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Exploring high-performing male psychology students' narratives of identity : telling tales of men defying hegemony.

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ABSTRACT

This study explores high-performing male psychology students' narratives of identity. The rationale for undertaking this study is that men presently represent a shrinking minority within the academic and professional practice of psychology in South Africa. While much quantitative research has noted gendered trends within the field, there remains a paucity of qualitative data on these men's thoughts and experiences within the South African context. A narrative research design, underpinned by an interpretative phenomenological epistemology, was employed to explore this topic in a participant-led manner. The unique life stories of the six male participants, recruited from third-year, honours and masters psychology courses, were explored through an open-ended narrative interview that was later followed by a semi-structured interview. Both interviews were audio-recorded and the interview transcripts were subjected to a two stage inductive thematic analysis in which emergent themes were interrogated both for each participant and between participants. The first round of data analysis yielded thirty thematic codes according to which these participants' narratives of identity could be interpreted and during the second stage of analysis these codes were clustered into six master themes which were mapped onto the secondary research questions informing this study. Thematic analysis revealed: (1) active efforts by the participants to defy hegemonic gender norms and (re)define masculinity through engagement in what is traditionally defined as "women's work" in their adoption of a care-giver role by providing emotional support to others while also attempting to redefine psychology as a profession that is not exclusively feminine. (2) These participants reported selecting their career option on the basis of passion as opposed to pragmatics by valuing their desire to engage in this field over hegemonic concerns with prestige and earning-potential. However, such considerations were peripheral rather than absent in their narratives. (3) Consistent with previous findings, these men all reported experiencing life struggles as a route to developing empathy and therefore exhibited elements of the wounded-healer model. (4) Those men who are pursuing careers neuropsychology and industrial psychology showed an interest in humanity (scientists) fostered by feelings of difference while those in therapeutic orientations report developing a desire to help (helpers) based on experiences of marginalisation. While the participants differed as to whether they were more inclined towards the more traditionally masculine values of science or the more traditionally feminine values of care, they all reported a desire to both help and understand as professional psychologists. (5) While diversity and difference were reported by these men to contribute to an enhanced sense of empathy and social interest, they mentioned such a sense of difference having developed from the experience of early geographic movement and exposure to multiple cultures. This seems to have fostered a keen social awareness that contributed to a growing interest in the different lifestyles that people and communities enjoy which they now study and work with as aspiring psychologists. (6) Furthermore, their dynamic and changing world is suggested to have garnered a love of variety and iterative sense of self which has permitted continuing development in professional psychology as they report finding the personal growth and development endemic to the field to be an important part of how they understand themselves. Findings of the research which may broadly map directions for future research include a lack of conflation by these men of sexual orientation and masculinity suggesting that homosexuality is not necessarily understood as a contravention of masculine norms not suggested by previous research findings. Importantly, while feelings of difference were explored in this study, race was a shared silence during the interviews and further investigation into the experiences of black men aspiring to become male psychologists in the South African context is considered vital to enhancing our understanding of the diverse body of professionals in South African psychology.