

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND MOTIVATION FOR THE STUDY

1.1 GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Practicum experience is an integral component in the training of clinical psychologists (Hecker, Fink, Levasseur & Parker, 1995). This involves the facilitation in the use of already acquired techniques in the context of an internship institution, usually a psychiatric hospital. The current scientist-practitioner model of training clinical psychologists places much of the responsibility for professional preparation on the internship experience (Norcross, Stevenson & Nash, 1986) that is aimed at assisting students in making the transition from trainee to professional (Tipton, Watkins & Ritz, 1991).

Many have endorsed the value of the internship experience. According to Kahr (1999), the clinical placement experience is the vital vertebral spine of the training. He further adds that a successful internship placement will help to fortify the student for a challenging and rewarding career in the mental health field. Stedman (1997) cites that it is an educational event that most applied psychologists credit as crucial in their professional formation.

Starting the internship year can be both a thrilling and terrifying experience (Wozencraft, 1997); it certainly is a stressful, confusing, exciting and busy year (Plante, 1988). Wozencraft (1997) puts forward the view that students will be less anxiety-ridden if they keep in mind that the internship experience is a continuation of the learning experience, an opportunity to translate knowledge into action.

1.2 MOTIVATION FOR THE STUDY

There is little evidence of research that has been done in South Africa on clinical psychologists' experience of the internship year. The researcher completed her internship in clinical psychology during the time of investigation. During this time, she experienced the transition from student to intern psychologist as an exciting but also a stress-related adjustment. The

mental health environment, which became her work and social environment, offered various challenges.

Starting to apply psychological concepts was an anxiety-provoking experience. The researcher often felt apprehensive about handling so many clinical responsibilities on her own, especially at the beginning of her internship. During various stages of the internship, she questioned her competence as therapist. Due to the demands placed on the intern psychologist, she often experienced physical and emotional stress. Support from others, and especially her peer group, became an integral part of her internship year.

The researcher also experienced a sense of "not belonging" in the psychiatric context where psychiatry is the dominant profession. At times her views with regards to patients were in conflict with those in the medical domain. It was a challenge to define her role as a member of the multi-disciplinary team. All these factors motivated her to explore other interns' experience of the internship year.

1.3 AIMS OF THE STUDY

The primary aim of the study is to describe, in terms of a phenomenological framework, the interview responses of a sample of intern clinical psychologists in order to explore their experience of the internship year in a psychiatric training hospital. A phenomenological approach has been chosen, as the locus of phenomenological research in psychology is experience. Phenomenology furthermore attempts to get beyond immediately experienced meanings in order to articulate the pre-reflective level of lived meanings, to make the invisible visible (Kvale, 1996). The focus of this study is therefore on the respondents' construction of the meaning of their internship.

A secondary aim of the study is to provide future intern psychologists with a useful frame of reference that may guide them through the process of internship. An awareness of the challenges that may arise during the

internship year should ease the transition from student to intern psychologist and may enhance the training experience.

The study may also be of value to researchers in this area of interest and to university staff members involved in the training of students in clinical psychology. Psychology departments in psychiatric hospitals may also benefit from the study.

1.4 CHAPTER DIVISION

A broad orientation of the study, including an introduction to the study, motivation for the study and aims of the study is presented in chapter one.

Chapter two provides a theoretical overview with references to research that has been done on the clinical psychology internship.

The focus of chapter three is the methodology of the study. The phenomenological theoretical framework and the qualitative research design are presented, followed by a discussion of the research methodology. Thereafter, aspects concerning the trustworthiness of the research are discussed. Ethical considerations are put forward to conclude the chapter.

In the fourth chapter, each respondent's experience of his/her internship is qualitatively analysed. The chapter also provides an integration of the respondents' descriptions with the literature.

Conclusions arising from the study as well as limitations are presented in chapter five. Finally, recommendations are put forth.