

Psychological Practice: Personal Drivers and Experience of Becoming a Psychologist – a Preliminary Qualitative Analysis

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Abstract

The present paper proposes to explore the personal drivers which represent the foundation for opting for a clinical psychology or psychotherapy career. In order to obtain this purpose, six psychology practitioners contributed by responding to an extensive open-answer interview guide with items formulated based on Sussman's psychodynamic work in 2007 regarding the motivations which lead to the choice of becoming a psychologist. We consider that further research regarding the personal drivers and traits involved in the choice and development as a psychologist is a subject which deserves full attention from both academics and practitioners. The implications of studying this subject and efforts in bringing validity to the findings are expected to be relevant on multiple levels: for future psychologists, for the general public and last but not least, the use of similar interviews as the one presented in the present paper is a valuable instrument for supervising programs.

Keywords: *psychological practice drivers, psychologist portrait, psychodynamic theory*

I. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

The psychology practitioner has to confront along the long term professional development process a series of challenges, both on a personal level as this process is not merely based on gathering competencies but also on improving one's self and on an interactional level as in their social encounters, psychologists face expectations of their clients or patients. Such expectations (both positive and even negative) and the perceived portrait are often inconsistent with the reality – with the actual personality structure and motivation of the psychologist but are mostly constructed based on a false image promoted mostly by the media through stereotypes (Schultz,

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2005). Francis (2003) also notices that the public perception on the psychologist proves that the discussed profession is rather misunderstood as the practitioner is constantly facing the situation in which he or she has to carefully correct such stereotypes regarding the means of approaching the patient's process.

This is one of the reasons why the motives and personality correlates of choosing to be a psychologist is a rich subject which deserves full attention from the researchers, along with the fact that the psychological intervention is known to be significantly determined by the quality of the therapeutic relationship or alliance (Lambert & Barley, 2001), therefore personal aspects regarding the choice for this type of practice should be considered and analyzed in a responsible manner.

Although it is long agreed that vocational choice is influenced by core factors such as personality, attitudes, personal experience and abilities (Roe, 1957), the fact that psychologist interact on profound levels with their clients or patients makes it mandatory to understand such factors on an as deep level as possible.

The present paper proposes to explore the personal drivers which represent the foundation for opting for a clinical psychology or psychotherapy career.

The subject has been previously studied (Murphy & Halgin, 1995), leading to the conclusion that clinical psychologists are motivated in their career choices by experienced distress during their development, desire to resolve personal problems and pursue for professional achievement and advancement opportunities.

As we might expect, the subject of influences of altruism upon choosing a profession which implies helping others has been approached (Wakefield, 1993). The author debates the idea that altruism has an egotistical basis and gathers a multidisciplinary perspective in order to make room for the proof that altruism is actually oriented towards the others in a real sense. On the other hand we should consider the complexity of the psychological practice and the fact that altruism is far from being the only main reason for choosing such a professional path. This is where the Sussman's work (2007) intervenes through a challenging and honest analysis of the motives which support the choice of becoming a psychologist. Sussman's debate is based on a psychodynamic theoretical phrame, which makes strong emphasis on the mechanisms in which the personality structure is blended with interpersonal interaction and the results of such mechanisms (Guntrip, 1995).

Therefore, Sussman (2007) offers an in-depth analysis of the motives driving the choice for becoming a psychologist. According to the author, the best way in which psychology practitioners can help their clients or patients is to come to admit that they themselves are ordinary people. This is why an exploration regarding the motivation for this occupational area is valuable

for both sides leading, we may assert, to an as authentic relationship as possible between the two helping them to grow – as persons and respectively as professionals.

Further, the author suggests that each psychology practitioner's process of professional development is characterized by anxiety, doubt and ambiguity, a fact which has serious implications for the therapeutic process itself and the way it is conducted by the psychologist. The awareness upon the existence of such feelings is essential in order to ensure an honest and fruitful approach towards one's self which further leads to a better and better involvement within the therapeutic alliance.

Sussman's work is essentially notable as he brings to our attention many types of motives based on which somebody may choose to become a psychologist, besides altruism (as he notices, this point of view is a merely general one lacking a multi-layered image on the issue). Such motives may be conscious and realistic (discovering a mystery, using one's intellectual capacities, getting to know other people in a profound way) or subconscious and rather fantasmatic (voyeurism, need of controlling others, narcissistic needs of omnipotence).

Some of these issues such as the narcissistic tendencies among psychologists have been approached previously in professional literature, as it seems that they are rather common and have to do with the childhood development of psychologists (Glickauf-Hughes & Mehlman, 1995; Halewood & Tribe, 2003).

Sussman (2007) does not only approach the drivers for psychological practice but includes in his analysis aspects such as personality traits and emotional involvement towards the relationships with clients, personal relationships dynamics, thus reaching to several types of portraits which correspond to typologies of psychology practitioners. Knowledge of such portraits along with the capacity of identifying one's own traits activated within the role as a psychological practitioner can be extremely valuable in adjusting the authenticity of the therapeutic alliance.

II. METHOD

1. Participants

The sample of participants to our qualitative study included 6 psychology practitioners, with ages between 26 and 44 years old, both male and female with professional experience in the field of psychological practice between 1 and 15 years. The practical background of the participants varied from Clinical Psychology, Psychotherapy and Counseling and ABA therapy. The participants involved to the study voluntarily and were not granted any financial reward.

2. Instruments and procedure

The present analysis is based on six case studies resulting from applying an open-answer interview. It has been opted for case studies analysis due to the exploratory and descriptive intentions of the analysis which are considered to be better approached in this manner (Kohn, 1997). The interview method was chosen for the present analysis based on the advantage of providing in-depth information (Turner, 2010) and also due to the fact that open responses of the participants were expected to provide a guideline for future research on the subject. The interview was built based on the psychodynamic work of Sussman (2007), previously described.

The resulting instrument consisted in several questions divided into three main sections namely: 1) Psychological practice drivers (consisting in 11 questions such as “What did you find to be mostly attractive related to the psychological practice?”, “What other professions do you consider to be mostly similar to the one of psychologist?”, “What influenced the most your choice for being a psychologist?”; 2) Experience of the therapeutic relationship consisting of 18 questions such as “How emotionally involved do you consider yourself to be within the relationship/interaction with your clients/patients?”, “Which was the easiest case for you to work on?”, “Which was the most difficult?”, “What does the healing or recovery mean to you?” and 3) Portrait, the third and final section of the interview consisting of six questions regarding personal aptitudes discovered or developed as a psychological practitioner, personal predictions regarding future changes within the role as a psychotherapist.

It was opted for adding two additional sections besides Drivers for psychological practice in order identify potential hypothesis for further investigations regarding the personality and life context of psychology practitioners, which may in the future prove to correlate to their motivation. All interview items were free-answer based which allowed the participants to bring their own personal input to the approached subjects, in an as elaborate manner as possible.

3. Results

As mentioned in the previous section, participants to our analysis responded to free-response questions; the provided answers will be synthesized as follows; we have selected responses obtained for some of the questions considered to be relevant for the drivers and development within psychological practice.

Firstly we have approached the benefits which are obtained by psychology practitioners through their profession. Their responses are oriented to three main directions: satisfaction experienced through the growth of the patients; having the possibility to obtain personal growth through professional activity and also having the possibility to apply one’s cognitive and analytical abilities (from this point of view psychological practice is compared to solving puzzles). Respondents stated they had been attracted by the possibility of knowing others on a deep level,

having access to knowledge in general and also by the opportunity of clarifying their own issues. Other elements which attracted the patients to this type of activity consisted in the interpersonal exchange itself on a subjective level, the fascination towards human limits, having access to interesting life events and stories. Regarding criteria of being a competent psychologist, besides the needs of having strong theoretical knowledge and long term practice, responses also included the capacity of strongly incorporating an ethical code, having knowledge from other domains in order to make better predictions, utilizing as much of the therapeutic field as possible (triggers of the interaction) but also being passionate about science and research.

We have noticed that the answers to the question “What it means to you to be the perfect psychotherapist” responses varied depending on the length of experience; beginner psychologists offered detailed descriptions of the perceived perfect psychotherapist while more experienced practitioners tended to deny the possibility of being a perfect psychologist.

Being asked to associate a metaphor to being a psychologist, the respondents mostly used descriptions of journeys and growth. Also, they associated their own profession with professions which can be divided into two main categories: medical professions or exploratory, scientific professions (such as archeologist, physicist).

We will further report the responses provided for the “Portrait” section; regarding self-reported abilities of the respondents, they emphasized two: they seem to report interpersonal abilities such as empathy, humor but also intellectual, scientific abilities such as conceptual thinking and analytic capacity. Interpersonal abilities as commonly reported as having being developed through personal experience, described as an intrinsic valuable resource for the psychological practice.

Relationships to others are commonly described in positive terms with the observation that there seems to be a tendency of being a supportive part of other people’s lives - therefore there seems to be a version of the psychologist’s role in everyday interactions as well. As far as the family is concerned, there are two opposite directions identified within the given responses. Whether the psychologist has or had a significant role in the family (or more precisely, felt important) or felt, on the contrary, insignificant and ignored; this might be a direction to explore in report to the mentioned findings in professional literature regarding the prevalence of narcissistic structures among the psychologists.

The previously mentioned section regarding the experience of therapeutic alliance shall not be further presented in order to protect both the identity of the respondents and their clients. Also, the responses would be difficult to synthesize as they reflect personal, individual experiences and their meaning attributed by each respondent.

III. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

We consider that further research regarding the personal drivers and traits involved in the choice and development as a psychologist is a subject which deserves full attention from both academics and practitioners. The implications of studying this subject and efforts in bringing validity to the findings are expected to be relevant on multiple levels: first, future psychologists will be able to become more easily aware of the aspects they should monitor about themselves while developing professionally; second, public access to such findings is a valuable way of decreasing the attention to stereotypes regarding the profession and on a common sense level people should be able to define in a better, more precise way their need for psychological intervention; last but not least, the use of similar interviews as the one presented in the present paper is a valuable instrument for supervising programs and allow the exploration of personal aspects which at some point might interfere with the therapeutic alliance (no matter the theoretical background of the practice).

Limitations of the study should be addressed; we should consider that in the future a more significant number of participants consisting mostly of clinical psychologists, psychotherapists, psychological counselors and even social workers with at least three levels of experience (beginner, medium experienced and expert); also it should be taken into consideration the option of adapting some of the interview items to a quantitative version in order to make it possible for the researcher to validate the obtained results more easily. On the other hand the qualitative analysis should be kept in the future as the main method of exploring the discussed subject – as Sussman himself states; there are no two individuals with the same needs (2007). Also, professional literature does include publications which consist in self-analysis of psychologists regarding their journeys of becoming a practitioner, the circumstances, situations and reactions which lead them to this fascinating type of profession (Kaslow, 2005; Hoyt, 2005; Orlinsky, 2005; Mahrer, 2005).

Acknowledgements

This paper was co-financed from the European Social Fund, through the Sectorial Operational Programmers Human Resources Development 2007-2013, project number POSDRU/187/1.5/S/155559 “Cercetări doctorale multidisciplinare competitive pe plan european (CdocMD)”, coordinator The West University of Timișoara.

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