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Marriage and participation in postgraduate study: Exploring the motivations and experiences of married female Psychology Masters students

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ABSTRACT

The profession of Psychology in post-apartheid South Africa has been dominated by women, despite attempts to address issues of equity, access and redress in recruitment and training. Certain obstacles to entering the profession, that may be specifically relevant to men, included the longevity and cost of training; the notion that Psychology is a 'woman's profession'; and the appeal of more lucrative job opportunities. Women, on the other hand, were often encouraged to enter female-dominated professions such as Psychology and financial support either from one's family or an economically-independent partner facilitates the pursuit of this career trajectory. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of married females who were embarking on postgraduate study. Using semi-structured interviews, eight married female participants currently enrolled in Professional Masters programmes provided in-depth information on why they took on the dual adjustment of marriage and postgraduate study and what were the challenges and benefits associated with this process. Thematic content analysis was used to interpret these accounts which revealed that the dating phase of relationships often concluded as postgraduate study commenced due to the longevity of the study trajectory. To address the accompanying relationship insecurity, marriage was idealised as offering enhanced security and stability. Despite the notion that Masters and marriage would complement each other in order to overcome the difficulties of marriage and postgraduate study, a blurring of boundaries was experienced between the perceived challenges and benefits as the idealised complementarity was not actualised. Using feminist theory, the study added value to debates on the perpetuating influence of chauvinistic notions regarding marriage and career development for women inherent in the family life cycle theory, as well as explored the implications of the "feminisation" of the profession of Psychology on recruitment, training and future practice of female Psychologists.