ISSN (online) : 1445-7377 ISSN (print) : 2079-7222



The Positive Experiences of Becoming a Psychologist: A Master's Student's Journey

by **L. Nel** and **P. Fouché**

Abstract

Since most research on the topic of experiences related to becoming a psychologist is conducted from a pathogenic paradigm, the study reported in this paper aimed to describe the journey of a clinical master's student from the perspective of positive psychology. A strengths-based paradigm allowed the researcher and the participant to understand the journey through the lens of personal growth, professional development, coping strategies, and attempts to make sense of the related difficulties. In this study, a qualitative research approach was used and a single case study design was employed. Data analysis followed the procedure of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Themes that were conceptualized and operationalized within the structure of psychological well-being (Ryff, 1989) comprised six well-being domains, namely (a) personal growth; (b) purpose in life; (c) autonomy; (d) self-acceptance; (e) positive relationships with others; and (f) environmental mastery. The most prominent finding was that, while the experience of becoming a psychologist is known to be a long and difficult journey, it can also be rewarding and positive, and holds the potential to enhance psychological well-being.

Introduction

The literature on the life of practising psychologists consistently indicates that psychologists are faced with a variety of stressors and demands and that the practice of psychology can be emotionally taxing (Barnett, Baker, Elman, & Schoener, 2007; Case & McMinn, 2001; Green & Hawley, 2009; Jordaan, Spangenberg, Watson, & Fouché, 2006; O'Connor, 2001; Schwebel & Coster, 1998). A South African study conducted in 2007 found that 56.3% of psychologists have above-average anxiety levels, while 54.2% of psychologists are mildly depressed (Jordaan et al., 2006). Another study by Jordaan, Spangenberg, Watson, & Fouché (2007), which explored burnout and its correlates among South African psychologists, indicated that, of the 238 participants in the study, approximately half experienced moderate to high levels of burnout; which resonates with Corey, Schneider Corey, and Callanan's (1993) reference to psychotherapy as a "hazardous profession" (1993, p. 47). Understanding the causes of stress is important in the journey of becoming a psychologist (El-Ghoroury, Galper, Sawaqdeh, & Bufka, 2012), in that it creates the opportunity to address the above-mentioned stressors more effectively. However, more research is needed to inform professionals and trainers of effective ways to promote stress management and psychological well-being (Myers et al., 2012), since wellness behaviours learned and adapted habits set may endure throughout the course of the career (El-Ghoroury et al., 2012).

Even though the journey of becoming a psychologist starts long before the master's degree course, it is during these years that most students tend to realise the reality and experience the effect of their psychology studies. Master's students in psychology are a unique population, in that they have to deal with academic stressors and

© The Author(s). This Open Access article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons License [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0].
The IPJP is published in association with NISC (Pty) Ltd and Informa UK Limited (trading as Taylor & Francis Group).
www.ipjp.org
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/20797222.2017.1299284

demands as well as take on the new role of being a psychologist. It has been shown that high stress levels can affect both clinical practice and the overall training experience (Elman & Forrest, 2007; Gaubatz & Vera, 2006; Kottler & Swartz, 2004; Myers et al., 2012; Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003; Rosenberg, Getzelman, Arcinue, & Oren, 2005). The majority of these negative experiences can be explained by the possibility that a student's psychological issues may be uncovered by studying to practise psychotherapy, by exposure to methods of self-analysis, and by balancing student roles with professional roles (Barnett & Hyde, 2001; Dearing, Maddux, & Tangney, 2005; Holzman, Searight, & Hughes, 1996; Howard, Inman, & Altman, 2006; Pillay & Kritzinger, 2007; Stratton, Kellaway, & Rottini, 2007; Truell, 2001).

This paints a rather gloomy picture of the lived reality of beginner psychologists and points to the need to explore their journey from a more positive approach. Along with taking due cognisance of the extensively documented stressors, it is considered equally important to know the degree of satisfaction, happiness and other characteristics of the good life that students experience during this journey. Another reason that a more positive research approach to this journey was considered was due to the recognition that positive elements foster willingness and motivation to undertake the necessary activities towards personal well-being and to persevere through the many and widely discussed difficulties (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Rosenberg et al. (2005) are of the opinion that, in light of the importance of personal growth and development for trainee psychologists, it is crucial that professional training programmes not only include methods of enhancing personal growth and insight, but also integrate the evaluation thereof with the curriculum philosophy in which the training programmes are embedded. The very few studies that pursued this notion indicate that trainee psychologists improve and develop across a diverse set of competencies, such as better coping strategies (Hill, Sullivan, Knox, & Schlosser, 2007), higher levels of autonomy (Tryon, 2000), more self-reflection practices (Coster & Schwebel, 1997), the maintenance of healthy relationships (Lee, Eppler, Kendal, & Latty, 2001) and personal fulfilment (Furr & Carroll, 2003).

Psychological Well-Being Model as Meta-Theory for the Study

In her attempt to represent a distinct form of well-being based in the eudaimonic theoretical perspective, Ryff initially used key concepts from Aristotle to strengthen the conceptual foundations of eudaimonic well-being. Being aware of the various forms that well-being can take, Ryff then revisited earlier theories that attempted to describe levels and domains of psychological well-being. Drawing on points of convergence within these theoretical formulations, Ryff (1989) suggested an integrative multidimensional model of psychological well-being that condensed six psychological dimensions of challenged thriving. These dimensions are: autonomy; self-acceptance; environmental mastery; personal growth; positive relations; and openness towards experiences (Ryff, 1989). Ryff's work has been used widely both as a theoretical framework and as a psychological instrument in studies. Already by 2006, her two key papers (Ryff, 1989; and Ryff and Keyes, 1995) had been cited in more than 500 published studies (Springer, Hauser, & Freese, 2006). The decision to use Ryff's (1989) model is substantiated by the fact that it offers not only a thorough theoretical basis, but also empirical evidence supporting the practical operationalization of the model (Ryff & Keyes, 1995).

Research Aim

The aim of this study was to explore and describe the experience of a master's degree student in a professional psychology programme in South Africa. The constituent experiential themes were identified, conceptualized, and operationalized within the structure of psychological well-being (Ryff, 1989). Thus, the principle question asked in this investigation was, "What are the positive experiences related to being a master's student in psychology?", with the intent of discovering the positive dynamics of taking the first steps towards professional registration as a clinical psychologist.

Research Method

Phenomenology is built upon the premise of social constructivism in that it recognizes the importance of the subjective human creation of meaning (Shinebourne, 2011). In attempting to achieve the aim of the study, a phenomenological approach was highly suited to help understand the significance of the journey and answer the "what" and "how" questions. By enabling the researcher to come as close as possible to the "real" experience of the participant, the choice of research design links with Starks and Trinidad's (2007) view that, at the end of a phenomenological account, the reader should feel as if he or she had vicariously experienced the phenomenon under study. The aim of phenomenological research is not to solve problems, but to describe the meaning that people attach to their daily experiences (De Vos & Fouché, 1998).

Given that a central focus of phenomenology is on how the individual perceives the world (McLeod, 2011), the participant's *own account* of being a master's student in a professional psychology training programme was therefore documented and analysed. Interpretations were rooted in what the participant said in his own words, with direct quotations used to substantiate the interpretation (Pringle, Drummond, McLafferty, & Hendry, 2011).

© The Author(s). This Open Access article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons License [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0].
The *IPJP* is published in association with NISC (Pty) Ltd and Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Participant Profile
One English-speaking participant was purposively chosen, based on his inclusion in a psychology master's programme and his willingness to participate in the study. Jim is a 39-year-old male who decided to further his studies in clinical psychology mainly because of his positive experiences in working with people.

Data Collection
Data was gathered using face-to-face semi-structured interviews over a one-year period. This proceeded in accordance with suggested IPA methodology and case study research (Howitt, 2010; Merriam, 2009; Pringle et al., 2011). Interviews were initiated by providing the participant with the opportunity to share all positive and negative personal experiences related to being a clinical master's student in a professional psychology programme, after which the more positive experiences shared were investigated further, taking care to avoid leading questions. The interviews thus started with a general open question from which funnelling questions developed (Gibson & Brown, 2009). In addition, the participant was asked to engage in reflective writing, given that a wealth of research suggests the keeping of journals and diaries as an increasingly common form of data collection in qualitative research, of particular relevance in the area of personal development (Jasper, 2005; Toohey, 2002). Topics such as day-to-day experiences, challenges faced and emotions experienced, as well as dealing with these challenges and emotions, were proposed in order to guide the focus of the participant's reflection and writings.

Data Analysis
Analysis of the data gathered in this single case study followed the process of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). The understanding of human experience is the essence of psychology, and IPA offers researchers the opportunity to learn from the experts – the research participants themselves (Smith & Osborn, 2004). IPA is particularly appropriate when psychologically unique experiences are being studied from the person's own perspective, in that the interpretation focuses primarily on meaning-making processes (Howitt, 2010). This method of data analysis offered the researchers the opportunity to engage with the research question on an idiographic level where the participant's experience is coupled with a subjective and reflective process of interpretation (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005). The transparency of the approach also appealed to the researchers, as its emphasis on reflexivity throughout the process facilitates the recognition of preconceptions and experiences that might have influenced the study. Although the majority of studies that have employed IPA lie within the field of health psychology, Reid et al. (2005) stress that, "in keeping with the broad premise of positive psychology (e.g., Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 21), there is scope for IPA research to become less disease- and deficit-focused, and for participants to be given a chance to express their views about strength, wellness and quality of life" (p. 21). Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) advise that the steps of IPA [(a) familiarisation with the data; (b) preliminary theme identification; (c) identification of theme inter-connectedness; (d) systematic tabling of themes; and (e) cross-case analysis] be used as guidelines only and be open to adaptation. IPA allows for the use of a theoretical framework, in this case psychological well-being, although the analysis was not led by any pre-existing theory. The data bank remained open to new ideas emerging from the interviews, with the process of interpreting the data inductive instead of deductive (Smith, 2004).

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations
Trustworthiness was ensured through theory and investigator triangulation, reflexivity, the careful use of field notes, and constant checking with the participant. While this study did not aim to generate generalisable findings, transferability was enhanced by providing in-depth and rich descriptions. Ethical practice was ensured by the sensitive positioning of the researchers (both of whom also lecture in a similar programme), informed consent (from the participant and his head of department) and the careful storage of confidential data. The participant was permitted to withdraw from the study at any stage for whatever reason. Approval for this study was obtained from the departmental and faculty ethics committees of the institution.

Findings

Jim's case is built upon three in-depth interviews (beginning, middle and end of the master's degree year) and three reflective writings, which were submitted between the interviews. Jim chose to describe the year with the word "curiosity", which was triggered by his openness and passion for the discipline of psychology. Four main themes evolved from the data.

Theme 1: *Climbing Kilimanjaro*
Continuous self-reflection made Jim aware of how the master's year contributed towards a greater narrative. Confirming this notion was his awareness of how significant the year became in relation to finding meaning in his life. In his meaning-making process, Jim used his prior experience of climbing Kilimanjaro as a metaphor for this journey.

> *I am on a journey to create meaning of these huge shifts happening in my life. So where do I begin? At the base of the mountain, I looked up at this mountain I had to climb. I had heard various stories of the adventure from those who had travelled this path before, but like any great adventure, you have to experience it for yourself. If I had to look back and identify any great shifts, it would be hard to pinpoint any*

© The Author(s). This Open Access article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons License [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0].
The *IPJP* is published in association with NISC (Pty) Ltd and Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

specific momentous event. Rather, it is those smaller qualitative moments, tiny events, which accumulate in reshaping my sense of who I am. I think it's just amazing. We got to the top and saw the sun at its peak. But it's not about getting to the top; it's actually about the journey. There's something so deeply satisfying about being able to walk for nine hours a day. And you can't talk, the walking is really slow. Everything slows down so you become so introspective; you go through a lot of processes yourself. There's something beautiful about that. I just wish this year would slow down; all these lecturers are coming with assignments and this research monster. Ja, the route is tougher than I thought. When I climbed Kilimanjaro I went up the easy route. I think this Master's in psychology is more of an Everest. You get mountain sickness occasionally and then you have to take a step back. Just to chill and get your head around it. Yes, I know what the pay-off is. And I think the other important lesson that I learnt there is that Swahili saying of polé polé, slowly slowly. And that comes back to me: slow down. I like the metaphor of Kilimanjaro; it is a slowing down for me, it is a process of deep introspection. You know what, the weird thing is I'm not scared. The big challenge is learning to trust yourself and believe in what you have to offer. Like I had to trust myself starting Kilimanjaro. Yeah, but there are some things you just believe you can do and then you do them.

Theme 2: ***Self versus Therapist or Self as Therapist?***
Jim identified areas of personal growth, of which the first was reflecting upon oneself as well as on the context. Jim connected with his emotions, and this allowed for the identification of personal character strengths and change. Through this identification, a process of integration between the personal self and therapist was catalysed. The process inevitably accompanied feelings of uncertainty and confusion, which Jim was aware of and used to further understand this integration.

It's a simple thing of flow with clients; for me it's a real sense of flow. Doing therapy is like being in a state of flow. Before I shut my eyes, I'm so excited about waking up the next day. I just want the night to be over quickly so I can wake up as quickly as possible. I love it, it drives me completely. It's complex and challenges you on so many levels. I won't call myself a psychologist anymore. I'm a student psychologist and I'm proud of that. It's important that language, for me. There's a growth process I still need to go through. That's what it says on my card. I'm a student psychologist. I'm very comfortable, I love being a student, I love this process. I also get quieter and quieter as the year progresses, I learn to listen more. To really listen and to engage with others. Whether that other is a fellow student, a lecturer or a client, to truly engage is to listen. I feel more grounded and settled. I listen a lot more, not simply to what someone else says, but I try to listen to the whole person; what they are feeling, thinking, being. You kind of go, "What am I doing here?" At the same time you ask the question, "Well, what's my voice?" From a client perspective and self-perspective I think you have to introspect all the time, just to find that sense of self again. Every day I question my own abilities ... Who am I? Why am I doing this? Do I really have what it takes to become a psychologist? Looking inward to explore my response: How do I understand this client? How do I understand myself in relationship to this client? And then, to reflect on the clients' journey: How far have they moved? Is this process working for them? Why is this client in therapy? Am I serving my client? How are my personal issues affecting the process? I was articulating who I was, who I'm becoming, what is my journey. And I think it's always going to be a process of "I am becoming". I don't think I'm ever going to reach a process where I say "I am this as a therapist". I think that is impossible. It should be impossible.

Theme 3: ***Important Role Players***
Jim identified different role players that had had a significant influence on his experiential journey, namely the members of his class, his clinical supervisors and the academic staff members. Jim's fellow *classmates* and the atmosphere created by the group were flagged as a major positive.

My supervisor, my class. That was the most brilliant part of this year. Therapy is about relationships, and about me developing a relationship with somebody else. That starts in the process of your class. What is my relationship with this group? What are my individual relationships with these people? And that magical area of this relationship that exists between two people or a group is sacred almost, because that is the healing process. You know, the classmates were amazing; over the year they engaged with me and we'd talk about it, you know, all that stuff you do in formal therapy with clients, the class were doing for me, and that was remarkable. I suppose that is what you get when you're surrounded by a group of psychologists. And even in the class you can't deny that there are dynamics and you just have to work that out. It's a great platform to say, is this about me? What is it

© The Author(s). This Open Access article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons License [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0].
The *IPJP* is published in association with NISC (Pty) Ltd and Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

about? What is it about me that I'm reacting like this? One of my big learnings was the whole relational aspect. You know, this is part of my process. This is what I'm going to get in therapy. This is going to be a client of mine. So what journey can I go on? What's happening within me?

Jim found *supervision* critical to his growth and development. Within supervision, he became aware of his personal growth and was challenged – with the main outcome of being more self-confident and the creation of a feeling of safety.

It was amazing to see my growth, to acknowledge my growth, especially with my supervisor. That's what the supervisor pinpoints. They look very carefully at where you can grow, what your weaknesses are, and where your strengths lie as well. My supervisor said a few things to me. I loved that. She said to me: "You need to investigate this and that about yourself." But that wasn't criticism, it was fantastic, I thought to myself, let me explore that. The supervisor was incredibly nurturing, pushing me in the right direction, to find my voice. What is amazing about my supervisor is that by the end of the year I was sitting in a supervision session and thinking I feel so confident. It's a real sense of flow that you can feel so open and discuss issues with confidence about your client. I loved that. It was a very contained space, a very boundaried space. I was articulating who I was, who I'm becoming, and what my journey is.

Jim also revealed that support from the Department of Psychology was a constant positive aspect throughout his journey; from its selection procedure to its academic standards. He highlighted that this department focuses on motivating students to be unique and original in their thinking.

But it was very empowering; they didn't try to break you down. They were trying to isolate you and find your strengths. And you become very aware of that early on in the process. It is a very nurturing environment and I think the philosophy is that "the department" really wants us to find our unique voice. They are aware of issues and problems and they are very perceptive of individual students.

Theme 4: *"Me Through Them": The Role of Clients*

Jim used his processes with clients to empower his own personal journey, as it encouraged him to gain more self-insight. He drew on personal strengths through clients' narratives and was confronted with his own personality dynamics. It is clear that he recognised the opportunity to grow and develop as a therapist through his clients.

Another important learning I will take forward is to always look for client's resources. To seek their potential, to help access their potential. It is easy to be seduced by the "problem", but to access individual resources is incredibly powerful. I had to apply the same principles to my life. You start out with an impulse to do something, you go through this huge amount of learning and training and you're growing all the time and developing as an individual. But ultimately you come back to yourself. And that should be a safe place to get back to. My clients had to conquer their own mountains. It was just remarkable. To see that devastation this individual had lived through. It was quite beautiful. And so powerful for where I was at that stage. I learnt a lot from them.

The four themes described above are summarised diagrammatically in Figure 1 below:

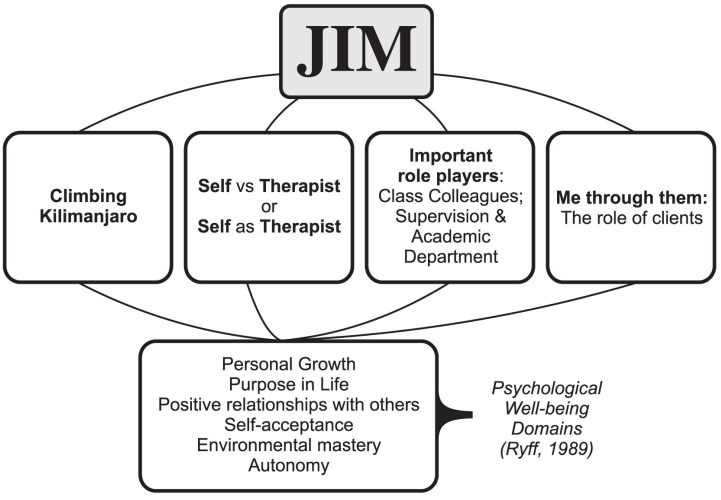

Figure 1. Diagrammatic Summary of Jim's Experience of Being a Master's Student in Professional Psychology

© The Author(s). This Open Access article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons License [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0].
The *IPJP* is published in association with NISC (Pty) Ltd and Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Consolidated Discussion of Themes

The themes described above all resonate with the journey of becoming a psychologist. In contrast to the majority of findings on this topic, Sheikh, Milne, and MacGregor (2007) indicate that some students do report powerful positive experiences related to clinical master's programmes in psychology. Through constant personal reflection, Jim was intensely aware of his journey, which enabled him to look constantly for the meaning in both the pleasant (e.g., working with clients) and the less pleasant (e.g., studying for examinations) activities. This practice is encouraged by Schwebel and Coster (1998), who highlight the necessity of nurturing skills of self-reflection above the pure gaining of knowledge, given that self-reflection is an essential aspect of any psychologist's developmental journey and prerequisite for optimal development (Kaslow, Dunn, & Smith, 2008; Neufeldt, Karno, & Nelson, 1996; Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2001; Woodcock, Richards, & Mugford, 2008).

Personal Growth and Openness towards Experiences

Personal growth is a progressive process and involves being conscious of one's thoughts as part of the process (Bauer & McAdams, 2010). First, Jim used the base of "the mountain" as his starting point. Although having experience of working with people before, he acknowledged that he knew very little of the clinical master's journey ahead. Such acknowledgement can create meaning in that it triggers curiosity and a sense of excitement. As indicated in the findings, he wanted to draw as much as possible from each exercise, activity, lecture, and therapeutic process. This is an illustration of openness with an orientation towards change and *personal growth* and is identified as one of the constructs that fits within a eudaimonic approach to well-being (Kopperud & Vittersø, 2008; Vittersø, 2004). In addition, conquering Kilimanjaro is a symbol of a slow and systematic process of perseverance. Jim's repeated comments of wanting the pace to slow down throughout the year were prominent. Jim explained that a slower pace would allow for better personal integration with the work to find meaning in the year as a whole and not only in the differentiated parts or in single experiences. An attitude of openness to learning and acceptance of the complexities of the profession are crucial for students in training programmes (Furr & Carroll, 2003; Jones, 2008; Neufeldt et al., 1996). Openness of this kind fostered a healthy sense of humility in that Jim realized how much there is to be curious about. All these factors have been proposed as broadening the thought-action repertoire by promoting interest in novel and/or challenging situations and accordingly promoting the incremental building of knowledge and well-being in a manner consistent with the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 1998; Gallagher & Lopez, 2007). The psychology Kilimanjaro symbolized is a journey of personal growth for Jim – not a reaching of a destination or a result.

Purpose in Life and Positive Relations with Others

Curious exploration leads to the formation of interest, which forms the proactive stage of purpose development. The recognition and capitalization of situations and opportunities (as illustrated in this case) have been posited as the second most important ingredient in the formation of *purpose in life* (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009). Jim's process of climbing his Kilimanjaro was also not a solo endeavour. He was able to identify support systems throughout the experience and in different contexts relevant to being a master's student in psychology. These experiences relate to Ryff's (1989) domain of *positive relationships with others*. As evident in the literature, positive relationships with significant others is ranked as an important aspect affecting the well-functioning of psychologists (Coster & Schwebel, 1997), and when an experience is shared, the joys and sorrows become more significant and less daunting (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005). In this regard, Jim's class colleagues, supervisor and academic staff were mentioned as sources of support. These ties made him aware of therapy being all about relationships and of his interaction styles with people. Rosenberg et al. (2005) and Volet and Mansfield (2006) comment on the close bonds that form due to the expectation of students to work in teams and do group assignments. Among other benefits, group activities assist students in analysing different perspectives and prove to be a major source of support for students in professional psychology programmes (Lee et al., 2001; Truell, 2001). Jim used these relationships to increase both self-awareness and his understanding of individual personality types. A further significant source of support was supervision, which Jim found to be critical to his personal growth and development as a psychologist. Jim's case serves as evidence for clinical supervision being pivotal in the developmental journey of a clinical master's student in psychology (Bernard, 2006), and supports the view of formal case supervision as the most salient influence on career development (Orlinsky, Botermans, & Rønnestad, 2001; Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003).

Self-acceptance and Autonomy

Being more accepting of himself created a feeling of unique worth whereby Jim could distinguish between his growth potential and acceptance of unchangeable characteristics (Gallagher & Lopez, 2007). As indicated in the findings, this self-acceptance dynamic was, to a significant extent, triggered by confrontations during supervision. This confirms the findings of studies aimed at identifying the sources of positive influence on professional development, which consistently identified formal case supervision as one of the top three sources (Orlinsky et al., 1999; Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003). Thus, in Jim's case, supervision positively influenced the psychological well-being domain of self-acceptance and cultivated higher levels of autonomy. Once Jim felt more comfortable in his role as a student psychologist, he could take more risks and act more independently.

© The Author(s). This Open Access article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons License [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0].
The *IPJP* is published in association with NISC (Pty) Ltd and Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Environmental Mastery

The academic environment has been identified as one of the contextual components that have a major impact on students' experiences (Dunn, McCarthy, Baker, Halonen, & Hill, 2007; Neufeldt et al., 1996). Ryff and Singer (2008) describe "the ability to choose or create contexts suitable to personal needs and values" (p. 1071) as a clear indication of a person's ability to control complex external activities. Jim's ability to identify growth-supporting contexts as part of the shaping of his environment in a desirable way is an example of environmental mastery, as posited by Ryff (1989) and Gallagher and Lopez (2007). Although Ryff and Singer (2008) acknowledge that the *dimension of environmental mastery* overlaps with other psychological constructs, such as a sense of control and self-efficacy, they propose that the distinction lies in finding or creating a context that suits one's needs and desires. Jim's journey was characterized by his feeling more in control, being able to figure things out, feeling competent, and having a sense of mastering.

Conclusion and Reflection

Jim's journey proved that the process of becoming a psychologist, and, more specifically, being a master's student, might be accompanied by beautiful views. His journey illustrates the positive end of the spectrum and directs attention to a possible psychofortogenic framework of development. As researchers and academics involved in the professional training of psychologists, becoming aware of Jim's experiences provided us with an increased sense of the critical incidents that have an effect on students' development, either positively or negatively. We realised that, even though professional training programmes are designed to provide students with critical content and practicum opportunities, they may also productively serve to generate and share information about what students experience in their early training. Jim's journey created a deeper awareness of how to optimize this experience and enhance psychological well-being among clinical master's students. To enhance the well-being of the profession of psychology in South Africa, there is an identified need for more research on trainee psychologists' personal journeys, and angles that branch out from the current study can be followed up by future research. In the end, thus, the study confronted us with our own "teaching Kilimanjaro" and the beautiful views it has to offer.

Referencing Format

Nel, L., & Fouché, P. (2017). The positive experiences of becoming a psychologist: A master's student's journey. *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology*, *17* [Special Edition: *Positive Psychology*], 12pp. doi: 10.1080/20797222.2017.1299284

About the Authors



Lindi Nel
Lecturer, Department of Psychology
University of the Free State, South Africa
E-mail address: nelli@ufs.ac.za

Dr Lindi Nel obtained her BA as well as her Honours degree in Psychology at the University of the North-West in Potchefstroom, South Africa, followed by a MA in Clinical and Counselling Psychology. She obtained a PhD in Psychology from the University of the Free State in 2012.

Dr Nel embarked on her academic career in 2005, and is currently a Lecturer in the Department of Psychology at the University of the Free State.

Dr Nel's research interests include positive psychology constructs and the teaching of psychology, and she has presented several papers in this field both nationally and internationally.

© The Author(s). This Open Access article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons License [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0].
The *IPJP* is published in association with NISC (Pty) Ltd and Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Paul Fouché
Associate Professor, Department of Psychology
University of the Free State, South Africa
E-mail address: FoucheJP@ufs.ac.za



Professor Paul Fouché obtained his BSocSc (Honours) and MSocSc (Counselling Psychology) degrees at the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein, South Africa.

After starting his academic career in 1995 as a Lecturer in Psychology at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University in Port Elizabeth, where he was later promoted to Senior Lecturer, in 2007 he was appointed as an Associate Professor in Psychology at the University of the Free State.

Having obtained his doctorate in the field of psychobiography, Professor Fouché continues to pursue research in the fields of psychobiography and case study.

References

Barnett, J. E., Baker, E. K., Elman, N. S., & Schoener, G. R. (2007). In pursuit of wellness: The self-care imperative. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, *38*(6), 603–612. doi: 10.1037/0735-7028.38.6.603

Barnett, R. C., & Hyde, J. S. (2001). Women, men, work and family: An expansionist theory. *American Psychologist*, *56*(10), 781–796. doi: 10.1037/0003-066X.56.10.781

Bauer, J. J., & McAdams, D. P. (2010). Eudaimonic growth: Narrative growth goals predict increases in ego development and subjective well-being 3 years later. *Developmental Psychology*, *46*(4), 761–772. doi: 10.1037/a0019654

Bernard, J. M. (2006). Tracing the development of clinical supervision. *The Clinical Supervisor*, *24*(1–2), 3–21. doi: 10.1300/J001v24n01_02

Case, P. W., & McMinn, M. R. (2001). Spiritual coping and well-functioning among psychologists. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, *29*(1), 29–40.

Corey, G., Schneider Corey, M., & Callanan, P. (1993). *Issues and ethics in the helping professions* (4th ed.). Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.

Coster, J. S., & Schwebel, M. (1997). Well-functioning in professional psychologists. *Professional Psychology*: *Research and Practice*, *28*(1), 5–13. doi: 10.1037/0735-7028.28.1.5

Dearing, R. L., Maddux, J. E., & Tangney, J. P. (2005). Predictors of psychological help seeking in clinical and counselling psychology graduate students. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, *36*(3*)*, 323–329. doi: 10.1037/0735-7028.36.3.323

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The "what" and "why" of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behaviour. *Psychological Inquiry*, *11*(4), 227–268. doi: 10.1207/S15327965PLI1104_01

De Vos, A. S., & Fouché, C. B. (1998). Selection of a research design. In A. S. de Vos (Ed.), *Research at grass roots. A primer for the caring professions*. Pretoria, South Africa: J. L. van Schaik.

Dunn, D. S., McCarthy, M. A., Baker, S., Halonen, J. S., & Hill, G. W. (2007). Quality benchmarks in undergraduate psychology programs. *American Psychologist*, *62*(7), 650–670. doi: 10.1037/0003-066X.62.7.650

El-Ghoroury, N. H., Galper, D. I., Sawaqdeh, A., & Bufka, L. F. (2012). Stress, coping, and barriers to wellness among psychology graduate students. *Training and Education in Professional Psychology*, *6*(2), 122–134. doi: 10.1037/a0028768

© The Author(s). This Open Access article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons License [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0].
The *IPJP* is published in association with NISC (Pty) Ltd and Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Elman, N. S., & Forrest, L. (2007). From trainee impairment to professional competence problems: Seeking new terminology that facilitates effective action. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, *38*(5), 501–509. doi: 10.1037/0735-7028.38.5.501

Fredrickson, B. L. (1998). What good are positive emotions? *Review of General Psychology*, *2*(3), 300–319. doi: 10.1037/1089-2680.2.3.300

Furr, S. R., & Carroll, J. J. (2003). Critical incidents in student counselor development. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, *81*(4), 483–489. doi: 10.1002/j.1556-6678.2003.tb00275.x

Gallagher, M. W., & Lopez, S. J. (2007). Curiosity and well-being. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, *2*(4), 236–248. doi: 10.1080/17439760701552345

Gaubatz, M. D., & Vera, E. M. (2006). Trainee competence in master's-level counseling programs: A comparison of counselor educators' and students' views. *Counselor Education & Supervision*, *46*(1), 32–43. doi: 10.1002/j. 1556-6978.2006.tb00010.x

Gibson, W. J., & Brown, A. (2009). *Working with qualitative data*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

Green, A. G., & Hawley, G. C. (2009). Early career psychologists: Understanding, engaging, and mentoring tomorrow's leaders. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, *40*(2), 206–212. doi: 10.1037/a0012504

Hill, C. E., Sullivan, C., Knox, S., & Schlosser, L. Z. (2007). Becoming psychotherapists: Experiences of novice trainees in a beginning graduate class. *Psychotherapy: Theory*, *Research*, *Practice*, *Training*, *44*(4), 434–449. doi: 10.1037/0033-3204.44.4.434

Holzman, L. A., Searight, H. R., & Hughes, H. M. (1996). Clinical psychology graduate students and personal psychotherapy: Results of an exploratory survey. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, *27*(1), 98–101. doi: 10.1037/0735-7028.27.1.98

Howard, E. E., Inman, A. G., & Altman, A. N. (2006). Critical incidents among novice counsellor trainees. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, *46*(2), 88–102. doi: 10.1002/j.1556-6978.2006.tb00015.x

Howitt, D. (2010). *Introduction to qualitative methods in psychology*. Harlow, UK: Pearson Publications.

Jasper, M. A. (2005). Using reflective writing within research. *Journal of Research in Nursing*, *10*(3), 247–260. doi: 10.1177/174498710501000303

Jones, C. M. (2008). From novice to expert: Issues of concern in the training of psychologists. *Australian Psychologist*, *43*(1), 38–54. doi: 10.1080/00050060601089470

Jordaan, I., Spangenberg, J. J., Watson, M. B., & Fouché, P. (2006). Emotional stress and coping strategies in South African clinical and counselling psychologists. *South African Journal of Psychology*, *37*(4), 835–855. Retrieved from http://www.sabinet. co.za/abstracts/sapsyc/sapsyc_v37_n4_a11.html

Jordaan, I., Spangenberg, J. J., Watson, M. B., & Fouché, P. (2007). Burnout and its correlates in South African clinical and counselling psychologists. *Acta Academica*, *39*(1), 176–201. Retrieved from http://www.sabinet. co.za/abstracts/academ/academ_ v39_n1_a8.html

Kashdan, T. B., & McKnight, P. E. (2009). Origins of purpose in life: Refining our understanding of a life well lived. *Psychological Topics*, *18*(2), 303–316. doi: 316.6:159.922.2

Kaslow, N. J., Dunn, S. E., & Smith, C. O. (2008). Competencies for psychologists in academic health centers (AHCs). *Journal of Clinical Psychology in Medical Settings*, *15*(1), 18–27. doi: 10.1007/s10880-008-9094-y

Kottler, A., & Swartz, S. (2004). Rites of passage: Identity and the training of clinical psychologists in the current South African context. *South African Journal of Psychology*, *34*(1), 55–71.

Kopperud, K. H., & Vittersø, J. (2008). Distinctions between hedonic and eudaimonic well-being: Results from a day reconstruction study among Norwegian jobholders. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, *3*(3), 174–181. doi: 10.080/ 7439760801999420

© The Author(s). This Open Access article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons License [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0].
The *IPJP* is published in association with NISC (Pty) Ltd and Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Lee, R. E., Eppler, C., Kendal, N., & Latty, C. (2001). Critical incidents in the professional lives of first year MFT students. *Contemporary Family Therapy*, *23*(1), 51–61. doi: 10.1023/A:1007872132292

Lyubomirsky, S., Sheldon, K. M., & Schkade, D. (2005). Pursuing happiness: The architecture of sustainable change. *Review of General Psychology*, *9*(2), 111–131. doi: 10.1037/1089-2680.9.2.111

McLeod, J. (2011). *Qualitative research in counselling and psychotherapy*. Thousand Oaks, CA. Sage.

Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA. Jossey-Bass.

Myers, S. B., Sweeney, A. C., Popick, V., Wesley, K. M., Bordfeld, A., & Fingerhut, R (2012). Self-care practices and perceived stress levels among psychology graduate students. *Training and Education in Professional Psychology*, *6*(1), 55–66. doi: 10.1037/a0026534

Neufeldt, S. A., Karno, M. P., & Nelson, M. L. (1996). A qualitative study of experts' conceptualization of supervisee reflectivity. *Journal of Counselling Psychology*, *43*(1), 3–9. doi: 10.1037/0022-0167.43.1.3

O'Connor, M. F. (2001). On the etiology and effective management of professional distress and impairment among psychologists. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, *32*(4), 345–350. doi: 10.1037/0735-7028.32.4.345

Orlinsky, D. E., Botermans, J.-F., & Rønnestad, M. H. (2001). Towards an empirically grounded model of psychotherapy training: Four thousand therapists rate influences on their development. *Australian Psychologist*, *36*(2), 139–148. doi: 10.1080/00050060108259646

Orlinsky, D. E., Rønnestad, M. H., Ambühl, H., Willutzki, U., Botermans, J.-F., Cierpka, M., Davis, J., & Davis, M. (1999). Psychotherapists' assessments of their development at different career levels. *Psychotherapy*, *36*(3), 203–215. doi: 10.1037/h0087772

Pillay, A. L., & Kritzinger, A. M. (2007). The dissertation as a component in the training of clinical psychologists. *South African Journal of Psychology*, *37*(3), 638–655. doi: 10.1177/008124630703700315

Pringle, J., Drummond, J., McLafferty, E., & Hendry, C. (2011) Interpretative phenomenological analysis: A discussion and critique. *Nurse Researcher*, *18*(3), 20–24.

Reid, K., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2005). Exploring lived experience. *Psychologist*, *18*(1), 20–23. Retrieved from http://www.thepsychologist.org.uk/

Rønnestad, M. H., & Skovholt, T. M. (2001). Learning arenas for professional development: Retrospective accounts of senior psychotherapists. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, *32*(2), 181–187. doi: 10.1037/0735-7028.32.2.181

Rønnestad, M. H., & Skovholt, T. M. (2003). The journey of the counselor and therapist: Research findings and perspectives on professional development. *Journal of Career Development*, *30*(1), 5–44. doi: 10.1177/0894845 30303000102

Rosenberg, J. I., Getzelman, M. A., Arcinue, F., & Oren, C. Z. (2005). An exploratory look at students' experiences of problematic peers in academic professional psychology programs. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, *36*(6), 665–673. doi: 10.1037/0735-7028.36.6.665

Ryff, C. D. (1989). Happiness is everything, or is it? Explorations on the meaning of psychological well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *57*(6), 1069–1081. doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.57.6.1069

Ryff, C. D., & Keyes, C. L. M. (1995). The structure of psychological well-being revisited. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *69*(4), 719–727. doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.69.4.719

Ryff, C. D., & Singer, B. H. (2008). Know thyself and become what you are: A eudaimonic approach to psychological well-being. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, *9*(1), 13–39. doi: 10.1007/s10902-006-9019-0

© The Author(s). This Open Access article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons License [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0].
The *IPJP* is published in association with NISC (Pty) Ltd and Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Schwebel, M., & Coster, J. (1998). Well-functioning in professional psychologists: As program heads see it. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, *29*(3), 284–292. doi: 10.1037/0735-7028.29.3.284

Seligman, M. E. P., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (Eds.). (2000). Positive psychology: An introduction. *American Psychologist*, *55*(1) [Special issue], 5–14. doi: 10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.5

Sheikh, A. I., Milne, D. L., & MacGregor, B. V. (2007) A model of personal professional development in the systematic training of clinical psychologists. *Clinical Psychology & Psychotherapy*, *14*(4), 278–287. doi: 10.1002/cpp.540

Shinebourne, P. (2011). The theoretical underpinnings of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). *Existential Analysis: Journal of the Society for Existential Analysis*, *22*(1), 16–31. Accession Number: 288874145

Smith, J. A. (2004). Reflecting on the development of interpretative phenomenological analysis and its contribution to qualitative research in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *1*(1), 39–54. doi: 10.1191/147808804qp004oa

Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method and research*. London, UK: Sage.

Smith, J. A., & Osborn, M. (2004). Interpretative phenomenological analysis. In G. M. Breakwell (Ed.), *Doing social psychology research* (pp. 229–254). Oxford, UK: Blackwell. doi: 10.1002/9780470776278.ch10

Springer, K. W., Hauser, R. M., & Freese, J. (2006). Bad news indeed for Ryff's six-factor model of wellbeing. *Social Science Research*, *35*(4), 1120–1131. doi: 10.1016/j.ssresearch.2006.01.003

Starks, H., & Trinidad, S. B. (2007). Choose your method: A comparison of phenomenology, discourse analysis, and grounded theory. *Qualitative Health Research*, *17*(10), 1372–1380. doi: 10.1177/1049732307307031

Stratton, J. S., Kellaway, J. A., & Rottini, A. M. (2007). Retrospectives from three counseling psychology predoctoral interns: How navigating the challenges of graduate school in the face of death and debilitating illness influenced the development of clinical practice. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, *38*(6), 589–595. doi: 10.1037/735-7028.38.6.589

Toohey, S. (2002). Assessment of students' personal development as part of preparation for professional work – Is it desirable and is it feasible? *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, *27*(6), 529–538. doi: 10.1080/0260293022000020291

Truell, R. (2001). The stresses of learning counselling: Six recent graduates comment on their personal experience of learning counselling and what can be done to reduce associated harm. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, *14*(1), 67–89. doi: 10.1080/09515070110059133

Tryon, G. S. (2000). Doctoral training issues in school and clinical child psychology. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, *31*(1), 85–87. doi: 10.1037/0735-7028.31.1.85

Vittersø, J. (2004). Subjective well-being versus self-actualization: Using the flow-simplex to promote a conceptual clarification of subjective quality of life. *Social Indicators Research*, *65*(3), 299–331. doi: 10.1023/B:SOCI.0000003910.26194.ef

Volet, S., & Mansfield, C. (2006). Group work at university: Significance of personal goals in the regulation strategies of students with positive and negative appraisals. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *25*(4), 341–356. doi: 10.1080/07294360600947301

Woodcock, C., Richards, H., & Mugford, A. (2008). Quality counts: Critical features for neophyte professional development. *The Sport Psychologist*, *22*(4), 491–506. doi: 10.1123/tsp.22.4.491

© The Author(s). This Open Access article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons License [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0].
The *IPJP* is published in association with NISC (Pty) Ltd and Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.