and the emphasis on prediction and control – that the public health approach is embedded in a larger system of dominant ways of comprehending reality, and that the discourses of public health may sometimes replace (if not displace) social justice and critical perspectives on violence and injury. This critique is not to be taken as a dismissal of public health approaches. Rather, it is a reflection of how the collective associated with the establishment of ASP had not considered the ways in which empirical data following the measurement logic may be mobilised to depoliticise the work of injury and violence prevention, and delink safety promotion from social justice struggles that may conceptualise the social drivers of violence and injury as human rights issues and as constitutive of structural violence. Unlike what we had claimed in the inaugural issue of the journal (Seedat 2002; Van Niekerk & Duncan, 2002), the public health perspective is not a *tabula rasa* or an open system of thinking and making knowledge (Stevens et al., 2003). It is integral to the outcome of an entire architecture of knowledge-making, founded on Cartesian philosophy and the claim that logico-empiricism is the only valid approach to comprehending reality and social, economic, psychological and health phenomena. Cartesian-inspired ideas of science privilege rationality as the pinnacle of comprehension, frame the individual as the knowing subject, and approach knowledge-making as an individualised, internal cognitive process of self-dialogue and self-reflection. Such ideas of science tend to be antithetical and antagonistic to philosophies of the South that comprehend ontology and epistemology in relational terms; emphasise the spatial and temporal dimensions of understanding reality; and define the making of knowledge as a social process involving communal, cosmological and spiritual connections (Grosfoguel, 2013).

## THOUGHTS ON ASP'S (DIS)CONTENTS

For a period of 19 years, ASP produced 18 volumes comprising 33 issues in total, including the last issue published in 2020. The first volume was published as issue 1 in 2002, and as issue 2 in 2003. This production record was consistent with the aim of producing one issue of the journal during the first two years, prior to progressing to two issues annually from the third year. In the main, ASP managed to produce two issues per annum, aside from lapses in 2005, 2017 and 2019 when, due to the low submission rate, only one issue was published each year. Another exception was in 2006, when volume 4 was organised and published as three issues to accommodate a special issue containing peer-reviewed proceedings from the 6<sup>th</sup> World Conference on Injury Prevention and Safety Promotion, which was held in South Africa.

There were substantial variations in the scope, quality and number of contributions per issue. Despite the Africa-wide planned focus, the reach and authorship base of ASP was dominated by a preponderance of South African contributions. ASP's aim of attracting critical writings, boundary-crossing analyses, and studies on the social determinants of injuries and violence and intervention contents and mechanisms, also gained limited traction. During the period 2002–2020, ASP published a total of 173 articles. Many of the contributions were of an empirical nature (n=79), followed by reviews (n=31), theoretical contributions (n=24), commentaries (n=18), critical studies (n=15) and intervention descriptions (n=6). The 79 empirical studies were distributed evenly between those that employed quantitative (n=32) and qualitative (n=30) methods respectively. The minority of empirical studies used mixed methods (n=16), and in one empirical paper the methods were unspecified. Over the 19 years, ASP featured several special issues led by guest editors who brought a concentrated focus to bear on subject areas such as traffic safety, child injuries and safety, diversity in social action, gender violence, youth development and transformation, and symbolic violence.

A range of factors may explain ASP's mixed record in terms of its publication targets as well as the patterns marking the contributor base and type of articles submitted and published. During its formative years and at different points in its lifespan, as is the case with fledging journals (see Ngobeni, 2012; Bickton et al., 2019), ASP experienced challenges in attracting quality contributions as well as the requisite number of submissions to assure the production of two issues per annum. Oftentimes, submissions received from emerging writers did not fulfil the conceptual, methodological, editorial and technical expectations of peer review. Inordinate institutional pressures placed on researchers to meet

specified publication targets, as well as the financial incentivisation of peer-reviewed articles, may have contributed to practices that emphasise volume over quality. Noting the challenges faced by health science journals in Africa (Bickton et al., 2019), I suggest that in the absence of support and capacitation for authorship and academic writing, it is possible that emerging writers in particular, facing multiple rejections from journals based in the North, may turn to journals such as ASP as a third or even fifth option. Emerging writers may select journals such as ASP expecting sympathetic reviews, major conceptual support, and assistance with editing and technical matters. When invited, established writers, pressured by institutional demands to publish in reputable, high-impact and ‘international’ journals, tended to be reluctant to submit to ASP, especially during its first decade. Such reluctance is understandable when we consider that established writers carry massive teaching responsibilities and increased institutional demands to secure substantial research grants, supervise large cohorts of postgraduate students and fulfil managerial responsibilities. The labour and time required to support the development and sustainability of new and emerging journals based in the South are disincentivised within current higher educational regimes that emphasise accreditation and ranking for purposes of funding and research subsidies.

ASP, like other journals attempting a counter-hegemonic orientation, rely on a deep labour of love, and the extraordinary commitment of small groups of peers and colleagues who volunteer their time and energy to keep the journal afloat. In a context where there was – and still is – a lack of dedicated resources and editorial support for managing, processing, reviewing and editing submissions, and when the volunteer core is under pressure from other teaching, community engagement and research work commitments, ASP suffered lapses in its administration and management, which had an impact on its publication deadlines. Further reduced library budgets impeded the purchasing and circulation of southern journals such as ASP, which have small print runs (see Ngobeni, 2012).

That most of ASP’s contributions and authors hailed from South Africa may be the outcome of the editorial team’s geographical location. South Africa is ASP’s administrative and editorial hub and, as such, the journal may be most visible and better known within this country. The limited success in obtaining a wider Africa-centred contributor base may point to weaknesses in the journal’s communication strategy and outreach activities. It seems that ASP may have needed to reconsider its communication strategy and target its calls to clearly identify trans-disciplinary, multidisciplinary and multi-country audiences across the continent.



While the large proportion of contributions that covered empirical studies resonated with ASP's aim to encourage the development of an Africa-centred safety promotion science base, most of the published studies – despite variations in the methods used – concentrated on the magnitude, patterns and/or risks of (un)intentional injuries across diverse sites and circumstances. A minority dealt with intervention and evaluation studies, and critical perspectives on injury and violence prevention and safety promotion. One may speculate that the concentrated focus on magnitude and risk determination may be indicative of larger trends in the public health injury and violence prevention sector, both across the continent and globally. Worldwide, public health studies on injury and violence have tended to coalesce around magnitude, risk determination and causation. The shift towards investing material and intellectual resources in public health-oriented implementation and evaluation studies is a very recent development across different parts of the world and constitutes a response to growing public and state demands for empirical information on effective interventions.

The low proportion of critically framed contributions may be reflective of the contributors' research priorities. Perhaps many of those who elected to submit to ASP have backgrounds and interests in the public health and measurement sciences and are thus less inclined towards critical work, which is more a mark of the human and social sciences. An analysis of the authors' institutional affiliations and disciplinary backgrounds may help to explain this trend that leans towards empirical analysis. Another plausible explanation is that the editorial collective had not undertaken a focused drive to encourage and obtain critical submissions from potential contributors located in the human and social sciences.

## CONCLUSION

ASP's aim, to serve as a publication space for public health-oriented injury and violence research and thinking, as part of a larger agenda to grow the empirical base for prevention on the continent, seems to have gained traction. Despite the lack of institutionalised funding for editorial management and administration, the expressed hesitancy by established authors to consider the journal, and possibly the expedient ways in which some emerging and established writers engaged with the journal, ASP continued as an Africa-based publication. Notwithstanding variations in the size and composition of each issue, the production of 18 volumes comprising 33 issues is a noteworthy marker of sustained presence. The sustained presence is attributed to the commitment and labour of love enacted by the small editorial cohort, and those who volunteered to occasionally guest edit special issues, as well as the authors who selected the journal for their publications. For the purposes of sustaining and growing

its reach, SaHS may consider entering into arrangements with a university-based publishing service that provides editorial training, online manuscript management, and marketing and communication support (see Ngobeni, 2012).

ASP's 19-year presence provides a platform for SaHS to continue and further animate Africa- and South-centred thinking, writing, research and scholarship, that may be located within the social and health sciences. The adoption of the name *Social and Health Sciences* is understood to form part of a renewed course of action aimed at making a break from, and replacing, the epistemic logics, methodologies and articulations that (re)create dominant narratives and knowledges about phenomena that traverse the social and health sciences (Malherbe & Van Niekerk, 2020). The cohort of activist scholars driving such a renewal may need to consider and forge innovative and collaborative strategies for attracting contributions outside of South Africa, as well as submissions that include a focus on intervention and evaluation studies, and elaborate on critical thinking on the expanded thematic areas of work that the journal aims to cover (see Malherbe & Van Niekerk, 2020). Earlier and recent advances in decolonial thought (De Sousa Santos, 2018), inclusive of the seminal concepts of coloniality of power, knowledge and being (e.g., Biko, 2004; Maldonado-Torres, 2007; 2016), and a repertoire of decolonising practices (see Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 2009; Wynter, 2003) constitute a small part of the large body of analytical resources that SaHS may critically engage and mobilise, to deepen its founding decolonising impulse and aims, formulated almost two decades ago, and refreshed and restated in its 2020 inaugural issue.

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