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Partington, Theresa

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Narratives of 'woundedness' in applications for clinical psychology training

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Theresa Partington

A research dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Clinical Psychology.

Johannesburg

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Abstract

This research is based on an investigation of the earlier experiences of those seeking a career in clinical psychology and the evaluations of those charged with the task of selecting applicants. There is considerable evidence in the literature that points to those drawn to the profession having come from troubled backgrounds and been emotionally and psychologically affected by these experiences. It follows that the psychotherapeutic community is concerned that these aspiring therapists' ability to provide therapy may be impacted owing to the effects of these experiences. This, however, remains a neglected area of inquiry. In aiming to address this, the researcher explored the following: Firstly, themes and patterns in clinical psychology applicants' negative and traumatic life experiences; and secondly, the implications of these for applicants' potential to provide therapy and thus their suitability to enter the profession. This was an exploratory study based in the qualitative research tradition. Thirty clinical psychology masters applicant autobiographies, depicting narratives of negative and traumatic life experiences were selected from an archival database of past candidates. Following this, based on a subsample of applicant protocols, ten members of a Selection Committee for clinical training participated in semi-structured interviews. The data sets were subject to thematic content analysis. Identified autobiographical themes and patterns were grouped into core categories: "life events" and "childhood experiences in family of origin", and the associated "emotional and psychological effects" of these. Predominant themes of traumatic life events and problematic family histories were associated with a range of psychological effects, from psychic injury to discomfort and distress. Therapist qualities and features identified by selectors as bearing on the therapeutic process were grouped into two core categories: "resources and strengths", with themes of empathy, psychological hardiness, emotional maturity and vulnerability as resources to the therapy process; and "obstacles and limitations", with themes of countertransference evocations, relational difficulties, narcissistic dynamics and needs, and difficulties in training as obstacles to the therapy process. The criterion recognised as being important for selection and impressing favourably on selectors, suggests that candidates are sought who come from troubled backgrounds and display potential for psychological resolution of these experiences.

Declaration

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

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Theresa-Anne Cecelia Partington

_____ day of _____, 2009.

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