Exploring students' motives for studying psychology: a qualitative study

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ABSTRACT

The present study explored participants' motives for studying psychology. A qualitative, exploratory, descriptive and contextual research design was used. The research method consisted of a brief survey. Four Black participants (male = 2; female = 2) for the study were purposefully selected from a Historically Black institution of higher learning in South Africa. The data collected through audio-taped individual, semi-structured interviews were analyzed by means of content analysis. The participants were asked to describe their motives for choosing psychology as a field of study. The results suggest that the participants chose psychology for various reasons. Minor gender differences were noted in the motives for the choice of psychology as a career. Further research on the topic is needed.

Keywords: Motives, psychology, gender, qualitative, students, career.

INTRODUCTION

This study forms part of continuing attempts to identify students' motives for choosing psychology as a field of study choice in South Africa. Whereas much has been written on why students prefer to study particular subjects, an overview of the literature reveals that little consensus exists in the current literature on students' motives for choosing psychology as a career. A thorough review of the literature on students' motives for choosing careers reveals a trend to focus on a number of factors, which can be categorized broadly as either intrinsic or extrinsic. Unsurprisingly, the literature seems to suggest there is a move away from

overemphasizing quantitative strategies to identify these factors towards the inclusion of qualitative strategies. Furthermore, while much has been written about white students' motives for choosing careers, very little has been written about Black students' motives for studying psychology. This study was designed to address this gap in the literature, albeit on a small scale.

As a result of these developments, career counsellors are playing an increasingly important role in the planning of people's lives in a world that constantly requires new skills. The world of work is changing so rapidly that a major paradigm shift is needed in the minds of not only prospective students and future work seekers but also in the minds of psychologists (career counsellors in particular) (Savickas 2006; Watts 2008). Spelke and Grace (2006) point to the impact of constant changes in people's work and lives and conclude that people are becoming increasingly flexible in terms of their interests and their abilities. Given this background, a study on the career aspirations of Black students who chose psychology as a field of study seemed appropriate.

MOTIVES THAT UNDERLIE STUDENTS' FIELD OF STUDY CHOICES

Gender and students; choice of a career

Salami (2008) maintains that choosing a career is a momentous decision as it affects the rest of a person's life. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the first institution to lay the foundation for a person's career choice is his or her family where domestic tasks are prescribed from a young age. Career choice accordingly starts early in life and is culturally embedded. It is consequently important to consider the significance of stereotyped sex roles in relation to career choices (Hartung 2010, 110):

"Regarding gender differences in career choice readiness, Mansor and Tan (2009) reported that Malaysian female undergraduate students evidenced lower levels of readiness as reflected in heightened needs for career information, increased anxiety, and more indecisiveness when compared with male undergraduates. Following traditional gender lines, profoundly gifted men and top math/science male graduate students appeared to develop more agentic, career-focused perspectives over time than did their female counterparts, who developed more communal, family-focused, and friend-oriented perspectives over time (Ferriman, Lubinski and

Benbow 2009). Counsellors need to recognize and appreciate the complementarity of these different developmental patterns for women and men."

Regarding how children develop tenderized life styles and preferences, Fagot (1974) reported that parents socialize their sons and daughters differently, and this socialization has a strong bearing on future career goals and motives. Maree and Molepo (2005) maintain that whereas boys play tough, hard games, and are encouraged to explore, girls are often discouraged from participation in what are considered masculine activities. They conclude that girls are often still discouraged from taking key subjects such as mathematics and physical science, which impacts significantly on enrolment patterns at tertiary institutions.

Selflessness motives

Scholars seem to agree on the existence of gender differences regarding altruistic motives. Altruism (as evidenced in the concept of helping) broadly encompasses behaviours that generally seek to help others or to improve their situation (Al-Bitar, Sonbol and Omari 2008; Nicole 2008). Some studies (Cox and Deck 2006; Davey, 2001; Davey and Lalande 2001; Holland 1985) suggest that women more than men choose careers for altruistic reasons. Nicole (2008) argues that male altruistic behaviours tend to relate to heroism, chivalry and physical needs while female altruistic behaviours tend to relate to other people's personal and emotional needs.

The literature suggests that students who choose fields of study in the social sciences, teaching and medical professions have powerful altruistic inclinations. Gervasio et al. (2009), for example, reported that students who majored in psychology were more likely to view the subject as an important prerequisite for people who wished to enter the helping professions than those who did not. Students who study psychology also develop key skills for helping friends and family members with personal problems.

Intrinsic motives

Researchers tend to agree that fundamental motives such as personal interest and professional development play a pivotal role in students' career choices (Griffiths and Kaldi 2007). Chan (2004) and Shadbolt and Bunker (2009) revealed in their research that intrinsic motives are major factors in students' career choices. Prestige, a component of extrinsic motives, in particular is an important motivating factor (Al-Bitar et al. 2008). According to Viet (1996), the

intrinsic motive of wanting to be 'useful', a key construct in psychology (Savickas 2007; 2008; 2009) continues to be a powerful factor in career choice.

However, researchers tend to disagree on the role played by gender differences in respect of intrinsic motives regarding field of study and, eventually, career choice. For example, Halpern (1992) and Lai, Chan and Yi's (2009) research reveals that men are inclined to be more intrinsically motivated than women. These researchers found that men are not only more performance oriented than their female counterparts; they are also more inclined to accept challenges, to find new ways to address their curiosity and to deal with problems independently. However, researchers such as Agarwala (2008) and Chan, Lai, Leung and Moore (2005) believe that women are actually more intrinsically motivated than men.

Incentive-related motives

Chan (2004), Griffiths and Kaldi (2007) and Hallisey, Hannigan and Ray (2002) noted that people often choose careers on the basis of expected incentives, which represent extrinsic motivation. The authors also revealed that indicators of extrinsic value include financial incentives, (job) security (including the prospect of permanent employment and promotion) and being valued as a person. Analyses of these indicators reveal significant gender-based differences. Holland (1985), for example, believes that boys regard utilitarian (functional) incentives (to become rich, well-known or to acquire authority) as particularly motivating. Chan (2004) and Hallisey, Hannigan and Ray (2002) ascribe this trend to the belief that it is the principal role of the man to protect and provide for his family. Duehr and Bono (2006), too, noted that the males in their study who were more 'agentic', who believed in the stereotypical role of the male as the breadwinner in the family were inclined to place particular emphasis on financial gain in the workplace. The girls, on the other hand, expressed a particular interest in gaining job security (Acat and Ozabaci 2008; Chow and Ngo 2002). However, contrary to what has been stated in this section, Chuan and Atputhasamy's (2001) findings suggest that gender differences in respect of extrinsic motives are not significant.

Lifestyle motives

Davey and Lalande (2004) use the term 'lifestyle values' to define a set of needs that include, but are not limited to, aspects of the so-called 'good life' such as status, power, independence,

opportunity for professional development, occupation-related compensation, hours of employment and opportunity to travel. Referring to a broadly related construct, Shadbolt and Bunker (2009) state that family life considerations are a powerful determinant of career choice. People often use the degree to which a chosen career will enable them to lead a fulfilling family life as an important criterion during the decision-making process.

Family-related motives

Richardson and Watt (2005) and Karibe et al. (2009) reported that people often choose careers that enable them to attend to family demands and/or meet family expectations. Gender-based differences seem to play a role in this regard too. Some authors (Albelushi 2004) contend that women regard family motives particularly highly. So-called 'care responsibilities' appear to play a major role in shaping women's career-related decisions. They include childbirth and childcare, single motherhood, looking after ageing parents or accepting joint roles and responsibilities in 'dual-earner' families (Bartosz, Stevens and Stevens, 2006). Cook (1993) adds another dimension to the argument, stating that young women are still expected to bear and nurture children (especially during early childhood), and, in doing so, sustain the traditional intermittent employment pattern that so often characterizes women's careers.

Entrepreneurship-related motives

In view of the growing realization that people will in future be less able to rely on employers to provide a financially secure future, the issue of entrepreneurship has assumed particular importance in the 21st century. Employers will to a lesser extent be able to ensure that their employees will have a 'safe' retirement at the end of their career lives. By the same token, employees will have to accept short-term assignments, moving from one employer to the other, and take care of retirement issues themselves. Hallisey, Hannigan and Ray's (2002) research on dental students revealed that business-related motives were a major reason underlying their choice of a field of study and career. Contrary to what could have been expected in the 21st century, with its strong emphasis on empowering women and facilitating equity in the workplace, gender parity has not remotely been reached in the entrepreneurial sphere. Small and McClean (2002), in their study on Barbadian youths, and Bardasi, Blackden and Guzman (2008), in their study on Belgian and Philippine students, confirmed that more men than women were

entrepreneurially conscious and motivated. Kourilsky and Walstad (1998) in a study on United States (US) high school students, Raijman (2001) in a study on Chicago-based Mexican immigrants, and Keat (2008) in a study on Malaysian graduate students all reported that men display a stronger leaning towards entrepreneurial activities than women.

Achievement motives

Khami, Murtomaa, Jafarian, Vehkalahti and Virtanen (2008) revealed a significant, positive relationship between academic achievement and career expectations. Mathombela (1997) and Wims (1994) also confirm that men generally have higher academic aspirations and expectations than their female counterparts. Straus, Straus and Tzanetos (2006) reported that the research and intellectual stimulation provided in academic circles tends to persuade some people to enrol in degree programmes.

Affiliation-type motives

In their research on medical students, Friedberg and Glick (2000) that these students chose their profession mainly because of affiliation motives: 92 percent of the students reported that they had chosen medicine because it involved human contact with patients, and 65 percent reported that they had chosen this field of study because it involved contact with healthy people (which they believed to be important and pleasant).

The rapidly changing work environment was a key reason for this study. Career counselling has seen numerous advances over the past few decades, and the profession has been complicated by changes in people's lifestyles brought about by technological advances and the information explosion. New careers requiring new skills and attitudes are constantly emerging, and career counselling has to keep abreast of these developments if it is to remain effective and relevant in postmodern society (Savickas 2006; Watson 2004). Professional identities are valued less these days, and future career prospects have increased significantly in higher education largely due to the technical advances that have taken place over the past two decades in particular. These advances have resulted in growing uncertainty and 'fluid-certainty' instead of job security. Rapid changes in the world of work require job seekers to acquire advanced skills and multi-skilling capabilities to enable them to cope with the new work situation (Evans and McCloskey 2001.

GOALS OF THE STUDY

The goals of the study were to a) explore why students choose psychology as their field of study, b) identify the career choice motives of psychology students, and c) analyze possible gender differences in the career choice motives of psychology students.

The following questions guided the study.

- What are Black, undergraduate psychology students' main motives for choosing psychology as a field of study?
- Are there gender differences in the choice of psychology as a field of study?

METHOD

Research design

A case study design was used to explore the participants' motives for choosing psychology as a career field.

Participants and setting

Four students took part in the study. The sample consisted of two male and two female participants. All participants were undergraduate Black African students, studying Psychology at a Historically Black University in South Africa. Two of the participants were in their first year of study and two were in their second and third years of academic study respectively.

Data gathering method

A semi-structured interview was used to collect the data. Semi-structured interviews are interviews organized around particular areas of interest while still allowing considerable flexibility in scope and depth (Greef 2002). In the present study, semi-structured interviews were conducted to get in-depth understanding and probing of data on the participants' career motives. The researchers also made field notes and audio-taped the interview sessions.

Collection of data

Purposeful convenience sampling was used to select the four participants who took part in the qualitative research project. Approximately 30-to40-minute, semi-structured, audio-taped interviews with each of the participants were conducted. The interviews were conducted in English as all the participants were conversant with the language. The participants were asked to describe in their own words their motives for choosing psychology as a field of study.

Analysis of data

The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic content analysis. The themes were generated inductively from the raw data through reading and re-reading the transcripts. The identified themes were then coded and categorized (Lyons 2002). Analysis and interpretation of the participants' responses were done.

Ethical considerations

Permission to conduct the study was granted by the University's Research Ethics Committee. Informed consent was formally obtained from the participants. Their participation was voluntary, and they were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time and that their disclosures would be treated with the strictest confidence. The participants were not subjected to physical or psychological harm, and the reporting was anonymous as the participants did not use their real names.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Themes that emerged

Twelve themes emerged in respect of the gender- and career-related motives of the psychology students. The participants' responses to the questions revealed a range of psychological experiences that impacted their career choice-related decisions. The themes are discussed below, and extracts from the data are presented to illustrate the themes and the corresponding subthemes that emerged.

Table 1: Motives for choosing psychology as a career field (n = 4)

Motive	Gender		Total n
	male	female	

Academic	2	2	4
Humanitarian	2	2	4
Altruism	2	1	3
Interest	0	2	2
Expectations of significant others	1	1	2
Finance	0	1	1
Prestige and respect	0	1	1
Entrepreneurship	1	0	1
Security	1	0	1
Self-branding	0	1	1
Lifestyle	1	0	1
Affirmative	1	0	1

Table 1 shows that the career choice motives of the participants were diverse both in terms of gender and breadth. The highest rated motives for choosing psychology were academic, humanitarian and altruistic. Half of the participants chose psychology as a career field for motives that include prestige and respect, interest and expectations of significant others. Whereas some gender-based motivational differences emerged in terms of, for instance interest-, entrepreneurship-, security-, altruism-, lifestyle- and affirmative choice-related motives, no gender-based differences emerged in respect of academic, humanitarian and expectation of significant others motives. The findings are discussed below.

Academic motives

All the participants decided to study psychology primarily as a result of intellectual motivations. This finding is in line with the results of studies by Khami, Murtomaa, Jafarian, Vehkalahti and Virtanen (2008) and Straus, Straus and Tzanetos (2006), which showed that intellectual stimulation and the challenges offered in academia often persuade people to enrol for degree courses. Intellectual stimulation, gaining better understanding of human behaviour, acquiring problem-solving skills and the ability to make judgments, and educational advancement emerged as important reasons for the decision of the participants in the present study. No gender-based

differences in the academic motive for choosing psychology emerged. This finding does not support Mathombela's (1997) and Wims' (1994) finding that men generally exhibit higher academic aspirations and expectations than women.

The emphasis on learning is apparent in the following extracts:

> *I wanted to understand why people behave differently. Most importantly, why is it that we think differently, act differently and many other things that people do differently.* (Participant 1 – male.)

> *I chose psychology because it helps one to understand human behaviour in a better way. I chose psychology because it is unique and broad in a way that a person gets to know a lot about individuals.* (Participant 2- female.)

Humanitarian motives

All four participants cited humanitarian motives as reasons for studying psychology. This supports the findings of Viet (1996). The emphasis on humanitarian motives is apparent in the following extracts:

> *Since childhood, I always wanted to be one of the persons who help other people with difficulties or who are sick.* (Participant 1 – male.)

> *People who had come across difficulties in their lives were the ones who influenced me to choose psychology so that I can help them to overcome their problems. Serious cases like people who wanted to commit suicide had a huge influence on my interest in psychology. The other thing that influenced me was people who are discouraged, those who lack confidence and lost hope. I want to help such people.* (Participant 3 - female)

> *I felt that doing psychology would equip me with the knowledge and skills to help people from my village and many others.* (Participant 4 - male)

Altruism

Most of the participants considered psychology a helping profession. More male than female participants mentioned this as a reason for choosing psychology. These participants indicated that they wanted to use their acquired expertise and knowledge to help people with psychological problems:

> *I am studying psychology because I want to help people with problems ... I enjoy helping others*. (Participant 2 – female)

> *I would like to help people with problems*. (Participant 4 – male)

> *I wanted to understand psychopathology so that I can help victims of mental disorder*. (Participant 4 – male)

This finding is inconsistent with the findings of (Huang 2008) who reported that female students were more altruistic than their male peers.

Interest

Consistent with basic person-environment fit tenets, Viet (1996) believes that choices that 'match' people's interest profiles reduce confusion and frustration and that, accordingly, prospective students should show a keen interest in a field of study before actually enrolling for that field.

> *My sister who is a professional counsellor influenced me to study psychology. Because of her influence, I later developed a passion for psychology*. (Participant 1 – female)

> *I realized that psychology was something that I liked so it was better for me to do it. I can't really explain how it happened but I just felt that I needed to do psychology*. Participant 3 (female)

Expectations of significant other

Two participants indicated that they enrolled for the psychology course to meet the expectations of significant others. This finding supports Karibe et al.'s (2009) finding that people make career-related choices to meet family expectations. Brown (2002) and Mitchell and Krumboltz

(1996) also reported that people from collectivist families or cultures who embrace the same values tend to choose careers that meet the expectations of reference groups and that people who embrace collective social values experience career satisfaction to the extent that their chosen careers are approved by social frames of reference such as parents and peers. The extracts below support the finding that significant others influence the career-related decisions of students.

> *My sister who is a professional counsellor influenced me to study psychology. She wanted me to join her profession.* (Participant 2 – female)

> *My uncle who was studying for a Bachelor of Arts degree influenced me to choose psychology. He then advised me to choose psychology because I was going to learn from the good lecturer.* (Participant 2 – female)

> *My secondary school teacher was the one who influenced me to do psychology. We came from the same village and I was so close to him.* (Participant 4 - male)

Financial motives

The findings provide some (if limited) support for previous findings, namely that career choice is motivated by financial motives and the probability of employment (Lehman, Dieleman and Martineau 2008). In the present study, two participants mentioned financial reward as a motive for choosing psychology, which may, to an extent reflect the possible perception of the participants that the remuneration of psychologists in South Africa is poor.

Prestige and respect

Only one female participant indicated that she chose psychology because it is prestigious. This finding is inconsistent with Sherrill's (2004) finding that prestige was one of the most important reasons for choosing a career. This low rating may suggest that most of the participants in the present study did not regard psychology as having the social status of the health professions.

Entrepreneurial motives

Entrepreneurial motives for choosing psychology were cited by only one male participant. This is a puzzling finding, given that entrepreneurship has assumed particular importance in the 21st

century. Seemingly, the majority of participants still do not realize that people will in future be less able to rely on employers to provide a financially secure future.

Security

Only one (male) participant cited job security as an important motive for choosing a career:

> *There is a shortage of psychologists in our country so opportunities for employment are high*. (Participant 4 – male.)

This finding is inconsistent with Sherrill's (2004) finding that individuals indicated that income prospects were the main motives in career decision making of participants in their study.

Self branding

The study revealed that only one (female) participant recognized the power of branding or building a strong personal identity on the perception of what distinguishes one person from others and acknowledged the added value any individual brings to a job or situation (Schaeffer 2008):

> *You see, my mother is a nurse and my sister is also a nurse. We cannot be all nurses. I therefore wanted a programme that would not put me in the same field with my mother and sister. I wanted to be different.* (Participant 2 – female.)

This finding provides very limited support for the finding that a shift has taken place from an emphasis on collective values to an emphasis on Western individual values (Heine, Lehman, Markus and Kitayama 1999).

Lifestyle-related motive

Only one (male) participant thought there was more lifestyle compromise in psychology. This finding provides very limited support for Shadbolt and Bunker (2009) and Thibodeau and Usoff's (2002) finding that lifestyle factors are important to men as well as women. This participant commented that he preferred a career in psychology because of the perceived good quality of life in the chosen career and added:

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> *I chose psychology as I realized that it deals more with issues that are related to my way of living and interests ... I enjoy being in the company of many people.* (Participant 1 - male)

Affirmative-related motive

A male participant reported that he chose psychology in order to increase the proportion of black psychologists in his province. This participant motivated his choice of psychology as a career by stating:

> *I realized that black psychologists, especially in my province, Limpopo, are fewer than how it can be imagined.*

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Because the findings were based on self-reported information, reporting bias as a result of incorrect interpretation of the questions by the participants could have occurred because of the participants' possible desire to give socially desirable responses. Furthermore, the data collected depended to a certain extent on the participants' long-term memory recall and their idiosyncratic perceptions of personal experiences. In other words, some of the participants may have been unable to recall accurately the processes and influences regarding their choice of psychology as a field of study recommendation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Firstly, further research in this field should be done as the findings could help in the selection of students to study psychology. Secondly, prospective students in psychology will benefit from the inclusion in curricula of what the day-to-day activities of practising psychologists actually entail. Ideally, these modules should be presented by psychologists in full-time practice. By exposing students to the everyday work of practising psychologists, they will become acquainted with the positive as well as the negative aspects of the career. This will help them make informed decisions as to whether they really want to become psychologists themselves. Thirdly, because misconceptions about the work of psychologists still abound, a national campaign should be launched to inform the public (including high school learners) about the nature of the work of psychologists. Fourthly, because of the disproportionate representation of males and whites in

the profession nationally, the underlying reasons for this disproportionate representation should be established and the necessary steps taken to rectify the situation. Fifthly, psychologists should be trained to identify their own faulty perceptions about their profession and to develop more informed perceptions. Lastly, and, in our opinion, most importantly, psychology students at all levels should become familiar with developments in the field of psychology. Psychologists should be encouraged to conduct research in this field and publish in scholarly journals and/or present at conferences on psychology.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the data revealed a number of trends as mentioned above. The study revealed that the participants chose psychology as a field of study for various reasons. The most common of these were academic, humanitarian, altruistic motives as well as interest and the expectations of significant others. Unlike Gallucci (1997), we did not find evidence of a strong interest in, for instance subject matter or job security. As stated previously, some gender differences were observed regarding the motives for choosing a psychology degree. Furthermore, it also emerged that black students rely on various resources for information regarding psychology as a field of study for instance friends, family members and teachers), who strongly shape their expectations (Sedumedi 2002).

However, very few of the participants in the study seemed sufficiently aware of the precise role and actual work of a psychologist. In addition, the participants did not seem to be at all familiar with the notion of life designing as a fundamental facet of 21st century (career) counselling. This is regrettable because heightened self-insight and a better understanding of the work of psychologists would help students make more informed decisions about whether they wanted to become psychologists themselves.

In order to determine the broader perceptions of psychology students, the study should be repeated with a bigger population and culturally diverse groups. However, we do hope that this study will create greater awareness of the reasons underlying students' choice of psychology as a field of study and possible career as well as the need to investigate these reasons.

Some variances emerged in the reasons for choosing psychology as a field of study. More significantly, it did not appear from the study that the participants were aware of the notion of life designing as a meta-reason for wanting to become psychologists. It seems unacceptable to

choose psychology as a field of study and possible future career based on limited personal and work-related information and a lack of knowledge of the *raison d'être* of psychology as a profession.

In conclusion, this study suggests that career counsellors are obliged to counsel Black students meticulously as regards what the career of a psychologist entails, as well as regarding the need to carry out thorough job analysis to ensure that they make informed choices when choosing psychology as a field of study. Furthermore, prospective students should be advised that the choice of psychology as a possible career is only a small, albeit significant, aspect of designing a successful life, which is the ultimate goal of career counselling (Savickas et al. 2009).

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