

ON BECOMING A CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST: THE EXPERIENCES OF INITIALLY UNSUCCESSFUL APPLICANTS

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ABSTRACT

The study explored the lived experiences of students enrolled in psychology master's clinical programmes who had previously been unsuccessful applicants. The study sought to establish whether qualities of growth may have manifested during the aftermath of being unsuccessful and how this may have affected the participants' success. The study adopted a qualitative research method and data were collected by means of individual semi-structured interviews. The data produced 7 superordinate themes, *Choosing psychology and undergraduate experience; master's selection and the first attempt; rejection and the process; preparation and the second attempt; "rejection" remains a constant; accepted but am I good-enough; and acceptance and the new insights*. The process of becoming a psychologist, which is filled with uncertainty and growth, resonates with the eventual dynamics psychologists must grapple with in training and in practice. Essentially, being unsuccessful creates a void, an anxiety that unsuccessful applicants should process and, hopefully, accept. The curious paradox is that it may be the very uncertainty of becoming a psychologist trainee that may allow anxious and doubtful applicants become open and reflective psychologists.

Keywords: Clinical psychology, Master's selection, Posttraumatic growth

CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY IN SOUTH AFRICA

Despite the tremendous political changes since apartheid fell in 1994 (Ahmed & Pillay, 2004; Rock & Hamber, 1994; Suffla & Seedat, 2004) and the response of the psychology



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profession to the burgeoning needs of the country (Cooper & Nicholas, 2012; Kagee, 2014), entry into the psychology profession in South Africa remains a complex and challenging process. Acceptance into a master's training programme is fraught with challenges, disappointments, and the elusive concept of life experiences, an integral part of being selected (Ahmed & Pillay, 2004; Hurter, 2009). This study focuses on the experiences of South African psychology students in coping with an initial unsuccessful attempt to gain access to professional training.

The profession of clinical psychology in South Africa is less than 40 years old (Pillay, Ahmed, & Bawa, 2013) and is yet to meet the challenge of diversifying the racial representation of psychology (Mayekiso, Strydom, Jithoo, & Katz, 2004; Pillay, Ahmed, & Bawa, 2013). There are approximately 18 master's training programmes through which one can become a psychologist in South Africa (Kagee & Lund, 2012) in one of five registration categories, namely, Clinical Psychology, Counselling Psychology, Educational Psychology, Research Psychology, and Industrial Psychology (HPCSA, 2013).

Over the past few decades, psychology has become a widely popular field of study, with an increasing enrolment of psychology undergraduate students at South African universities (Cooper & Nicholas, 2012; Kaschula, 2002; Richter, Griesel, Durrheim, Wilson, Surendorff, & Asafo-Agyei, 1998). Universities are usually inundated with applications for master's level training, with an annual average of 150 per annum for each programme (Pillay et al., 2013). Yet a very small proportion of these applicants is accepted into training programmes because of the limited number of spaces available for training in accredited programmes. While some studies have given attention to students enrolled in clinical master's programme, no research focus has been directed to students who have not been accepted or those who were previously unsuccessful and who have subsequently been selected.

PSYCHOLOGY AS A PROFESSION

Becoming a psychologist is described by Kottler and Swartz (2004, 1) as a "rite of passage". It is challenging, regardless of where one trains, whether locally or internationally (Manganyi, 2013). Training involves acquiring new skills, attitudes and identity in the context of psychology (Kottler & Swartz, 2004). Moreover, the process of becoming a psychologist has been framed as being "summoned by an inner voice" to help others help themselves (Heimann cited in Mander, 2004, 165). However, as philosophically attractive the calling may sound, the training is filled with academic, professional, and personal difficulties. The personal experiences of candidates are characterised by anxiety, isolation, depression, and self-doubt about being good-enough to become a psychologist (Kottler & Swartz, 2004).

The motivation to become a psychologist can be attributed to certain factors of personal character, values, and interests. Research suggests that early familial and parental

interactions may also contribute significantly to deciding to become a psychologist (DiCaccavo, 2002; Hayes, 1996). Early childhood traumas or emotional deprivation resulting in individuals adopting parentified roles in their family (DiCaccavo, 2002) may draw these individuals to the helping profession. Parentification occurs when children adopt the role and duties of the parent, ensuring safety and security in the family. The child negates their own needs or feelings and considers the needs of others above their own well-being (DiCaccavo, 2002).

The current study has its genesis in my (DB; first author) own personal experience of only being successful on the third attempt. After working through and reflecting on each unsuccessful application, was I able to experience the personal growth of participating in such a highly challenging process. In each unsuccessful attempt, I engaged in a process of review, I gained more personal insights and felt more knowledgeable about professional training in psychology. Every attempt and failure provided new insights, which I was able to use for the next application process. However, every attempt and failure was also accompanied by anxiety, self-doubt, despondency and much disappointment. With the help of a supportive family, discussions with friends and a continual process of self-reflection, I approached the next application period with new growth of experience and approach. In essence, I approached subsequent selections with more openness and in an amenable position to accept the outcome irrespective of the uncertainty thereof.

Research has been conducted on different facets of psychology training in South Africa, including the nature of the selection process within a narrative context (Kaschula, 2002); the process of master's level training programmes (Kottler & Swartz, 2004); the experiences of the first community service clinical psychologist (Pillay & Harvey, 2006); Apartheid and post-apartheid intern clinical psychology training in South Africa (Pillay, 2009); the use of specific psychometric assessment measures in selecting master's students (Hurter, 2009) and intern clinical psychologists' experiences of their training and internships (Pillay & Johnston, 2011). Scant research has focused on the process of becoming a psychologist and the experiences of the unsuccessful applicants. Hence this study endeavours to contribute to the current body of knowledge concerning psychology as a profession in South Africa by highlighting the adjustment experiences of trainees who were initially not selected.

MASTER'S SELECTION PROCESS

Psychology departments have a challenging task in selecting appropriate applicants for master's training, particularly given the history of psychology and apartheid in South Africa (Rock & Hamber, 1994). Furthermore, in light of the history of psychology and race, it is important for selection committees to ensure that the selection criteria allow merit access, in order to address the needs of all South Africans (Hurter, 2009; Kaschula, 2002; Mayekiso et al., 2004).

The process of master's selections, particularly in clinical psychology, has seen a history of different methods and requirements used to select appropriate candidates. Selection committees have relied on various methods like psychometric instruments and interviews (Hurter, 2009; Mander, 2004). However, university training programmes still consider academic ability as the initial screening step (Hurter, 2009). After initial shortlisting, the selection process will involve individual and panel interviews (Hurter, 2009), probably the most crucial aspect of the selection process. Interviewers screen for various personal characteristics such as a congruent sense of self, academic strength, empathy, emotional and cognitive reflectivity, and curiosity (Chippindall & Watts, 1999; Kottler & Swartz, 2004; Mander, 2004; Wheeler, 2002). There is also attention on selecting a candidate with the capacity to acquire knowledge about psychological difficulties and the psychological skills to help others (Mander, 2004). Wheeler's (2002) consideration of whether therapists are born or trained highlights the fine balance for selectors in assessing both candidates' inherent character traits and their likelihood to succeed in training. Applicants are evaluated based on their life narrative and their capacity to self-reflect on developmental processes, and whether past difficulties may create hindrances in training or practice (Mander, 2004). Research indicates that personal character is a primary tool for therapeutic change, before therapeutic techniques (Chippindall & Watts, 1999). Other criteria pertain to the candidate's projected ability to handle the intense training and the responsibility of providing competent psychological services to individuals, couples, groups, families, and communities (Goldberg, cited in Kaschula, 2002).

Each university accredited for master's level training in psychology offers its own unique training programme in alignment with the specifications of the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA), with its own selection procedures reflecting departmental competency and ethos (Kaschula, 2002). Selection panels are aware of the high level of anxiety and stress that candidates experience during selection and endeavour to accommodate candidates as much as possible. Notwithstanding the competitiveness and anxiety, master's selection remains a daunting challenge for all applicants.

Given the high volume of applications and limited number of available positions, there are invariably a high number of unsuccessful applicants. According to Kaschula (2002), this is due to a very high standard in training programmes, limited internship sites, shortage of staff capacity, and specialised training. Due to the high level of competition to attain a position in a master's class, a number of students apply to various institutions to increase the possibility of success (Kaschula, 2002).

The literature devotes little attention to unsuccessful students, and less to the experiences of those who are eventually admitted after several attempts. The purpose of the current study was to explore how students experienced recovery from being unsuccessful in a master's selection process. Conceptualisations within a posttraumatic

growth framework (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1996, 2004) were used to explore the participants' lived experiences in recovering from the stressful selection process.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Posttraumatic growth (hereafter referred to as PTG) can be described as positive change within a person after a highly challenging or stressful life event. PTG focuses more on the possible positive – rather than negative – outcomes of trauma (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1996, 2004). PTG may be seen as an expression of the influence of the positive psychology movement. However, the link between suffering and personal growth is evident throughout the writings of various philosophers and psychologists (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2004).

In conceptualising the personal narratives of the participants, the researcher – and participants – endeavoured to revisit the challenging experiences of being unsuccessful. Challenging life experiences can be turning points, as people may critically re-evaluate past values or lifestyles. This process may drive the individual to a higher or improved level of functioning (Kaminer, 2006). The terms 'crisis', 'stressful life event', and 'trauma' are used interchangeably in the study, as approximate synonymous, although not all stressful life events result in a clinically diagnosable disorder such as Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. The researcher is mindful of these labels and of the possible implications of pathologising life experiences as traumatic.

There are three broad categories of perceived benefits of PTG: (a) a change in self-perception; (b) a deeper appreciation of close relationships; and (c) a change in one's personal life philosophy. The suggestion is that negative experiences may lead to defensiveness. However, the psychologically intact person may respond to a stressful event in a less distorted manner, rather experiencing growth (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2004). This may require certain factors such as social support and education or financial stability to increase the possibility of PTG (Borawski, 2007). Nevertheless, it may not only be the existence of these positive factors that fosters growth, but also how the person uses them to their benefit (Kashdan & Kane, 2010).

The study explored how unsuccessful applicants experienced a master's selection process, and what elements of PTG could be identified in the experiences of the participants. The study used Calhoun and Tedeschi's (1996, 2004) qualitative concepts of posttraumatic growth as a theoretical framework. The theory allowed the researcher to conceptualise any significant factors of a crisis and qualities of growth that may be congruent with posttraumatic growth.

Primary Aim

The aim of the research was to explore the lived experiences of previously unsuccessful psychology master's applicants who are now in training as psychology master's students.

In addition, the study seeks to establish whether qualities of growth occurred during the aftermath of being initially unsuccessful and how this growth may have affected the participants in being successful.

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

This study was qualitative in nature (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; 2005) using PTG as a theoretical framework. The researcher used Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis to interpret the research data.

Purposive sampling identified five M1 students in professional training in clinical psychology at two universities in the Western Cape, all of whom were accepted on their second or subsequent attempts. However, delayed feedback from one of the universities limited the data to only two participants. As this would not allow for saturation, a case study method was adjusted to the research methodology and used only to position the data, not to interpret it (Yin, 2009).

Ethical Consideration

The researcher (DB) recognised the sensitivity of the topic under study, and was mindful to protect the rights and privileges of the participants. Pseudonyms were used and no mention of university names was made to uphold anonymity. The researcher also consulted and adhered to the university's ethical guidelines and ethics committee's resolutions on conducting the study. The assistance of the student counselling centres at both universities was solicited for any referrals after the interviews. No referral was, however, necessary. All data were kept on the researcher's personal computer under password protection, and the identities were changed to protect the anonymity of each participant.

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted by means of individual English or Afrikaans semi-structured interviews with the identified participants that covered three broad areas: (a) The background and current status of the student's life and experiences in professional psychology training; (b) their experiences of master's selections and the experiences of being unsuccessful; and (c) how they coped with being unsuccessful, the consequences, and what helped them transform the disappointment.

Data Analysis

The researcher used Interpretive Phenomenology Analysis (Smith, 2007; Smith, Flower, & Larkin, 2009) which focuses on the lived experience of the individual and

how they make sense of the experience (Eatough & Smith, 2008). The interviews were transcribed verbatim and the findings are given as a summation of the superordinate themes of convergence and divergences of the two cases.

Trustworthiness

Guba and Lincoln (1994) identified four steps to ensure the trustworthiness of qualitative research. The researcher upheld the trustworthiness of the study by being mindful of the following steps: *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability*, and *conformability*. Shenton (2004) highlights the importance of researcher reflexivity throughout the research process. Researchers need to be cognisant and honest about their intrusive subjectivities and need to show evidence of reflexivity throughout the research process. Reflexivity was demonstrated during research supervision and detailed recording of the research process, data collection, and data analysis.

Reflexivity

The research process has not only been an academic exercise, it has also been a process of personal reflection. There were times during the interviews and the analysis of the data, that I (DB) felt a desire not to be a researcher but to identify with the participants' narratives and experiences. I was reminded to let the participants' narratives express their own experiences and not project mine on theirs. Supervision provided an invaluable process to remain critical during the research process. Despite the logistical pressures of doing research, the major reward of this process has been personal growth and insight. The following statement made by a participant succinctly captures what the process of becoming a psychologist essentially is for many students of psychology:

“...it's sort of like becoming a parent, you can read all the books that you want, but I don't think that there is anything that can prepare you for the actual thing. I mean at least thinking about it is important...”

FINDINGS

The seven superordinate themes identified in the two case analyses are discussed in chronological order as they emerged from the data following the interview guide.

Choosing psychology and undergraduate experience

Thembi and Susan (pseudonyms) are both master's students in clinical psychology at a university in the Western Cape. Both were previously unsuccessful in applying for a position in a master's training programme. They expressed an early interest in studying psychology, but had different obstacles throughout their studies. Thembi expressed an

early fascination about psychology and what a psychologist can do. This helped her to make a very firm decision to pursue psychology as a profession. Susan's curiosity was confirmed when she started studying and being in psychotherapy. She gained personal fulfilment from reading psychological literature that may have facilitated personal insights.

Thembi and Susan did not study at the same university during undergraduate studies, nor at the same time. Thembi completed her undergraduate degree in Namibia.

Susan's undergraduate psychology studies were filled with curiosity and exploration of psychology – they appeared to be highly stimulating and personally enriching.

Thembi had a somewhat different start. Her pre-selection expectations were satisfied with new experiences (*"I said it was quite different from what I expected, but I quite liked learning the theory behind it"*), but she faced institutional dilemmas regarding her course and the expected outcome of her undergraduate degree. This precipitated her feelings of apathy towards studying psychology, and temporarily influenced her process of becoming a psychologist. Her struggles may have caused an accumulative process of challenges and stressors linked to completing her studies in psychology (*"I think after four years I was a bit tired. You know after four years and the disappointment of the [registered counsellor] internship, ja."*)

The early experiences of the participants affected their processes of psychology and outlook. Susan made the decision to apply for her master's directly after doing her honours in psychology. Her third year and honours period solidified her belief that she wanted to continue her training in psychology. Yet for Thembi, by the end of her fourth year she needed a respite from all the disappointments and challenges. These experiences gave both participants different understandings filled with satisfaction and frustration.

Master's selections and the first attempt

Thembi and Susan did not have exact and reliable knowledge about what a master's selection entailed, as is the case with most students, and this proved critical. Their different approaches to selection may be linked to the difference in undergraduate training and how that informed their thinking about master's training. Susan expressed doubt about whether she would be accepted, but decided to apply nevertheless. Thembi's return to psychology after working for a few years came at the suggestion of a friend who had applied for master's the previous year.

Both participants were successfully shortlisted for interviews. Their experiences of the selection process were filled with initial anxiety and doubt. The selection procedures encompassed a variety of tasks, assessments, activities, and interviews. After the selections, both participants reported feelings of uncertainty about the possible results. It appeared that not knowing the expectations of the selection committees created a lot

of uncertainty and anxiety (“*And also, the kind of fear of being judged on whom I am...*” (Susan, p.5) Yet, both participants expressed gratitude for being shortlisted.

The selection process, especially the interviews and group tasks, evoked some personal issues from the participants, who had to answer challenging questions about themselves. The selection process is considered to be an unusual process in which participants have to communicate and share personal experiences in an unfamiliar and controlled environment while being assessed. “*I find it quite hard to talk about myself and in detail about my life..., and my life experiences to [someone] I don't know very well. Ja, so I kind of, I didn't feel very comfortable in the group task*” (Susan, p.5)

Despite their anxiety, both appeared to have managed to get through an intensive process of assessment. This reflects how psychologically intact persons may respond to stressful life experiences.

The rejection and the process

Both applicants were unsuccessful in their first application year but had different experiences of not being accepted. Susan was put on a waiting list and Thembi was unsuccessful. Despite Susan's challenging experience of the selection process, she experienced positive confirmation from the selection process and the feedback of being on the waiting list reinforced this positive experience. Susan remained on a waiting list and eventually was not accepted; consequently, the feedback she received positively affected her experience of a selection process. The feedback enabled her to be proactive and to effectively prepare for the following selection process. This may reflect the change in self-perception that Calhoun and Tedeschi (2004) refer to as one of the broad categories of change. It may have further reinforced her sense of being on the correct path by choosing psychology as a career. Thembi, on the other hand, was not placed on a waiting list and her experience of the selections and rejection seemed worse compared to Susan. Immediately after the selections, she had to travel home and only received feedback a few weeks later.

“Perhaps I wasn't ready, I sort of came to the conclusion that I wasn't ready that specific time. Looking back at it now, I'm so glad I didn't get in because I wasn't ready. [laughs]” (Thembi, p.7).

Thembi had to make significant decisions about her life and relationships. Having worked for a few years before attempting to restart her psychology career without success created a new difficulty she had to resolve using her support structures. The support of her parents, friends, and work colleagues was crucial – it allowed her to confide in others, something that did not come naturally to her. Calhoun and Tedeschi (2004) suggest a change in close relationships after difficult experiences. Thembi's experiences of a selection process may have led to a deeper appreciation for and use of

the support in her life. The two accounts show different experiences of processing the “rejection”. Yet, both resemble aspects of possible growth. Susan demonstrated a shift in her self-perception about being suitable for psychology. Thembi describes a shift in her close relationships and how she made use of the relationships as part of her growth.

Preparation and the second attempt

Both participants had to understand their experiences of “rejection”. This process resulted in gaining more practical experiences, engaging with support structures and planning for the following application round.

“I thought perhaps, in order to give me more time to get ready, and also to get back in the swing of university life, I should do an honours, ja. I think it was the best decision.” (Thembi, p.9)

Both Thembi and Susan consciously engaged in activities to facilitate their learning and growth to make them more *suitable* candidates. This process also facilitated a shift in their approach to the follow-up selections. They reported a difference in attitude about the selections – they were more confident and at ease about the process. However, despite all the effort in preparing for the second attempt, the selection process again proved challenging and anxiety-provoking. This remained constant throughout all the selections the participants attended.

“Somehow, I felt like it went horribly like from the beginning, the interviews... I kind of felt like I was digging myself into a hole” (Susan, p.8-9).

“Rejection” remains a constant

Susan’s second attempt started with hope and having recently completed the process. Yet, it turned out to be more challenging and anxiety provoking than her first experience. Regardless of the first experience and her new approach, she knew she could still be unsuccessful. It is also important to note the role and influence the selection committee members or interviewers have on the process. A participant’s experience with an interviewer depends on the interpersonal dynamics of the two individuals. The following year, Susan’s second attempt was at three universities, where she was invited for selection. At the first university, she was unsuccessful in the first selection round, whilst at the third university she was placed on a waiting list. Initially, Susan was on a waiting list at the second university and was eventually accepted at the second university.

Accepted, but am I good enough?

Susan’s experience proved to be more challenging than the first. She had to regulate her feelings of uncertainty, rejection, and demotivation during her subsequent interviews.

Being on a waiting list and eventually being offered a position created a new dynamic in Susan's process of being accepted. The second selection challenges proved to be thought-provoking for Susan's level of self-perception. She describes her active process of change in her self-perception due to the challenges of the second attempt.

"I think, even though I know for a fact I know that it is not true. There is still that idea that I am not quite good enough as the people who were accepted immediately." (Susan, p.12)

Thembi's experience of her second attempt was less challenging as she was successful in all her applications. Her approach to her second attempt was characterised by a new sense of self-perception (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2004) and confidence in her ability. The most significant change relates to Thembi as a person and how she related to other people in her life (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2004). She related that a possible reason for her first unsuccessful application could have been about her own "squeamishness" (ambivalence) about herself.

"Going from previously being that closed off person that kept everything to herself, to sort of, I mean it's not easy it doesn't come easy to me, really to see the value of developing myself. I think that this is the one, that's the essential thing I learned in 2013." (Thembi, p.9)

Here Thembi alludes to a shift in her own self-perception and, more generally, a shift in her personal philosophy. She describes a sense of acceptance of herself and, subsequently, a new sense of confidence in her own ability. She appears to be open to the experiences and possibilities of the second attempt, be it positive or negative.

Acceptance and the new insights

The process of studying psychology is undoubtedly an "emotional roller-coaster". The experiences of both participants are filled with fantasy, exploration, disappointment, doubt, hope, commitment, resilience, growth, and acceptance. Their reflections on the experience of selections gave them both new insights and understanding about themselves and the selections processes.

"You have to be in therapy during the programme. I think like to have that beforehand is good. Like have some kind of self-exploratory work beforehand." (Susan, p.14)

Susan provided crucial insights on the importance of one's own personal therapeutic space. This may allow the needed exploration of therapy itself and the processing of the person's own interpersonal dynamics before embarking on an intensive training programme in psychology. In addition, applicants need to know how emotionally exhausting a selection process can be and that affect regulation is central to managing such a highly-charged process. Lastly, selection committees and interviewers have a specific function, which may not meet the expectations of all applicants during an unusual process such as this. Thembi's reflections hold similar sentiments.

“I think, being rejected is not the end of the world, it’s an opportunity for you to explore yourself, for you to go back and think, explore who you are and take that exploration into the next time you apply... look at every rejection and every disappointment as an opportunity for you to learn and then what you’ve learned take it and use it in the next interview.” (Thembi, p.12).

These statements hold the insights both participants may not have fully comprehended before their first selection process.

DISCUSSION

The experiences of unsuccessful applicants have not yet been fully explored – particularly how they affect the process of reapplying for master’s training. The aim of the study was to explore the experiences of unsuccessful applicants on the path to becoming a psychologist. Based on the qualitative data, in the selection and re-application processes created, both participants experienced challenging life experiences and positive growth. The challenges did not pose life-threatening consequences but pressures linked to self-perceptions, personal philosophy, and personal relationships. The process of cognitively restructuring the experiences of being unsuccessful provides insight into how the participants grappled with different aspects of overcoming and acceptance. The eventual selection may not signify an end of personal challenges and possible growth. Master’s training programmes are geared to further explore personal challenges and facilitate growth (Kottler & Swartz, 2004). Essentially, applicants came to acknowledge and accept the arbitrariness of master’s selections, the perpetual possibility of “rejection”, and the emotional and personal investment selection processes require.

The experiences documented above poignantly illustrate the general sentiments of Kottler and Swartz (2004) that becoming a psychologist is an arduous process. Yet, the reflections of the participants also show elements of personal growth. The subtle differences between the two cases highlight the unique process applicants go through; challenges – personal or institutional – arose for the participants at different stages of studying psychology. Despite the uncertainties, both participants reported an early interest in psychology, which, at various stages, provided personal gain, impetus, and reinforcement to continue studying. Both Susan and Thembi reported personal experiences of growth and insight through studying psychology.

Posttraumatic growth asserts that change may occur in three broad categories: a change in self-perception, deeper appreciation of close relationships, and a change in personal life philosophy. It may be argued that both participants reported aspects of posttraumatic growth over certain periods. Thembi reported a significant change in herself and how she used her close relationships with family and friends for support after being unsuccessful, something she found previously difficult to do. Susan alluded to difficulties of not feeling “good enough” and how she is currently working through her self-doubt; her self-perception appeared to have been more challenged during the second selection process. Considering their initial beliefs about their ability and

suitability, both participants reported a change in personal philosophy and insight. Not all aspects of growth would manifest immediately, but both participants provided enough experiential evidence of growth in self-perception, interpersonal relationships and personal philosophies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Training to become a psychologist is, generally, an arduous and misconstrued process. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge the attempts of certain universities and professional bodies that uphold the integrity and transparency of the profession. The following recommendations highlight specific factors of the study and the dynamics of becoming a psychologist.

Firstly, providing feedback opportunity to unsuccessful applicants is crucial to their potential growth and processing of the experience. However, the consequences of feedback may be positive or negative; applicants' perception and understanding of feedback may be misconstrued, distorted or too affirming, which may have unintended consequences for subsequent selections. Applicants may benefit from debriefing their experience in a support group. Applicants may benefit from debriefing their experience in a support group.

Secondly, developing and accessing social support during the arduous process appears crucial to coping with and processing the feedback and interpretations of the selection outcome. In one of the cases, being in therapy was identified as very facilitative.

The sample size of the study was severely limited due to institutional challenges in obtaining consent to approach participants for the study. A larger sample size may allow for more divergent and unique perspectives, which may permit a more comprehensive exploration of experiences pertaining to the aim of the study. It may also be fascinating to explore the experiences of unsuccessful applicants still in the selection process. Notwithstanding, the data obtained from the two participants provide valuable insights into the subjective experiences of dealing with the difficulty of initially being unsuccessful and using this as an opportunity for growth to make constructive readjustments for subsequent applications.

LIMITATIONS

The design of the study together with the purposive sampling used and the limited number of participants do not allow for an in-depth description. However, the findings provide two *insiders' perspectives* of the subjective experiences, feelings, and thoughts about the process of making meaning of the challenging life events.

CONCLUSION

A specific component of becoming a psychologist is captured in the above-described narratives of personal struggle, acceptance and growth. Considering the benefits of being part of a profession that emphasises personal insight, connectedness and understanding of others and oneself, it may be important to acknowledge that most students may grow from studying psychology, but not all may be able to become a psychologist due to various reasons. Despite the limits of the sample, the study has highlighted a need for further research about coping with the selection process, particularly namely, the experiences of unsuccessful applicants (who actually represent the larger proportion of the application cohort). Further research would also add knowledge pertaining to the personal characteristics of those who eventually become psychologists despite the arduous process.

The process of becoming a psychologist, which is filled with uncertainty and growth, resonates with the eventual dynamics psychologists have to grapple with in training and in practice. Essentially, being unsuccessful creates an imbalance, an anxiety that unsuccessful applicants must process and, hopefully, make sense of. The curious paradox is that it may be the very uncertainty of becoming a psychologist that may allow anxious and doubtful applicants become open and reflective psychologists.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES



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