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Professor Cheryl de la Rey honoured by Rhodes University for her contribution to social change in the country

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Prof Cheryl de la Rey delivers the fifth annual Psychology and Social Change Project Award lecture, which was hosted by Rhodes University□s Department of Psychology.

Debating the nature and role of psychology in South Africa's higher education institutions and society in general, Prof Cheryl de la Rey, Vice-Chancellor and Principal of the University of Pretoria, called for a new approach to the discipline which would be better suited to addressing the problems experienced by millions of South Africans.

Prof De la Rey is this year's recipient of the Rhodes University Psychology Department's annual Psychology and Social Change Project Award which she received in Grahamstown last week. She also delivered the fifth annual Psychology and Social Change Project Award lecture, which was hosted by Rhodes University's Department of Psychology.

The Psychology and Social Change Project Award is presented to prominent members of the psychology community in South Africa for going beyond the traditional bounds of the discipline and contributing, through intellectual, professional and personal labour, to social change in South Africa. The recipients are considered to be role models for psychology students, encouraging them to think deeply about the role of psychology in understanding as well as facilitating social change. Last year's recipient was Deputy Minister of Higher Education and Training, Professor Hlengiwe Buhle Mkhize.

In Prof De la Rey's lecture, entitled "Psychology: private – public good?", she provided an overview of the trends within South African psychology over the last 40 years and reflected on the current debate in higher education pertaining to the role of psychology in South Africa. A dominant theme within psychology is the challenge to its relevance as a discipline in a country ravaged by widespread inequality, said Prof De la Rey.

"How does one reconcile the advocacy we do for more funding of our courses when at the same time we live in a country with such huge deficits," she challenged the audience, suggesting that, while much attention is paid to interrogating the private good of psychology, not much attention is devoted to understanding its role in relation to the public good.

"The question I hear people asking is whether psychology is addressing the socio-political concerns of the day and whether psychology is responding to the national priorities as set out by government," she said.

This quest for understanding the relevance of the discipline has resulted in a dominance of applied psychology within the field, which Prof De la Rey described as comprising "little more than descriptions of individual lives".

This approach is thin on theory-based research and tends to focus on the individual as the primary unit of analysis, thus retaining a core focus on the private aspect of psychology. This, Prof De la Rey said, is resulting in a dearth of psychological literature and analysis equipped to confront problematic aspects of South African society.

"We have to move past description and produce research that debunks the binaries. We need to develop an approach that combines applied and basic research, theory and practice, individual and community and

private and public to begin to address the challenges facing us in this country," she said.

According to Prof Michael Guilfoyle, Head of the Department of Psychology at Rhodes University, Prof De la Rey continues to challenge our understanding of psychology in both the South African post-apartheid and the global environment.

"There is an overarching sense of perspective that underpins her work. She is a leader of whom psychologists can be proud," he added.

Prof De la Rey has published books and several journal articles on psychology. She has done extensive work on gender issues, leadership and higher education policy, sits on several national committees and, among other leadership positions, is a member of the strategy and planning committee of the International Council for Science.

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