

## Exploring the Underrepresentation of Men in the Psychology Degree Programme

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**ABSTRACT** The number of people enrolling for psychology degree programmes is growing, yet men continue to be outnumbered by women. At school, boys and girls take the same subjects in similar numbers. After completing high school education, many boys and girls go to universities to pursue degree programmes of their choice. However, fewer men than women pursue psychology as a career field. The exploratory study sought to investigate the underrepresentation of men in psychology at a Historically Black University. Purposive sampling was used to select participants for the study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and data were analysed using thematic content analysis. The study revealed that gender-stereotypes influence male students to shun psychology. The findings of the study would help the University and Heads of Psychology Department to understand the underrepresentation of men in their psychology degree programmes.

### INTRODUCTION

School to work transition is a process often filled with uncertainty and apprehension and one in which barriers, real or imagined, are considered by the learners when shaping their careers (Kelly 2014; Stead et al. 2004). The relationship between career choice and gender difference is a complex psychological and social dynamic, infused with individual and social structural elements (Zhu 2006). The choice of a career is complex in that it coincides with adolescence, a critical and complex human developmental milestone. Adolescence is a period of considerable stress and uncertainty resulting from a multitude of new developmental and environmental challenges, which include peer pressure, family conflicts, academic strains and future career choices (American Psychological Association 2015; Alumran and Punamaki 2008). Career decision-making is a lifelong process that is influenced by several factors that include the home and school.

Parents shape and groom boys into stereotypical masculine careers and give them more status in the family (Grant 2004; Rudasill and Callahan 2014). The traditional family role expectations of father as “breadwinner” (McGarraugh and Von Wellshein 2009) are believed to lay the foundation for career decision making by children. The stereotypes are so serious that boys who do not live up to a stereotypical vision of manhood may be victims of violence themselves

(Management Systems International 2008; Leaper 2014; Rudasill and Callahan 2014). Empirical studies affirm that schools formalise stereotypes by reinforcing rather than correcting the problem of gender imbalance in career choice (Foster 2005). In Nigeria, a study by Denga (2004) found that sex-role stereotypes exist among boys and girls in primary schools as they aspire to traditional occupations.

For centuries, the influence of gender in the choice and motives of psychology majors was overlooked. Nevertheless, in the past three decades, studies in Canada revealed a dramatic increase in the participation rates of women in occupations traditionally held by men but men did not flock into stereotypically feminine jobs (Davey and Lalonde 2004). A study by Cochran (2005) reported that men are almost universally underrepresented in psychological clinics and practices in the United States. Consistent with the above, Willyard (2012) asserts that psychology, once a man’s profession now attracts mostly women. For instance, the U.S. Department of Education (2006) reported that in American universities, gender disparities exist in psychology classrooms. Women major in psychology at a rate of more than double that of men.

Scholars from different disciplines have weighed in on social and biological underpinnings of the underrepresentation of men in psychology. Huang (2008) argues that male students are motivated by extrinsic values. This is in line with their traditional role of breadwinner. An-

other plausible explanation is that men can feel threatened by engaging in domains they consider feminine (Bosson et al. 2005; Leaper 2014; Rudasill and Callahan 2014). This finding lends support to Adams et al.'s (2006) assertion that sexism against one's gender affect men to a lesser extent compared to women. Thus, men choose careers that suit their traditional role expectations. This is in line with Fiske's (2004) argument that men who subscribe to traditional masculine values choose careers that suit societal expectations because the need to belong is a fundamental human need. Willyard (2012) reported that men in their traditional roles as breadwinners may not be viewing psychology as a viable career. Furthermore, Willyard argued that changes in the job market and the perceptions of psychology by the public and policymakers contributed to the gender gap in the discipline of psychology. The consequence of this was that salaries became stagnant and the field lost prestige, men decided to pursue other degrees and women filled the gap.

From the foregoing, it is clear that the underrepresentation of men in psychology is cause for concern. The field no longer has enough male therapists to serve predominantly male populations such as prisoners or soldiers and that lack of diversity limited the learning in some areas (Willyard 2012). Available literature shows that motives for choice of psychology as a career field are a fluid area that needs continuous investigation to keep pace with the changing job market. The nature of career motives is presumed to be dynamic and reactive as it is moderated by personal and socio-economic circumstances, in particular gender and culture. This important phenomenon has been given very little attention by scholars in Southern Africa. There is a serious gap in literature on gender representation in the field of psychology in the region. Therefore, in an effort to gain in-depth understanding the underrepresentation of men in psychology, the current study was conducted.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

An exploratory study was conducted to gain in-depth understanding of the underrepresentation of men in the discipline of psychology. The design enabled the researcher to gain a bet-

ter understanding of the underrepresentation of men in the psychology degree programme at the University of Venda. The choice of the design was informed by the researcher's desire to understand the phenomenon in depth.

### Participants

The population of this study comprised of all male first year students in the Department of Psychology at the University of Venda in South Africa. Seven male students of Black African ethnicity were purposively selected for the study. The seven were drawn from the first year class who had just chosen psychology as a career field. Their reasons that they shared were assumed not to have been contaminated by several years of study. Their ages ranged from 17 to 20 years. Purposive sampling was chosen because it allowed the researcher to use his own judgment to choose participants who could give relevant information.

### Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with each participant in a non-threatening room on campus. To ensure consistency in data collection, an interview guide that had four open ended questions was used. The guiding questions were: *Who influenced you to choose the psychology degree programme? What was your preferred career discipline? Why did you prefer the degree programme? Why are there few men in the psychology degree programme?* Thus, the guide ensured that the conversations focused on crucial issues of the study, while allowing for exploration of unexpected and potentially significant responses were framed from the perspective of the participants. The interviews were conducted in English as all the participants were conversant with the language. The conversations were audiotaped and the transcriptions were verified by reading them while listening to the recordings.

### Data Analysis

Tesch's coding technique (Creswell 2009) was adopted in data analysis. The researcher read one document at a time to make sense of the data. Short notes were taken, and this was

followed by the listing and clustering of topics on the basis of similarity. Thereafter, themes and sub-themes were developed.

**Ethical Considerations**

Permission to conduct the study and the procedures to be followed were approved by the University of Venda’s Ethics Committee. Consent to participate in the study was obtained from individual participants. Participation was voluntary and privacy, confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study. The participants were not subjected to any form of harm.

**RESULTS**

**Table 1: Themes and subthemes that emerged from the interview sessions**

Theme	Sub-themes
1. <i>Socialising Agents</i>	1.1 Father 1.2 Friend 1.3 Role model
2. <i>Preferred Degree Programme</i>	2.1 Commerce 2.2 Natural sciences 2.3 Education 2.4 Other degree
3. <i>Reasons For Preferring Other Degree Programme</i>	3.1 Financial gain 3.1 Financial gain 3.3 Control 3.4 Prestige 3.5 Intellectual challenge
4. <i>Reasons for Shunning Psychology</i>	4.1 Not financially lucrative 4.1 Not financially lucrative emotions 4.3 Avoid sharing own negative experiences 4.4 Not willing to express themselves

Table 1 shows that the four themes emerged from the study and these were socialising agents, preferred degree programme, reasons for preference of other degree programme and the reasons for shunning psychology. Each of the four themes had sub-themes.

**DISCUSSION**

Despite considerable progress in diversifying previously homogenous domains, gender disparities still exist in several facets of life including the field of psychology. This section discusses the four themes.

**Theme 1: Career Socialising Agents**

The present study revealed that the participating students did not rely on professionals (such as teacher and counseling psychologist) on career information. However, they relied on the fathers, peers and role model. This finding is supported by the following responses:

*Most of them are influenced by their fathers.* (Participant 3)

*Usually the influence is from peers as well as societal influence.* (Participant 6)

*It is believed that if you have a neighbour who is an engineer,....you should choose a more compatible field in order to earn more money.* (Participant 7)

The participants relied on the external social frame of reference in their career choices. They did not make independent career choices. This finding supports the long standing argument that in collectivistic societies, the power to decide resides outside the individual. Decisions are a reflection of the collective will of families, communities and significant others such as parents and peers. The finding is in line with Grant’s (2004) and Kelly’s (2014) assertion that parents shape and groom boys. It is worrying that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; individuals still rely on the immediate social support rather than seek professional opinion in making critical decisions that affect the rest of their lives. Professional career counsellors can help students choose careers that match their intellectual capabilities, interests and personalities. The prospect of job opportunities after acquiring the degree is another important consideration. Correct career choice has implications on job satisfaction, retention, performance and unemployment in general as job market forces need to be considered.

**Theme 2: Male Students’ Preferred Career Fields**

There are various career disciplines that the students wanted to pursue. Of concern to the researcher was the realisation that psychology was not the first choice for all male students who took part in the study. The participants preferred other degree programmes such as hard core sciences, commerce and education. This finding is supported by the following statements:

*Men prefer studying Bachelor of Commerce in Economics and Business Management.* (Participant 2)

*However, I will go for education if I do not get a place in engineering.* (Participant 3)

*Males prefer programmes that deal with problem solving, for example, business programmes and medicine and mechanical programmes.* (Participant 4)

*I know a number of men who like engineering, geology, science and technology.* (Participant 6)

*Engineering because I think that being an engineer will enable me to earn more money compared to other fields. Also, I like neurology because I have a passion for it and it is prestigious.* (Participant 7)

The above finding lends support to Grant's (2004) finding that parents shape and groom boys into stereotypic masculine careers and give them more status in the family. It appears that the traditional family role expectations of father as "breadwinner" (McGarraugh and Von Wellshein 2009; Rudasill and Callahan 2014) had a significant influence on their degree programme preferences. The participants' preferences were driven by the extrinsic motives such as financial gain. According to Management Systems International (2008), the stereotypes are so serious that boys who do not live up to a stereotypical vision of manhood may be victims of violence themselves. Male students' strong feelings for financially rewarding and masculine-laden career disciplines are formalised at school where sex-role stereotypes are reinforced (Denga 2004, 2005; Leaper 2014). From the foregoing, it is apparent that current literature does not support Hasley's (1993) finding that with the diminishing gender stereotype in schools and universities, gender does not seem to be an obstacle to enrolment into higher education.

### **Theme 3: Reasons for Male Students' Preference for Other Career Fields**

It emerged from the study that the participants preferred other career related fields suit their traditional role expectations. The participants had the following to say:

*They prefer law because they want to earn as much as possible.* (Participant 1)

*They like to work in the financial sector and make money.* (Participant 2)

*They want to be in charge of things.* (Participant 5)

*They believe these fields are more challenging. Men like challenges.* (Participant 6)

*Engineering because they think that being an engineer enables one to earn more money compared to other fields. They have interest in fields that have heavy objects.....you should choose a more compatible field in order to earn more money. Also, I like neurology because I have a passion for it and it is prestigious.* (Participant 7)

It is clear from the responses that the male students were motivated by extrinsic values (Huang 2008; Leaper 2014). This is in line with their traditional role of breadwinner and they will be expected to fend and provide for their families. The other motives for preferring other disciplines were prestige, interest and the masculine stereotypes. Thus, the male students had ambitions and egos that could be met in other career fields and not psychology. Thus, they viewed psychology as not much appealing, prestigious and financially rewarding. This finding is consistent with Bosson et al.'s (2005) assertion that those men can feel threatened by engaging in domains they consider feminine. Overall, men prefer careers that suit their traditional role expectations.

Worrying to the researcher was the observation that psychology was a fall back option for all the participating students. The finding has serious long term implications to the profession of psychology. One wonders whether the participating students would make effective psychologists as they lack the required intrinsic motivation for the profession. Although they will be guided by the professional code of conduct, it is difficult to ascertain and believe that the motives will change.

### **Theme 4: Reasons for Fewer Males in Psychology**

The responses suggested that the participants regard psychology as financially rewarding and that the discipline does not suit their stereotypic gender-oriented values. The participants said:

*Most men are interested in the salary and they do not think there is money in psychology.* (Participant 1)

*They do not like to communicate with people face to face.* (Participant 2)

*I think that psychology requires or entails a display of emotions, hence, calls for a lot of soul searching. This contrasts with the masculine make-up. Men are more physical than emotional, thus, probably getting in touch with emotions or dealing with other people's emotions may be too much for them. (Participant 4)*

*They do not believe in sharing their bad experiences or problems with other people. (Participant 5)*

*I have come to realise that men are not strong when it comes to self-expression. When it comes to confronting emotional issues, they basically pretend to be strong. (Participant 6)*

*Men have that perception that they cannot deal with problems and it is said that a man should never cry. (Participant 7)*

The above finding affirms the argument that men generally lack the intrinsic motivation to choose psychology as a career field. The overarching reason cited by the participants is that psychology is not financially lucrative. This is in line with the argument that men in their traditional roles as breadwinners may not be viewing psychology as a viable career (Leaper 2014; Willyard 2012). Changes in the job market and the perceptions of psychology by the public and policymakers contributed to stagnancy in salaries leading to loss of prestige and men shifted their attention to other careers and women filled the gap. Furthermore, the finding supports the notion that in collectivistic and patriarchal societies such as South Africa, men still subscribe to traditional masculine values, hence, they choose careers that suit societal expectations because the need to belong is a fundamental human need (Fiske 2004).

Another plausible explanation for men's reluctance to pursue a career in psychology affirms the notion that they conceal or obscure their emotional difficulties as a consequence of masculine gender role socialisation (Cochran 2005; Leaper 2014). Due to their traditional masculine values, men may be inclined to hide, minimize, or otherwise have difficulty expressing their psychological suffering. In the current study, some participants indicated that men have reservations on sharing their emotional troubles with the clients or attending to clients as they steam out. The African traditional system says that a man should not cry but be strong; therefore psychology may be perceived to be a field for the weak.

However, if the current trend goes unchecked, the tragedy is that in the long run, the field of psychology will be without enough male therapists to serve predominantly male populations such as prisoners or soldiers and the lack of diversity will limit learning in some areas of the profession (Willyard 2012).

## CONCLUSION

The current study explored the reasons for the underrepresentation of men in the psychology degree programme. Overall, the results found that male students prefer degree programmes that are financially rewarding, prestigious, challenging and cultural expectation of adventure. All the participants indicated that psychology was not their first choice. They preferred hard core sciences, commerce and education. It emerged from the study that men shun psychology because they are reluctant to share emotional experiences with clients and self-expressive limitations.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

This finding underscores the need for parents, schools and universities to strengthen the career guidance programme to ensure that students make informed career choices. There is need to reduce the gender gap in psychology to increase the number of male psychologists in practice so that clients who prefer male therapists will get psychological support. Further research is needed to confirm the findings of this study expand on the understanding of the underrepresentation of men in psychology and suggest strategies for bridging the gap.

## LIMITATIONS

Although this study advances current knowledge of male psychology students' perceptions, there are limitations worth noting. First, the sample was small and drawn from a geographically and demographically limited population of first year male students at one institution. Second, the study was qualitative in nature therefore the generalisability of the findings was not essential. Thus, the findings may represent the views of students who took part in the study and not general perceptions of male psychology students.

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