Career Aspirations of Psychology Students at a Rural Based University in South Africa

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ABSTRACT The current study explores the reasons for choosing degree programmes as career fields by university students. An ex post facto research design was used to conduct the study. Ten participants were purposefully selected from an institution of higher learning in South Africa. Data was collected through audio-taped individual semi-structured interviews with the participants. Content analysis was used to interpret and analyse the data. The major finding was that the participants chose psychology for various career motives. Gender differences in motives for the choice of psychology as a career were observed. Replication of the study with a larger sample of students from different institutions on diverse degree programmes is needed for generalisability purpose.

INTRODUCTION

Choosing a career is a landmark decision as it affects the rest of a person's life (Salami 2008). It is not surprising therefore that the first institution to lay the foundation for career choice is the family where domestic chores are prescribed from a very tender age. Thus career choice starts early in life and is culturally embedded. Muthukrishna and Sokoya (2008) assert that from an early age, children are keen to identify themselves as either a boy or a girl. They further note that the gender role fantasies are influenced by parents, local communities, early years' professionals (teachers and caregivers) and media. The early manifestations of sex typing are evident in stereotypic play (Serbin et al. 2001). Girls prefer basic family roles of mother, child and domestic activities like food preparation while boys choose masculine roles during pretend play (Black 1989). The girls play with feminine toys like dolls and kitchen utensils whereas boys prefer toys associated with maleness like toy gun, sword and car. Lerner et al. (2013) reported that parents socialise their sons and daughters differently. This socialisation has a strong bearing on future career goals and their motives.

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Career Motives

A great deal of literature addresses reasons why students choose to study particular academic disciplines. Motives are desired goals that underlie an individual's behaviour (Feldman 1993). However, current literature on motives for career choice among tertiary students according to gender has no consensus. Researches indicate that intrinsic, extrinsic and altruistic motives (Brookhart and Freeman 1992) are the major reasons for career choice. In addition, social norms, lifestyle, values and attitudes (Brown 2003) are factors whose trends are difficult to anticipate or even to recognise quickly, and yet they significantly affect educational and occupational choices.

Altruistic Reasons

Helping is a broad concept that encompasses behaviours that generally seek to improve the situation of another person (Al-Bitar et al. 2008; Nicole 2008). Male altruistic behaviours have been linked to heroism, chivalry and physical needs. Altruistic behaviours of females have been linked to other people's personal and emotional needs and nurturing behaviours (Nicole 2008). The pattern that emerged from the literature that was reviewed was that, students who chose careers in social sciences, teaching and medical professions had strong altruistic inclinations. Gervasio et al. (2009) state that psychology majors were likely to endorse the sub-

ject as a helping profession than non-majors. Students who study psychology can help friends and family members with personal problems and assist people improve parenting skills. There seems to be a consensus among scholars on gender differences in altruistic motives. Some of the studies (Holland 1986; Cox and Deck 2006) suggest that females more than males choose careers for altruistic reasons. The difference is attributed to gender socialisation.

Intrinsic Reasons

Intrinsic motives include personal interest and professional development (Griffiths and Kaldi 2007). Earlier researches of Chan (2004) and, Shadbolt and Bunker (2009) show that intrinsic motives were one of the major factors that influenced them to choose a career. Prestige, a construct of intrinsic motives, was an important motivating factor in their career choice (Al-Bitar et al. 2008). According to Viet (1996), the intrinsic motivation of wanting to be useful, is still high as in previous investigations. Empirical research does not agree on gender differences in intrinsic motives for career choice. Studies by Halpern (1992), Heyman et al. (2002) and Lai et al. (2009) show that males are more intrinsically motivated than females. Males were more performance oriented and performed significantly higher than girls (Halpern 1992; Lai et al. 2009). Males appeared to be more willing to confront a challenge, to seek to learn new things to satisfy curiosity and to solve problems independently as compared to females. Other studies (Agarwala 2008; Chan et al. 2005; Acat and Ozabaci 2008) dispute the above as they suggest that females are more intrinsically motivated than males. Chan et al. (2005) attribute the gender discrepancy to the complex cultural and social context that have influence on achievement goal orientations. Similarly, Halpern (1992) suggests that the gender differences in intrinsic motivation are a result of gender stereotypes and socialization experiences.

Economic-related Reasons

Empirical studies (Chan 2004; Griffiths and Kaldi 2007; Hallisey et al. 2002) show that many people make career choice decisions on the basis of expected incentives. Measures of extrinsic value like money, security and prestige revealed significant gender differences among stu-

dents in several studies. For example, Holland (1986) suggests that boys are motivated more by utilitarian incentives (to become rich, acquire authority) since the principal role of a man in his family is that of "protector" and "provider". Males, perceived to be stronger, fitter, more technical and practical, rated 'earn a lot of money', 'work with technology' and 'good promotion prospects' more highly than females in a study with Scottish pupils (Bond et al. 2009). Tsagala and Kordaki (2007) state that computer science boys were more concerned about financial gain and prestige of the profession. According to Duehr and Bono (2006), men who are more agentic, who believe that their appropriate role and value to their family is as breadwinner tend to place a higher value on financial gain. Girls were found to be far more interested than boys in gaining job security (Acat and Ozabaci 2008; Chow and Ngo 2002; Tsagala and Kordaki 2007). However, Chuan and Atputhasamy (2001) note that gender difference on extrinsic motives are not significant.

Lifestyle-related Reasons

Lifestyle values refer to the want for "good life" like status, power, independence, opportunity for professional development and remuneration associated with the occupation (Davey and Lalande 2004). The lifestyle values include constructs such as hours of employment and opportunity to travel. According to Shadbolt and Bunker (2009), family factor is a powerful determinant of career choice that relates to the need to consider circumstances that surround it. Recent research evidence suggests that lifestyle factors are now equally important to both men and women (Shadbolt and Bunker 2009; Thibodeau and Usoff 2002). In contrast, a study by (Wendel et al. 2003) found that male more than female medical students who preferred a surgical career cited lifestyle as one of the major reasons for career choice.

Family-related Reasons

Some studies suggest that individuals choose careers that give them the latitude to attend to families demands (Richardson and Watt 2005) or career choices to meet the expectations of their family (Karibe et al. 2009). Women were found to have a stronger inclination to

family motives (Albelushi 2004; Sanfey et al. 2006). The major influences on women's career decisions appear to come from what is referred to as "care responsibilities", such as childbirth and childcare, being a single mother, sharing roles and responsibilities with partner in a "dual-earner" family or caring for aging parents (Bartosz et al. 2006). By the same token, Cook (1993) states that despite strides in gender equity, it seems that young people are expected to follow the traditional interrupted employment pattern, which allows baring and nurturing of children during their early ages.

Entrepreneurial Reasons

In Europe, a study by Hallisey et al. (2002) with dental students shows that entrepreneurial motive was rated among the major reasons for career choice. However, gender parity on participation in entrepreneurship has not been attained. For example, studies conducted by Small and McClean (2002) with Barbadian youth and Bardasi et al. (2008) with Belgian and Philippine students show that more males than females are entrepreneurially motivated. In Africa, women were found to be major players than men in the private sector, particularly agriculture and informal businesses (Bardasi et al. 2008). Studies by Matthews and Moser (1996) with US business graduates, Crant (1996) with US undergraduates and MBAs, Kourilsky and Walstad (1998) with US high school students, Raijman (2001) with Mexican immigrants in Chicago and Keat (2008) with Malaysian graduate students show that more males than females have a stronger inclination towards entrepreneurship. However, Kourilsky and Walstad (1998) report that both males and females exhibit a low level of entrepreneurship knowledge.

Academic-related Reasons

Some studies suggest that there is a significant positive relationship between academic achievement and career expectations (Khami et al. 2008; Sanfey et al. 2006). Research, intellectual stimulation and intellectual challenge (Straus et al. 2006) provided in academia may persuade people to choose a degree programme. The finding is supported by Wendel et al. (2003) who report that the most common reason for choosing a career in surgery was the intellectual challenge of the field. Another study suggests that more men than women agreed that their skills were compatible with those required for surgical career (Sanfey et al. 2006). Furthermore, other studies (Wims 1994) note that males generally show higher academic aspirations and expectations than females. The gender disparity is attributed to society's expectation for females to choose stereotypically feminine occupations such as education and social sciences (Mote 1982).

Relationship-related Reasons

A study with medical students suggests that they chose their profession mainly for relationship motives (Friedberg and Glick 2000). The students reported that they chose medicine because of the human contact with the patient (92 percent), familiarity with the patient's environment (76 percent) and, contact with healthy people which is important and pleasant (65 percent).

The researcher was influenced to conduct the study by the ever changing job market forces. The job market wave anchors on the dynamic socio-political and economic forces. As a result, the uncertainty of professional identity and future career prospects have enormously increased in higher education due to fast and mostly unexpected technical advances, as well as rapid changes in working life, which require abilities to cope with the uncertainty (Vesisanaho et al. 2009). Occupational opportunities and requirements continue to change, so do the types of capabilities involved in effective work that changes at a fast pace (Evans and McCloskey 2001). Consequently, the immense changes in men's and women's work and lives, over the course of human history, suggest that people are highly flexible in their interests, as well as their abilities (Spelke and Grace 2006). It is, therefore, imperative that a study be conducted to establish the career aspirations of university students.

Aim of the Study

The study explored the motives for choosing degree programmes as career fields among students at an institution of higher learning in South Africa. Specifically the study sought to answer the following questions:

- What are the motives for choosing degree programmes as career fields?
- Are there gender differences in motives for choosing degree programmes as career fields?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The present study used an ex-post facto research design to explore the reasons for choosing psychology as a career field. According Selamat (2013), ex post facto research design enabled the researchers to identify events that had already occurred or conditions that were present and then collected data to investigate a possible relationship between motivational factors and subsequent choice of psychology as a career field. Thus, ex post facto research was used to search back in time for possible reasons associated with the choice of psychology as a career field by participating university students.

Participants and Setting

Ten participants took part in the qualitative study. The participants were drawn from the Schools of Health Sciences, Human and Social Sciences and Education. All the participants were of Black African ethnicity. The study was conducted at a Historically Black University in South Africa. The institution is situated in a largely rural province.

Research Instrument

A semi-structured interview was used to collect data. In addition, the researchers took some field notes and audio-taped the interview sessions. The researchers tested the findings obtained through the qualitative approach against the four criteria developed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to establish the "truth value of the study". The credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability of the research findings were tested.

Collection of Data

One of the researchers conducted interviews with the selected participants. The interviews were conducted in quiet lecture rooms and the office. A 30-to-40 minute, semi-structured, audio-taped interview with each of the participants was implemented. The interview protocol con-sisted of open ended questions that were based on insights gleaned from literature that was reviewed. The participants were asked to describe in their own words their motives for studying psychology.

Analysis of Data

The explication of qualitative data was done using thematic content analysis. The researchers drew themes that emerged from the data that was collected. The researchers followed Hycner's 1999 five steps that include: bracketing and phenomenological reduction, delineating units of meaning, clustering of meaning to form themes, summarising each interview, validating it and in some cases modifying it and, extracting general and unique themes from the interviews and making a composite summary (Hycner 1999).

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was formally obtained from the participants. Their participation was voluntary and they were informed of their right to withdraw from the study. The participants were not subjected to physical or psychological harm. The participants were informed that their disclosures were going to be kept in strict confidence. Reporting was anonymous as the participants were not using their real names.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Twelve themes emerged from the current study on the reasons for choosing their respective degree programmes as career fields by university students. These were finance-related, prestige and respect, academic-related, security, self-branding, altruistic-related, lifestyle-related, affirmative-related, humanitarian-related, interest, expectation of significant other and self-enhancement. The participants' responses to the questions point to a perceived range of psychological experiences that impacted on their career choice decisions. The themes are discussed below. Excerpts from the data are presented to illustrate the themes and the corresponding subthemes that emerged.

Finance-related Reasons

The finding that finance-related reasons motivated some participants to choose pstychology as a career field confirms earlier findings of

Lehman et al. (2008). Consistently, Sherrill (2004) had observed that the potential for higher lifetime earnings increases the probability that a profession is chosen. Thus, it is believed that financial return is a key element in the decision making process concerning careers and education. Contrary to expectations, only two participants mentioned financial rewards as a reason for choosing their career fields. This might reflect the poor progress in salaries in the respective career fields in the country. The finding may be attributed to the possibility that the participants did not perceive their career fields as professions with the ability to yield high salaries. However, as expected, the two participants who mentioned finance as a career motive were male. This was expected as previous research suggests that men show significantly higher odds than women of expecting to have a higher income in the first year of their employment (Johanson 2007). The following except demonstrate the finding:

I heard that it pays much better. (Participant 3)

The programme will enable me to get more money. (Participant 4)

Prestige and Respect

Two male participants indicated that they chose their degree programmes to gain prestige and respect. This supports Sherrill (2004) whose study revealed that among the most influential factors for career choice is prestige. Gender proportion was decernible. The finding is consistent with Halpern's (1992), Heyman et al.'s (2002) and Lai et al.'s (2009) assertion that males are more intrinsically motivated than females. In the same vein, the finding did not lend support to previous studies (Agarwala 2008; Chan et al. 2005; Acat and Ozabaci 2008) that suggested that females were more intrinsically motivated than males. The lack of gender parity suggests an insignificant change in status of women in society. The new cultural and social context has minimal influence on achievement goal orientations for women. Furthermore, the lower rating of this dimension may suggest that most of the participants did not regard their degree programmes as having some of the highest respect and social cache of the professions. However, the excerpts below attest to the participants' high regard of their degree programmes as career fields.

I like the name. I chose it because it is unique. (Participant 3)
It is a great field. (Participant 7)

Academic-related Reasons

The data show that most of the participants entered their respective faculties primarily out of intellectual motivations. This is in line with studies by Khami et al. (2008), Sanfey et al. (2006), Straus et al. (2006) and Wendel et al. (2003) which found that research, intellectual stimulation and intellectual challenge provided in academia may persuade people to choose a degree programme. The majority considered intellectual stimulation, gaining new understanding, educational advancement and self-enhancement as important reasons for their career decisions. There was no gender difference in the academic motive for choosing psychology. This was not in line with Wims's (1994) finding that males generally show higher academic aspirations and expectations than females

Intellectual Stimulation

The emphasis on learning is apparent in the following excerpt:
I felt that doing this programme would equip me with the knowledge and skills to help people from my village and many others. (Participant 4)
I want to learn more about it. (Participant 5)

Gaining New Understanding

The most common academic reason for pursuing the respective degree programmes was the need to gain new understanding. The following excerpts bear testimony to the participants' quest for understanding people and the challenges that they face:
Secondly, because I wanted to understand why people behave differently. (Participant 1)
…. because it helps one to understand human behaviour in a better way… (Participant 3)
It will help me to understand why people behave differently. I want to learn more about personality and be able to identify different types of disorders that people have. (Participant 4)
I want to understand the challenges that people face. (Participant 10)

Educational Advancement

Viet's (1996) study showed that students choose careers for the opportunities that they offer for personal development. Some participants indicated that they chose their degree programmes for educational advancement. The following extracts are indicative of the participants' desire to pursue professional qualifications:

I have already started to look for a place for MSc. Clinical Psychology. (Participant 2)

I want to do my Master's degree but I have not yet found a place. (Participant 4)

I want to acquire a master's degree. (Participant 7)

Become a Master's student, then go on to get a doctoral degree. I am on my way there. (Participant 8)

I want to get a higher degree. (Participant 9)

Challenge

One participant chose the career field because of its challenge. This is supported by the following vignette:

I chose this degree programme because it is challenging and interesting. (Participant 10)

Security

Previous research studies (Jacobs et al. 1991; Sherrill 2004) found that individuals indicated that job security was the main motive in career decision making. Men were found to regard security higher than women. This perception is supported by one male participant.

Participant 3 reported that;

There is a shortage of experts in my field in our country so opportunities for employment are high. (Participant 4)

Self-branding

The study revealed that the participating students recognise the power of re-branding or building a strong personal identity based on a clear perception of what sets an individual apart from others. Furthermore, they recognise the added value one brings to a job or situation (Schaeffer 2008). Two participants indicated the need to package themselves differently from other people. Thus, they strove for personal identity, which includes, who one is, what makes him/ her unique, his/her values and how he/she identifies himself in terms of his/her job (Perera 2010). The finding demonstrates a shift from collective to the Western individual values. In societies with individuated cultural values, a person has a moral obligation to become separate, autonomous, efficacious and in control of their choices (Heine et al. 1999). However, gender difference in the self-branding motive was imperceptible as one female and one male participants indicated the need to self-brand. The following vignettes provide a scenario of students who seek identity formation:

You see, my mother is a nurse and my sister is also a nurse. We cannot be all nurses. I, therefore, wanted a programme that would not put me in the same field with my mother and sister. I wanted to be different. (Participant 1)

I want to contribute to the world by making a difference in people's lives. I want to address their challenges…..I want to educate young people and encourage them that life is not all about material possessions but helping each other. (Participant 7)

Altruistic Reasons

Most of the participants believed that their career fields to be helping professions. The finding is consistent with research of Huang (2008) which indicated that students chose their careers for altruistic reasons. The participants depicted their career fields as professions that open some doors. They indicated that they would like to use their expertise and knowledge acquired to good use by helping people with problems. The participants expressed their ability to help and the desire to help those in needy situations. The following extracts support the participants' wish to make a difference in other people's lives:

I like helping people with difficulties so that they can live normally like others. (Participant 2)

The other thing that influenced me was people who are discouraged, those who lack confidence and have lost hope. I want to help such people. (Participant 3)

I chose psychology because it will enable me to help people in need. (Participant 4)

Because I want to help people and to be part of those who bring change to people's lives..I want to apply the knowledge. (Participant 5)

I would like to be professionally capacitated to help people to live more fulfilling lives. (Participant 6)

I realised that life is not always about individuals. It is about being with people and helping them. (Participant 7)

I have always been very passionate about helping people, having always been concerned about other people's well being. Growing up in a dysfunctional family made me want to reach out to others. (Participant 8)

I want to help people. (Participant 9)

I chose this career because I want to help people. I was influenced by my mother. (Participant 10)

Lifestyle-related Reasons

Two participants felt that there is more lifestyle compromise in their career fields. The finding confirms Shadbolt and Bunker's (2009) assertion that family factor is a powerful determinant of career choice. The motive was gender neutral as the motive was cited by both male and female participants. This is consistent with researches of Shadbolt and Bunker (2009) and Thibodeau and Usoff (2002) which indicated that lifestyle factors are now equally important to both men and women. Both men and women are now highly flexible in their interests as well as their abilities (Spelke and Grace 2006). This is illustrated by the following excerpts:

I then chose the degree programme as I realised that it deals more with issues that are related to my way of living and interests….. I enjoy being in the company of many people. (Participant 2)

I want to explore the working conditions before I decide on the job to undertake. (Participant 7)

Affirmative-related Reasons

Two participants, male and female, reported that they chose their degree programmes as career fields to increase their ethnic representation and influence people to strive for better lives. The participants had this to say:

I realised that black people in my field of study, especially in my province,…., are fewer than how it can be imagined. (Participant 2)

…to influence people to desire quality lives as well. (Participant 6)

Humanitarian Reasons

Education, Humanities and Psychology play a crucial role in ensuring the well being of self and other people. Individuals in these fields target their actions towards a better quality of life for other people. Quality of life also matters for students in the three disciplines. The knowledge and skills gained would help the students to manage their situations for the purpose of good health and well being of others. Fifty percent of the participants indicated that they chose their degree programmes for humanitarian reasons. Both male and female participants were influenced by humanitarian motives. Their responses suggest that they have empathy for the suffering of other people. Thus, they have compassion for persons experiencing difficulties. The following excerpts attest to the observations:

Caring for Self

The finding is in line with Jacobs et al. (1991) whose study revealed that the other common motive for career choice is compensation for personal weakness. For instance, two participants said:

E-e-e-ish! Firstly, because of the problems that I was facing and going through in my life…. I wanted to change the way I perceived things. (Participant 1)

Growing up in a dysfunctional family made me want to reach out to thers. (Participant 6)

Caring for Community

Participating students conceptualised their roles in terms of social responsibility. Intrinsically motivated students choose vocations with a view to be useful (Viet 1996). Compassion for the community is illustrated by the following extracts:

Since childhood, I always wanted to be one of the persons who help other people with difficulties or those who are sick. (Participant 2)

People who had come across difficulties in their lives were the ones who influenced me to choose psychology so that I can help them to overcome their problems. Serious cases like people who wanted to commit suicide had a huge influence on my interest in psychology. The other thing that influenced me was people who are discouraged, those who lack confidence and lost hope. I want to help such people. (Participant 3)

I felt that doing psychology would equip me with the knowledge and skills to help peo-

ple from my village and many others. (Participant 4)

I would like to work will children. This has always been my passion. Obtaining a degree in my current field will help me to achieve that. (Participant 6)

Interest

Earlier studies (Jacobs et al. 1991; Viet 1996) found that students choose careers that match their interests. Such choices reduce confusion and frustration if the chosen career is in tandem with the individual's interests. Both male and female participants had interest in their degree programmes. The following statements support this observation:

I realised that psychology was something that I liked so it was better for me to do it. (Participant 3)

I find the programme interesting. (Participant 7)

I always wanted to pursue this degree. I have interest in it. (Participant 8)

I like this degree programme and I don't wish to change it. (Participant 9)

I chose this degree programme because it is challenging and interesting. (Participant 10)

Expectation of Significant Other

Contrary to expectation, only one participant indicated that she enrolled into her degree progrmme to meet the expectation of significant others. This supports Karibe et al. (2009) who reported that individuals make career choices to meet the expectations of their family. The finding is consistent with collectivist cultural values in which the interdependent self is most complete when a person is perceived to be functioning smoothly within a larger, more encompassing collective (Hiene et al. 1999). According to Brown (2002) and Mitchell and Krumboltz (1990), people from collectivist families or cultures who hold the same values make career decisions to meet the expectations of their reference group. Career satisfaction for the individual with a collective social value depends on the extent to which the chosen occupation is approved by the social referents like parents, peers and significant others. However, it should be underscored that choosing a career to satisfy parents and family tradition as unrealistic (Ja-

cobs et al. 1991). It implies faulty career decision making. The excerpt below supports the finding that significant others have more influence in career decisions made by students:

My sister who is a professional counsellor influenced me to study psychology. She wanted me to join her profession. (Participant 1)

Self-enhancement

One participant indicated that the career field would help to make choices in life. This shows that some students derive personal meaning from what they learn at university. This is in line with the goal of learning which seeks to bring a permanent change in life of the learner. Such students could be self-driven in their pursuit of their degree programmes. The participant had the following to say:

Studying this programme will help me to make better choices in life. (Participant 6)

CONCLUSION

The study suggests that the participants chose their degree programmes as career fields for various reasons. The popular reasons for the choice of the degree programmes as career fields were academic-related, interest, altruistic and humanitarian. Pronounced gender differences were observed in some motives for choosing degree progammes as career fields. Males were driven by finance-related, security and respect reasons. Females were motivated by signicant other and the need for self-enhancement.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS

The participants overwhelmingly chose their degree programmes as career fields for academic-related, interest, altruistic and humanitarian reasons. Such motivations promote degree programme and job satisfaction. The students are intrinsically motivated to do well and complete their degree programmes. It minimises chances of failure and career change. Some career motives of both male and female participants were gender-stereotyped. Males were inclined to motives associated with masculinity and the role of a bread winner. Some females chose their degree programmes to suit the expectation of significant other and self-enhancement. This shows

that cultural responsibilities of home and child care are still an issue for women. This impacts negatively on performance and satisfaction both at university and place of work. Self-enhancement reflects strides made in gender equity. Faculties should mount serious career choice programmes in schools to help post high school students to make informed career choices. If students choose programmes for realistic motives, the throughput rate in university faculties will increase. Academic-related problems will be reduced.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The present study was without limitations. The study relied on self-reported information, hence, response bias may not be ruled out. Bias was likely to stem from the participants' desire to give socially desirable responses. Data collected depended on the participants' long-term memory recall and their perceptions of personal experiences. It is therefore possible that some participants were unable to accurately recall the processes and influences of their choice of degree programmes as career fields. There is need for further research with a bigger sample on diverse degree programmes drawn from different institutions to obtain generalisable findings.

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