The systems psychodynamic experiences of first-year master's students in industrial and organisational psychology

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Orientation: The researchers described the experiences of first-year master's students in industrial and organisational psychology in terms of their anxiety and basic assumption behaviour. Apart from their academic tasks, they seem to be unconsciously involved in many relationship and relatedness matters.

Research purpose: The purpose of this research was to describe the systems psychodynamic experiences of first-year master's students in Industrial and Organisational Psychology.

Motivation for the study: Academic staff members tend to forget their own experiences as master's students, lose touch with their students' experiences, lose empathy and treat student groups in mechanistic ways. Although the students' conscious tasks and roles are relatively clear, very little is known about their unconscious experiences.

Research design, approach and method: The researchers used qualitative research involving a case study. They collected the data and conducted their analyses by administering a Listening Post (LP) and discourse analysis. Two themes emerged, from which the researchers formulated their working and research hypotheses.

Main findings: The themes related to anxiety and basic assumption behaviour. The research hypothesis referred to students' introjections of emotional incompetence. This resulted in exhaustion.

Practical/managerial implications: More focused attention to the students' emotional experiences, by themselves and by academic staff members, could conserve students' energy for their academic work and relationships.

Contribution/value-add: Being master's students consumes emotional energy that jeopardises students' academic work and forming relationships. Being aware of these and managing them could help students to achieve better academically.

Introduction

After completing their honours degrees, master's students in industrial and organisational psychology (IOP) move into the master's programme with high hopes of becoming professionally registered psychologists. From a rational and conscious perspective, the students perform and cope well with the academic demands within the prescribed time limit. On the other hand, academic staff members often speculate about the unconscious dynamics that manifest in the students. The researchers tried to explore the students' behavioural dynamics by entering their experiences and trying to put their minds into the students' space and, by being empathetic, report more specifically on 'what is going on below the surface'.

The university has presented its master's programme for more than 25 years. The degree has a two-year programme and the university requires its students to complete it in a maximum of four years. The first-year consists of six modules. They cover the fields of organisational, personnel and career psychology, psychometrics, psychological research methods and personal growth. The university presents the modules in workshops, on campus, in four five-day blocks (20 working days). Students have to hand in and pass 15 assignments in the various modules and pass the examination in November. It constitutes 50% of the first-year assessment.

The second year consists of a dissertation with a limited scope. It constitutes the other 50%. The Health Professions Council of South Africa has accredited the programme. It gives students access to internships and registration as industrial psychologists. Twelve staff members are involved in the programme. All are registered industrial, counselling, clinical or research psychologists.

The university selects students using the criteria of previous academic performance, literacy, numeracy, personality and other relevant skills (measured in an assessment centre). Approximately 20 students enter the programme every year. About 50% have honours degrees from this university. Others come from other South African universities. On average, 12 students graduate each year (calculated for 2000–2010). This is a 60% throughput. Very few students finish the degree in two years. Most students spend between three and four years to complete it. Most students complete the first year successfully, whilst the largest fallout occurs during their work on the dissertation. Over the last five years, measured feedback on the students' first year of study showed their satisfaction with the academic content, standard, practical application possibilities of the work and the competence of the lecturers.

The researchers became curious about possible underlying and unconscious themes that are presently unknown. They could assist students and staff members to a more holistic understanding of the students' experiences. This line of thought is consistent with Bion's (2003) notion of integrating knowing with not knowing to improve performance. On the surface, students are well selected, academically informed and sufficiently emotionally resilient to begin master's studies. However, if one explores below the surface behaviour (see Huffington, Armstrong, Halton, Hoyle & Pooley, 2004), it seems that students' resilience changes during their first year. This influences their 'groundedness'. Arrogant expressions like 'we are the best of the best' turn into realisations of the hard intellectual and emotional work the students need to do to stay in and move through the programme.

This often manifests in child-like behaviour. An example is a student who phoned a professor to inform him impatiently that she was still waiting for him to send her the instruments she needed for her research. Another student wanted to know when his newly appointed supervisor was going to re-write his research proposal and whether it would be in time for the deadline. Within the first few months of the start of the programme, students approach lecturers to ask what would happen if they did not complete the first year successfully or wanted to postpone their studies to the following calendar year. Students tend to contact the research module lecturers much more frequently than they contact the other lecturers, especially about the due dates for their dissertations.

One could use these vignettes to hypothesise about the students':

- narcissism that turns to arrogance
- anxieties that turn into defences like regression and projection or into strong dependence on staff members as authority figures
- performance anxiety about their dissertations (see Blackman, 2004; Sandler, Person & Fonagy, 2004).

Without substantial evidence, these hypotheses become risky. We cannot be sure which of these behaviours belong to individuals and which belong to the student system or even

to the student-lecturer-departmental system. To access these below the surface behaviours, the researchers decided to work from the systems psychodynamic perspective because this would allow them to study the students' unconscious behaviour and the relatedness between the students as a system (Campbell, 2007).

Research purpose

The purpose of the research was to describe the systems psychodynamic experiences of first-year master's students in industrial and organisational psychology. It seems to be an unresearched topic. There has been plenty of research on cognitive learning and the relationship between learner and instructor from a rational and conscious perspective (Rautenbach, 2007). Educationists have conducted most of the qualitative research that focuses on students' affective experiences, but they report little psychological behaviour (see Conrad, Duren & Haworth, 2002; Marcketti, Mhango & Gregoire, 2006; Murphy & Coleman, 2004; Popov, 2009; Stiwne & Jungert, 2007).

The systems psychodynamic literature reports on learners' behaviour in group relations training events (Brunner, Nutkevitch & Sher, 2006; Fraher, 2004), in organisations as part of staff development, in coping with change (Czander, 1993) and in consulting (Neumann, Keller & Dawson-Shepherd, 1997). The researchers could not trace any related research in the literature on systems psychodynamic enquiry into student experiences during a teaching programme.

Trends from the research literature

The literature on the systems psychodynamic perspective uses research at the Tavistock Institute (Miller, 1993) as its basis and group relations training (Brunner, Nutkevitch & Sher, 2006). Theoretically, it incorporates Freudian (1921) systemic psychoanalysis, the work of Klein (1988) on family psychology, Ferenczi on object relations and Bertalanffy on systems thinking (Colman & Bexton, 1975; Colman & Geller, 1985; Cytrynbaum & Noumair, 2004). As a research perspective, systems psychodynamics offers a depth psychology organisational theory and a developmentally focused, psycho-educational process for understanding conscious and unconscious behaviour (Campbell, 2007; Campbell & Huffington, 2008; Huffington *et al.*, 2004; Klein, 2005). The systems psychodynamic perspective accepts anxiety as the basis for, and driving force (dynamo) of, relationship and relatedness behaviour (Armstrong, 2005). One can define it as fear of the future.

People use defence mechanisms (Blackman, 2004) against the anxiety to ensure emotional safety. Examples of primitive defences people use often are splitting, introjections, projection and projective identification. Ones that are more sophisticated are rationalisation and intellectualisation. In an organisation, any system (person, group or organisation) unconsciously needs something or someone (managers or

leaders) to contain the anxiety on its behalf. The organisation does this through structures like laws, regulations, procedures, organograms, job descriptions and idiosyncratic ways of solving problems.

The system acts out its anxiety in various ways. Five basic behavioural assumptions encapsulate them. They are dependency, fight or flight, pairing (Bion, 1961; 1970; 2003), me-ness (Turquet, 1974) and one-ness or we-ness (Lawrence, Bain & Gould, 1996). These behaviours manifest unconsciously and systemically in a kind of group mentality, described as a unanimous expression of the will of the group. People contribute to it in ways of which they are unaware and which invariably influence them again.

'Dependency' refers to the system's anxiety about its need for security and structure that it projects onto a perceived strong or parental object. It becomes an unconscious dependence on this object (Campbell, 2007). When the object does not meet these needs, the system experiences frustration, helplessness, powerlessness and de-authorisation (Czander, 1993; Stapley, 2006) that manifest as counter-dependence.

'Fight or flight' refers to the system's performance anxiety in the here-and-now. It defends itself by fighting the imagined enemy or removing the self physically or emotionally from the danger (Cytrynbaum & Noumair, 2004). Fight responses manifest in aggression against the self, peers (through envy, jealousy, competition, elimination, boycotting, sibling rivalry, fighting for a position in the system or an assumed privileged relationship with authority figures) or against authority itself (Klein, 2005). Flight responses manifest physically in, for example, avoiding others, being ill or resigning. Psychological flight responses include defence mechanisms like avoiding threatening situations or emotions in the here-and-now, rationalising and intellectualising (Gould, Stapley & Stein, 2004).

'Pairing' manifests in order to cope with anxiety about alienation and loneliness. The system tries to pair with an object (person, subgroup or idea) it perceives as powerful (Colman & Bexton, 1975). The unconscious fantasy is that creation will happen in pairs and will protect the system against threat (Colman & Geller, 1985).

'One-ness' refers to the system's efforts to join a powerful union or omnipotent force. It surrenders the self for passive participation and lives in the fantasy of well-being and wholeness (Turquet, 1974). We also refer to one-ness as we-ness. 'Me-ness' refers to survival and solace in the own inner world, avoiding the outer world and its reality (Lawrence, Bain & Gould, 1996). The importance of the individual is greater than that of the group (Cilliers & Koortzen, 2005).

These basic assumption behaviours manifest on different levels of work that Cilliers and Koortzen (2005) integrated as the CIBART model (conflict, identity, boundaries, authority, role and task). For the sake of this research, the researchers changed the sequence (to conflict, task, role, authority, boundary and identity) to fit the findings.

'Conflict' refers to the split between differences, like between two or more parts of a system. Conflict can manifest intra-personally (in the individual between ideas and feelings), interpersonally (between two or more team members), intra-group (between factions or sub-groups) and inter-group (between one team or department and others in the larger system). See Cilliers & Koortzen (2005).

'Task' is the basic component of work. The leader adheres to the primary task, indicating contained anxiety. Diversions into off-task and anti-task behaviour show confusion and free-floating anxiety (Cytrynbaum & Noumair, 2004).

'Role' is the centre of individual activity. A series of boundaries delineate and define the behaviour (actual, implied or potential), authority, structure, culture, duties and responsibilities under a formalised title that others recognise and more or less value. It manifests as normative, experiential and phenomenal experiences (Cytrynbaum & Noumair, 2004; Czander, 1993; Obholzer & Roberts, 1994).

'Authority' refers to the right one has, because of one's rank or office, to issue commands and to punish violations (Czander, 1993). Authority comes from above (the organisation, manager or leader), the side (colleagues), below (subordinates) and from within (self-authorisation).

'Boundaries' refer to the space around and between parts of the system. They keep the system safe and contained (Cilliers & Koortzen, 2005). Examples are the boundaries of task, time and territory.

'Identity' refers to the aspects that make the system the same as, and different from, others (Campbell & Groenbaek, 2006). It is also the system's climate, cultural characteristics and whether it identifies with the self (Cytrynbaum & Noumair, 2004; Klein, 2005; Hirchhorn, 1997).

Research problem and objectives

The researchers formulated the research problem as 'would the systems psychodynamic perspective give the researchers access to enter and explore student experiences, to enable them to understand the depth psychology of being master's students and to lead students towards different ways of containment in future?'. The research objectives were to explore the behaviour the researchers recorded and to analyse it qualitatively.

The potential value-add of the study

The researchers saw the potential value of the research as an in-depth understanding of the experiences students have as master's students and building knowledge around them.

What will follow

The structure of the rest of the article follows. The researchers present the research design, the research approach and research strategy. The research method follows. It consists of the research setting, the roles of the researchers, their sampling method, data collection, recording and analysis. The strategies the researchers used to ensure quality data follow. They then present the findings as manifested themes. The discussion contains the research hypotheses. The article concludes with the conclusion, recommendations, limitations and suggestions for further research.

Research design

Research approach

The researchers chose qualitative and descriptive research (De Vos, Strydom, Fouché & Delport, 2002) within the hermeneutic paradigm (Terre Blanche, Durrheim & Painter, 2006). Whilst interpreting the data, the researchers used themselves as instruments (Watts, 2009) using the epistemological assumption that empathetic listening allows for deep understanding of shared experiences (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2010).

Research strategy

The researchers used a single case study (Chamberlayne, Bornat & Apitzsch, 2004). They treated it as a collective narrative event (Breverton & Millward, 2004) to elicit a rich descriptive account of the stories in their real contexts. They saw the case study as intrinsic (intended to interpret and understand) and instrumental (as feedback to their academic department). See Denzin and Lincoln (2005).

Research method

Research setting

The researchers set the study in the master's student programme in industrial and organisational psychology (IOP) at a large university. During the qualitative research module, the university exposes students to an experiential event so that they can learn about research processes and roles.

Entrée and establishing researcher roles

Both researchers are academic staff members in the IOP department. Whilst collecting the data, the first researcher was the convenor of the event. The second researcher was a participant-student in the event. The first researcher conducted the data analysis, interpreted it and structured the research. The second researcher assisted in interpreting and structuring the research.

Sampling

The researchers used convenience (Breverton & Millward, 2004) and opportunistic sampling (Terre Blanche, Painter & Durrheim, 2006). The case study comprised the 2009 master's students ($N = 23$). Whilst collecting the data, the researchers divided the students into two groups. Eight volunteers participated in the event. Seven were women and one was a man. All were between 25 and 38 years of age and worked full time in different organisations. The remaining students acted as scribes.

Data collection methods

The researchers used a systems psychodynamic LP (Stapley, 1996; 2006). The Organisation for Promoting Understanding of Society (OPUS) developed it for use in research and consulting (Neumann, Keller & Dawson-Shepherd, 1997; Stapley & Rickman, 2010). Its design is unstructured, allowing one hour for exploring a specific matter experientially through thinking and free association (Stapley & Collie, 2005). In the next hour, researchers process the conscious and unconscious aspects of the matter into working hypotheses (Terre Blanche, Durrheim & Painter, 2006). A system psycho-dynamically informed convenor manages the time and task boundaries (Dartington, 2000). Research validity depends on the convenor's ability to provide a contained space without judgement, memory or desire (Miller, 1993). The volunteers sat around a table, surrounded by the scribes. The convenor introduced LP matter, stated as 'explore your experience as a master's student'.

Recording of data

The scribes recorded the data verbatim and the convenor made field notes. In the second hour, the whole group, divided into five subgroups, formulated the working hypotheses. The researchers integrated the verbatim material with the hypotheses the group and the convenor's field notes generated. This integration was the research text.

Data analyses

The researchers used thematic analysis (Breverton & Millward, 2004; Camic, Rhodes & Yardley, 2003). They applied simple hermeneutics to the text in order to understand the participants' meaning. Two themes emerged. The researchers applied double hermeneutics (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009) to interpret the data from the systems psychodynamic stance (using Armstrong, 2005; Campbell, 2007; Cilliers & Koortzen, 2005; Huffington *et al.*, 2004; Klein, 2005). Congruent with the group relations notion of group-as-whole and the LP assumption of the individual speaking on behalf of the system, the researchers analysed the data and reported them (Stapley, 2006). For each theme, the researchers formulated a working hypothesis. They integrated them into the research hypothesis (see Schafer, 2003).

Strategies employed to ensure quality data

The researchers ensured scientific rigour by focusing on credibility, dependability, transferability and ethics (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Terre Blanche, Durrheim & Painter 2006). They ensured credibility through the authorised involvement of all parties (Hirschhorn, 1997). They ensured dependability using the scientific rigour they applied in planning and executing the research project. Transferability referred

to ensuring a scientific link between the LP data and the systems psychodynamic stance (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Eisner, 1998).

The first researcher is a psychologist with training in systems psychodynamics – as it applies to consulting and research, according to the conditions of Brunner, Nutkevitch and Sher (2006). Ethicality referred to obtaining the informed consent of all participants, keeping the identities of the eight volunteers confidential, not causing them harm or invading their privacy (De Vos, Strydom, Fouché & Delport, 2002).

Reporting

The researchers reported their findings in terms of the manifested basic assumption themes.

Findings

Two themes emerged. They were anxiety and basic assumption functioning.

Anxiety

Participants experienced crossing the boundary into the master's programme and the selection as 'intimidating', 'overwhelming' and 'daunting'. They were pessimistic ('I did not think I would make it'). They found the selection 'surprising' and saw the procedure as an obstacle to their dreams of becoming psychologists. On the other hand, their acceptance in the programme led to 'excitement' and 'feeling very special' to know 'that I was successful'. Once participants started engaging with the task of handing in assignments, their excitement faded. They became 'surprised that this was not the same as honours'. They described the work as 'hard', 'difficult', 'pressuring' and 'unstructured'. It made them feel 'out of my comfort zone' and 'out of control'. They realised that they would have to 'juggle everything', 'strike a balance' and use skills that they had never used before.

Most participants considered leaving the programme at some point. They reported feeling despondent and having thoughts of 'giving up'. Their anxiety about failure brought compulsive coping methods to the fore: 'I just worked harder' and 'put in more hours'. Many had to make a decision 'to go or to stay', to 'get stuck in fear' or 'make a paradigm shift' and become 'flexible'. Their possible failure did not relate to their dreams of becoming psychologists. Their anxiety was about survival. They approached it by competing ('I know I was stronger than some of the others'), guilt (leaving would 'rob another person from participation'), projection ('I am doing this for my family'), personal growth ('I have to lift myself and be strong') and self-motivation ('I know I am much more resilient than I thought').

Once they began to get their marked assignments back, they realised that lecturers commented on their performance and marked in different ways. They experienced this as 'an inconsistency' and 'a disappointment'. Some suggested that the complexity of the course content was unexpected

and difficult to deal with. Participants coped with the work and the split experience by relying on their own resilience or by becoming rebellious ('I just wanted to give it up, and get my life back'). Participants expressed 'how naive' their expectations were to think that 'the master's would be easy'. They 'realised how little I know' about what the programme was about in terms of academic content.

Participants experienced a split between various aspects relating to their competence. On the one hand, they said that they knew what they needed to do. They had the energy to do the work and had been successful up to that point in time. On the other hand, they did not know what they needed to do, were unsure and experienced a lack of confidence about doing anything ('I thought I just can't do this'). Their naiveté was connected to 'not knowing' the content of the programme, 'not knowing what I got myself in to' and not having any idea what master's study was about ('no one in my family did such a degree before'; 'I never thought of what a psychologist really does').

Basic assumption functioning

Dependence

Participants expressed their strong dependence on predictability, form and structure. They often referred to the master's programme as 'having no structure' and how 'unexpected' that was. They expressed their need for emotional security as a 'soundboard', 'a mentor or life coach' to 'give perspective'. Participants continuously referred to their dependent coping mechanism of needing to be self-reliant and resilient, as if this had become their religion (Blackman, 2004) – something to guide them through difficult times in the programme. Counter dependence manifested in the participants' implied love-hate relationships with the lecturers. They saw the lecturing staff members as 'intimidating', 'inconsistent' and as causes of confusion in the different ways they gave feedback on assignments. Comments on how lonely they were usually followed these comments. Instead of working with their loneliness in an authorised manner (Hirschhorn, 1997), they became stuck in their lonely child ego state (James, 1977). It was as if their need to stay reactive and childlike was stronger than their need to step into adult roles of pushing boundaries (Cytrynbaum & Noumair, 2004).

Fight and flight

Fight responses manifested in participants' excuses for not having enough time and resources. It was as if they were fighting something outside of themselves in order to avoid taking responsibility for being out of control. In a way, they were fighting the primary task of being a student and learning (Bion, 2003). They said they were 'overwhelmed' and thus de-authorised (Campbell & Groenbaek, 2006). The participants did not allow themselves to express any negative feelings. Yet, below the surface, their aggressive tendencies appeared in their projections onto the 'rigid programme', 'limited time' and the 'inconsistent lecturers'. It was as if they

contained the students' survival anxiety. It seemed that the conflict they were fighting was to stay in the programme and keep their family relationships and marriages intact.

Flight responses manifested as flight into-past and into-future. In their fantasy, the past was an ideal place where the students 'had time to attend to their families' and when they were in a 'much more structured' and less complex honours IOP course. At the same time, they fantasised about the future as a place where they would complete their studies and be professional psychologists. In this future flight, they also negated their second year dissertation. Another flight response was avoiding feelings of anger and hostility towards authority figures (including the lecturers in the room) – it was as if the students desperately needed to impress them. This avoidance extended to their search for their own identities (Campbell & Huffington, 2008).

Pairing

Participants tried to pair with authority: the lecturers, the department and the programme. Because authority did not reciprocate, the participants projected their anger back and described authority as distant, cold, inefficient and unstructured. As compensation, they expressed the need for a soundboard, mentor and coach, which they always linked to expressions of 'God's grace'. It was as if they projected their lonely struggle onto an imagined connection with a force that would save them miraculously and gracefully from the anxiety of coping on their own. Therefore, they did not address their high level of performance anxiety successfully.

As another compensation, they started (through their assignments) to pair with their tasks. This happened in their singleton roles based on their individual resilience, about which they became quite proud. The evidence showed that the participants, as a collective, struggled with building any kind of relationship. This might be a result of their high levels of interpersonal competition and the accompanying performance anxiety (Blackman, 2004).

One-ness

The researchers did not refer to the participants as objects of togetherness or cohesion. They framed the relatedness identity of the participants in their connection with outsiders and imagined authority figures (mentors). Therefore, their emotional attachment was with their known and fantasy relationships and their detachment towards those in the same boat as themselves. The researchers hypothesised that the intensity of the competition in the group led to the participants avoiding internal intimacy. This could also have happened to keep the fantasy of winning the competition alive (Czander, 1993).

Me-ness

Participants' one-ness as group members manifested in their relatedness to their families. One participant referred to doing the studies 'for my family'. Me-ness also manifested in the many references to 'me', 'myself', 'I', 'my studies', 'I'd rather do it myself' – as if the participants were fighting to have an effect and be heard as individuals. Participants also referred to their 'loneliness' and 'alienation'. This linked to working on assignments late at night. It was as if the master's programme had become the participants' life partners with whom they spent many intimate nights. One participant referred to a recent divorce. This showed that me-ness compensated for the loss of meaningful relationships. Participants expressed their loneliness in the first person singular – as if they could not even make emotional connections with loss.

The importance of personal growth followed most references to loneliness. It was as if personal growth, as an individual endeavour, became a defence against connecting with others. Participants conceptualised personal growth as toughness in coping with difficult circumstances. This framing did not include the relationship interdependency that personal growth models, like self-actualisation (Rogers, 1985) or individualisation (Jung, 1986), describe. On another level, it was as if participants attached to their singleton roles strongly as a defence against the anxiety of sharing and letting others see their vulnerability.

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to describe the system psychodynamic experiences of first-year master's students in industrial and organisational psychology. The research was important because of its rich description of students' unconscious experiences. Accessing these behaviours could assist students and academic departments to manage students' expectations and demands during master's studies.

Theme 1: Anxiety

This theme illustrated the extent and depth of the students' unconscious experiences. They projected their paranoid anxiety (Czander, 1993) about failure and leaving the programme onto the selection procedure and the lecturers. Their performance anxiety (Menzies, 1993) became arrogance, implying that they knew more than the authority figures did about assessment. The researchers interpreted this as narcissistic tendencies the students used as a defence against their vulnerability (Sandler, Person & Fonagy, 2004).

The students idealised (Blackman, 2004) their membership of the programme and becoming psychologists. At the same time, they felt under attack from the demands of the programme. The researchers interpreted this as feelings of being inadequate (Klein, 1988). This suggested that the students projected their narcissism to relieve their shame about their inadequacy (Freud, 1921). This defence was a turning into the self. Instead of being angry at the objects of their anger (like the department), they introjected the anger (Blackman, 2004). The researchers interpreted this behaviour as perfectionism – an obsessive narcissistic wish (Blackman, 2004). This suggests that their wish for narcissistic perfection acted as a defensive distortion of reality (an affectionately labelled fantasy based on the originally perfect self-object bliss of the symbiotic phase). See Czander (1993).

The researchers interpreted the students' surprise and naiveté as a denial of the complexity inherent in a master's programme and psychology training – a disavowal of a reality despite the overwhelming evidence of its existence (Blackman, 2004). The researchers interpreted the students' need to leave the programme as regression (Campbell & Huffington, 2008) because of their insecurity and because parental figures were not meeting their need for acceptance. This was a defence against their perceived incompetence and the introjections thereof.

Reaction formation (Blackman, 2004) manifested as individual resilience to cover for their unexpressed anger, incompetence and vulnerability. They split the good (positive) from the bad (negative) as a symptom of their denial of autonomy (Czander, 1993). They could not move out of this ambiguity. This means that they could not move to a position where they projected only good feelings and parts onto an object in order to idealise it and subsequently to develop superior-subordinate relations, integrate and bond (Vansina & Vansina-Cobbaert, 2008). It was as if their child ego state functioning (James, 1977) and its primitive defences of splitting and projection (Blackman, 2004) had trapped them.

Working hypothesis 1

Their anxiety to impress, and get acceptance from, their authority-in-the-mind de-authorise master's students when they enter the programme. They introject incompetence, project competence onto the academic staff and rivalry onto student colleagues. This leaves them stuck in their singleton roles with only individual resilience as a coping mechanism.

Theme 2: Basic assumption functioning

This theme illustrated the intensity of master's students' anxiety about the content and structure of the programme. They split their previous ability to use structure from their present incompetence about not coping with lack of structure. They became dependent on various objects that did not satisfy their performance needs and acted out their counter dependence on staff members as parental figures. They used fight to get attention and flight when it did not happen. They had limited resources to connect with one another as support systems. Therefore, they had to use their individual resilience to cope. If this carries on for long, one can expect symptoms of burnout (Cilliers, 2003), as in their expressed helplessness.

The researchers interpreted the students' tendency to avoid building relationships with others as their over identification with authority (as parental figures). It is a defence against building relationships with peers. This may connect to their performance anxiety about research when they pair with a supervisor and the dissertation becomes the result (a baby). Playing out their intimacy needs in relatedness with authority could help them to achieve their ultimate goal of qualifying as psychologists.

Working hypothesis 2

Master's students' performance anxiety and inability to form new relationships lead to an experienced incompetence with individual resilience as their only available coping mechanism.

The researchers integrated these findings using the adapted CIBART model (Cilliers & Koortzen, 2005). Because all of the interpretations imply conflict, the researchers did not treat it as a separate theme.

Task

In terms of their primary task, students expressed their realistic cognitive understanding of what they need to do. Emotionally, they felt overwhelmed and exhausted. Motivationally, they experienced high levels of performance anxiety and a need to over-control (Sievers, 2009). This derailed the task emotionally. The students replaced it with survival (originally a secondary task) as the new primary task. The researchers linked their performance anxiety and narcissism and thought that the department, by referring to the master's programme as the department's flagship, projected their performance anxiety onto the students. The department unconsciously tasked them with keeping the ship sailing on its behalf but without authorising them to do so. This could explain the student's irrationality and lack of (sibling) relationships.

Role

In their normative roles (Obholzer & Roberts, 1994), the students were cognitively and emotionally unclear about entering the programme and managing their academic tasks. Their previous academic skills did not help them. In their experiential roles, they introjected pressure and incompetence. The researchers interpreted this as the method the students used to contain the shadow side of the system, allowing the lecturers to keep the competence. This left the students in the adapted child ego state with its anxiety about unclear boundaries. In their phenomenal roles, the students carried, and identified with, the systemic projections about learners or children performing academically well whilst remaining personally resilient. This made the parents (the department) look good but not good enough and they authorised themselves to be regarded as adults (Vansina & Vansina-Cobbaert, 2008).

Authorisation

The students experienced their authorisation as a roller coaster of high and low expectations, hope and despair, competence and incompetence. They experienced low emotional authorisation from the authority figures (the academic staff members) but could not manage effective and supportive inter-relationships. This meant that they had to self-authorise as a defence against the withholding of the authority figures (Vansina & Vansina-Cobbaert, 2008). The authority-in-the-mind (Armstrong, 2005) disappointed them. This meant that they had to contain everything that was authoritative and rely on resilience.

The researchers interpreted their way of self-authorisation as a next wave of dependence on authority. This was to use many positive psychology constructs in their discourse. This started a new wave of competition amongst them, albeit to argue whom the most resilient student would be (Stapley, 2006).

Boundaries

The students experienced high levels of anxiety about task and time boundaries (Lawrence, 1999). The researchers interpreted the lack of clarity about task boundaries as their limited authorisation, especially from within. With regard to the students' struggle to manage time, the researchers felt that it was because the students were emotionally out of control and struggling to differentiate and integrate (Fox & Spector, 2005). They tried hard not to let the emotional toxicity (see Porter-O'Grady & Malloch, 2007) spill over into their work and family lives. References to God and the church surrounded these responses. The researchers interpreted them as the students' guilt feelings about not attending to their families well enough. It was as if the students used their guilt and shame (Mollon, 2004) to hide their anger about being away from their loved ones – the anger that they could not express at the programme authorities.

The participants interpreted their anxiety about the time and task boundaries as their incompetence and 'not making it'. The turned the challenge of managing boundaries into opportunities to be resilient and to compete by being strong, self-reliant, independent and, eventually, lonely. It was as if holding tight boundaries around the self became their formula for survival (Obholzer & Roberts, 1994).

Identity

The students' identity consciously contained their rational attachment (Rholes & Simpson, 2004) to their academic tasks and their boundary demands. Their work became unconsciously counterproductive (Fox & Spector, 2005) because their anxiety about balancing intellectual and emotional demands, differentiating and integrating (Sievers, 2009) preoccupied them. The split between academic performance and personal development drained their emotional and, sometimes, intellectual energy. Nevertheless, their self-idealisation and quest for perfection motivated them – if not to achieve academic excellence then at least to become more resilient (see Sievers, 2009).

Working hypothesis 3

The split between holding on to their intellectual and academic competence, whilst struggling to stay emotionally grounded, characterises students' identity. They introject the adapted child ego state with frustrated attachment needs and use flight into an obsessive search for personal growth.

Research hypothesis

The researchers formulated the research hypothesis that follows. After a period of adaptation, master's students seem to cope with most of the intellectual demands of the programme. They introject incompetence. This leads to their feeling stuck because they do not have access to a wide repertoire of feelings and ways of connecting. It eventually drains their energy. Their compensatory defence is a quest for personal growth to cope and to impress authority.

Conclusions

The researchers concluded that, although most IOP master's students seem to perform well academically, it seems that the programme unconsciously acts as an attack on their emotional and relational coping mechanisms. This is a conflict between being competent and feeling incompetent. As a defence against the attack, students compensate by using flight into personal growth for the sake of coping, and not – as the positive psychology literature suggests (Snyder & Lopez, 2002) – to achieve the most favourable life experiences, happiness and meaning. The compensation impressed the department. The evidence suggested that the notion of growth that the students acted out actually serves the department's agenda and narcissistic fantasy.

Recommendations

The researchers recommend that the findings are shared with academic staff members to study the manifestation and depth of the unconscious experiences of master's students in IOP. Practices could be built into the selection and training to make these experiences more real, to counteract the high levels of anxiety and as learning opportunities for students.

Possible limitations of the study

A limitation of the study was that the researchers were part of the system they studied (see Hinshelwood & Skogstad, 2005). This suggests that subjective experiences influenced the trustworthiness of the data.

Suggestions for further research

The researchers suggest that future research focuses on system domain defences (Bain, 1998) that manifest in higher education teaching and learning as well as in master's training in psychology. Although it was not the aim of this research, the researchers became aware of parallel processes and the mirroring that manifested between the students and the staff (see Kets de Vries, 1991). One could hypothesise that the student subsystem contained the projected performance anxiety on behalf of the academic staff. This needs to be researched further.

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Authors' contributions

F.C. (University of South Africa) was responsible for planning and conducting the empirical research as well as interpreting

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