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AN INVESTIGATION OF DEPRESSION AMONG CLINICAL, COUNSELLING AND EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGISTS IN PRIVATE PRACTICE

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Arts, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts (Clinical Psychology)

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to investigate depression in clinical, counselling and educational psychologists in private practice. Forty-one psychologists completed a survey questionnaire consisting of closed and open-ended questions. The questionnaire required no identifying details. This ensured confidentiality, and the information gathered was subjected to both quantitative and qualitative analyses, which forms the basis of this dissertation.

The results confirm that psychologists do indeed suffer with depression. However, contrary to expectation, it is not always the work of a psychologist which creates the conditions for depression, but rather a history of depression or a vulnerability to depression, which is sometimes stirred up by different aspects of the work. Also, a psychologist's personal experience of depression often seems to be helpful during the therapeutic process, where the therapist uses his/her subjective experience of depression, to understand and assist clients in the management of their emotional pain. In addition, the negative impact of depression on clinical work is explored.

In the sample, there do not appear to be many differences between clinical, counselling and educational psychologists regarding their experiences of depression. With hindsight, it was thought that the division of the disciplines did not add anything meaningful to the study. The purposively drawn sample was biased towards clinical psychologists. Also, the investigative nature of the study made it difficult to draw conclusions which could be generalized to the population of psychologists in South Africa.

Despite the study's limitations, the results, when compared with existing literature regarding depression in psychologists, revealed many similarities. Areas of further research were identified.

Declaration

I declare that this dissertation is my own, unaided work. It is being submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts (Clinical Psychology) at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted for any degree or examination at any other university.

MELANIE JANE ESTERHUIZEN

_____ day of _____ 2005

DEDICATION

In memory of Tony Esterhuizen

1935 – 2004

'Palma non sine pulvera'

I understand now Dad.

Your perseverance and passion inspired me.

Acknowledgements

- **Linda Rosenbaum**… Over the years your encouragement, generous support, love and belief in this journey has sustained me. Thank you darling friend.
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AIMS

This study, using both quantitative and qualitative research methods, aims to expand our understanding of depression in clinical, counselling and educational psychologists in private practice in South Africa.

The study addresses the following research questions:

a) Do psychologists in private practice in South Africa experience depression?
b) What kind of treatment do psychologists seek when depressed?
c) What aspects of their treatment do they experience as most helpful?
d) How do they understand their depression in terms of predisposing, precipitating, and maintaining factors?
e) Do psychologists perceive a link between their depression and their professional activity, and if so, how do they understand that link?
f) What kinds of self-care practices do psychologists in private practice in South Africa engage in?
g) Is it possible that psychologists conducting psychodynamic therapy may be more vulnerable to depression than those from other theoretical orientations?

RATIONALE

To date, there seem to have been no studies conducted to investigate depression among psychologists, either in institutional settings or in private practice in South Africa. Preliminary research done in the United States provides evidence for the suggestion that psychologists are a population at significant risk for depression.

There appears to be a central debate in the current literature concerning depression among practising psychologists. This debate centers around the extent to which depressive symptoms negatively impact on the functioning of psychologists in private practice, and the opposite point of view, which suggests that a psychologist's personal experience of depression may have a positive impact on professional functioning.

It was thought that it would be useful to explore psychologists' experiences of depression in the South African context, given the paucity of information in this regard. It was thought that if there is any unique factor to the South African context generally contributing to depression among psychologists, or a unique factor in the context of private practice in particular, this may emerge in the research. The context of private practice was selected as a focus for this research as it presents psychologists with a unique set of work circumstances and challenges which, if not actively managed, are thought to contribute to a practitioner's vulnerability to depression.

Existing literature on psychologists' willingness to seek treatment indicate that there may be a reluctance to acknowledge their vulnerability and compromised mental health. This research study attempts to ascertain attitudes to treatment and treatment choices. Also, evidence is sought for the idea that psychologists who embrace a psychodynamic theoretical orientation may be more vulnerable to depression by virtue of their intense focus on the often-painful conscious and unconscious feelings evoked in the relationship.

Finally, from the literature reviewed on psychologists' personal experiences of depression, a consistent belief emerged, namely, that prevention of depression lies in establishing a professional ethos in which self-care is prioritised. It is thus also an aim of this study to explore the trends in current self-care practices among psychologists in private practice in South Africa.

The decision to combine both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies in this study was driven by the research questions. These questions required the use of different theoretical underpinnings and different types of data analysis. One the one hand, ordinal data, which is amenable to statistical manipulation was required, and on the other hand, research participants whose subjective experience needed detailed investigation was required before interpretations or explanations could be formulated. These two approaches are more accurately described by Evered and Lewis (1981) as 'inquiry from the outside' (quantitative research) and 'inquiry from the inside' (qualitative research) (p.178). It was also thought that in using different methodologies, biases in any one approach may be compensated for.

The qualitative aspect of this study was given emphasis as it was thought that it would be more likely to foster new lines of inquiry. The qualitative results could be used as a precursor for more quantitative investigation, or a continued qualitative emphasis could provide a deeper exploration of the respondents' experience within a particular professional setting.

Chapter One will provide a review of past and current literature on depression as it is experienced by psychologists in private practice. Chapter Two will outline the methodology – both quantitative and qualitative – used for the research design, collection and analysis of the data. Chapter Three will present the results of the research in both quantitative and qualitative formats. Chapter Four covers a discussion of the results in the context of the current body of knowledge. And finally, Chapter Five will review the ground covered by the current study and offer suggestions for future research.