

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### 5.1 CONCLUSION

This study has highlighted the unique personal experience of intern clinical psychologists. The research design was qualitative, adopting the phenomenological theoretical framework with its emphasis on the research respondents' lived experiences and the meanings that they attribute to these. The research participants were interviewed, after which the interviews were transcribed and essential themes were extracted. Each respondent did not necessarily experience all the themes. Individual and shared phenomena emerged from the qualitative analysis of the data, illustrating that the internship year is a critical event in the training of clinical psychologists.

The research findings provide information on the clinical psychology internship on various levels. The themes extracted from the data include the following: the value of the learning experience, a sense of apprehension, the experience of stress, the importance of support, a sense of isolation from social contexts, the importance of supervision and mentorship, a sense of not belonging, challenges around culture and a sense of achievement. Each of these themes will now be discussed briefly.

The findings of this study indicate that the internship context provides a culture of learning where the intern psychologist will have the opportunity of experimenting with and exploring a variety of therapeutic techniques. New strategies and techniques may also be mastered and the intern may realise what kinds of therapeutic work he/she prefers to do. With the shift from thinker to doer, the intern psychologist becomes aware of the differences between theory and practice. The learning experience the internship context offers is therefore very good preparation for independent work.

Another interesting phenomenon that has become evident in this study is a sense of apprehension experienced by all the respondents in the sample. Intern psychologists may enter the internship year with feelings of

apprehension. These may be rooted in the unknown, in working with difficult patients, in supervisory experiences and in feelings of inadequacy as a therapist.

As the transition from student to intern psychologist leads to professional and interpersonal changes, emotional and physical exhaustion are natural consequences for the intern. The psychiatric context may be perceived as hostile and exhausting. There is also the emotional strain of continuously offering oneself to the inner suffering of others.

The internship context does not only provide a context for professional development but also for personal growth. What the intern psychologist values in personal relationships is likely to become more mature. Relationships may change or even be terminated. This may contribute to the sense of isolation reported in this study.

In the light of the above two findings, support from others becomes a vital component during the internship year. In this study it is evident that supervision, peer support and external support systems such as family and friends are utilised during the internship year. The intern group or peer group is not only a supportive structure; intern psychologists may also learn from their peers through peer-assisted learning.

Supervision and mentorship are of paramount importance to the intern starting his/her career as psychotherapist. In this study supervision played an important role, both as supportive function as well as in the respondents' growth as therapists. Although intern evaluations and supervision may contribute to feelings of anxiety, their significance in manifesting supervision as an essential component of the intern's professional training cannot be under-estimated.

Although there are ample references in the literature to the role of the psychologist in medical contexts, only one respondent's experience correlates with this. It is, however, evident in research on the topic that the intern

psychologist may experience a sense of not belonging in the psychiatric context. Role delineation does present a challenge that intern psychologists face.

The internship context also provides exposure to cultural diversity. The intern's cultural assumptions may be challenged. Although intern psychologists may start their internship year with feelings of vulnerability and confusion, they are most likely to experience a sense of achievement for having survived at the end.

## **5.2 LIMITATIONS**

Durrheim and Wassenaar (1991) define generalisability as the extent to which it is possible to generalise from the data and context of a research study to broader populations and settings. The research findings of this study are trance-situational, but not generalisable. The sample group was not a random one. Purposive or judgmental sampling was used as sampling method. A limited number of intern psychologists who did their internship in the same psychiatric institution were included in the study. This institution was chosen for practical reasons. The researcher was an intern psychologist at the institution during the time of investigation. The sample group is therefore not a representative sample of the intern psychologist population of South Africa. The analysis does, however, provide some insight into and understanding of the experience of the internship year in a psychiatric training hospital.

The availability of intern psychologists willing to participate in this study was limited. This may be rooted in the fact that the researcher knew all the respondents personally. The respondents may have experienced a need for maintaining a certain degree of appearance for the researcher.

Another aspect to consider is the researcher's influence. During the time of investigation she was an intern psychologist herself. It is important to note the researcher's contribution to the collection and analysis of the data. Her own experiences could have influenced these. The researcher had continuous discussions with her supervisor to limit her own influence during the collection

and analysis process of the data. The researcher's supervisor also examined the research plan and its implementation.

Another criticism is that three of the respondents were female and that only one of the respondents was male. This may have influenced the results of the study as it appeared from the analysis that the psychiatric context is a particularly difficult context for the female therapist. This is reflected by one of the respondent's experience with male and with forensic patients. The fact that three white intern psychologists but only one black intern psychologist was included in the study, is another limitation, considering that the black respondent was the only one making reference to cultural challenges during her internship year.

### **5.3 RECOMMENDATIONS**

Little research has been done on the phenomenon of intern psychologists' experience of the internship year, especially in the South African context. It is hoped that this investigation will act as a pilot study upon which further research may be based. A more heterogeneous sample of intern clinical psychologists, including respondents from various cultural groups is recommended for further research. In follow-up studies, researchers could ask respondents to elaborate on the themes highlighted in this study.

This study has implications for future intern clinical psychologists and for universities that train students in clinical psychology. To enhance the internship experience, intern psychologists should prepare themselves for the emotional demands and challenges the internship context offers. Staff members involved in the training of clinical psychologists may also contribute to the internship experience by preparing students for this unique event in post-graduate training.