

Beyond the Surface: A Qualitative Exploration of Factors Shaping Career Choices in Psychology

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ABSTRACT

The decision to pursue a career in psychology is especially arduous for individuals in India and the factors involved in reaching that conclusion are complex. Ten students pursuing masters in psychology with a specialization in either clinical psychology, counselling psychology or industrial psychology were interviewed using a structured interview method to understand factors influencing career choice and if adverse childhood experiences and parental relationships played a role. The results indicated that adverse childhood experiences leading to the strengthening of empathy, altruistic characteristics and eventually not wanting others to suffer the same way they, unfortunately, had to were the major factors that sparked their interest in psychology. It was also found that a lot of participants found solace in studying psychology and wanted to pursue a career in the field to heal themselves and others.

Keywords: *Career Psychology, Adverse Childhood Experiences, Motivation of Career in Psychology, Parental Role, Parental Experience, Career, Career Influence*

Psychology as a field of study has only recently gained recognition when it comes to Asian countries, especially in India where mental health is still a taboo topic irrespective of socio-economic, cultural, religious, and ideological boundaries (Paul & Guha, 2022). However, the times have become more accepting of the role it has in our society. The pandemic forced the world including India to turn our attention inward and the curiosity about our behaviour and the people around us paved the way for psychology and talks about mental health to become a little more open if not completely accepted (Singh et al., 2020).

The landscape of practising as a psychologist in India diverges notably from that of Western and European countries (Virudhagirinathan & Swaminathan, 2011). Despite strides, the profession continues to navigate its integration into society, encountering persisting usage of derogatory terms for both individuals grappling with mental illness and professionals within the field. Consequently, discussions surrounding prestige, societal status, and lucrative salaries are often not applicable within this context. Despite the low social status associated with the profession, the disapproval of parents towards their children pursuing a career in psychology adds another layer of challenge. However, this research is an attempt to understand what drive individuals toward this field despite the obstacles.

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Received: April 06, 2024; Revision Received: December 28, 2024; Accepted: December 31, 2024

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Choosing a career is a complex process that involves many factors, such as interests, values, opportunities, and skills (Zheng et al., 2022). According to a 1995 study by Hanson & McCullagh, social work students rank their career choices from highest to lowest, working with people, engaging and challenging work, good job opportunities, good working conditions, job security, status and prestige, and good salaries. There is little literature on what motivates people to choose a career in psychology and only a handful of studies are on the Indian population (Nyamwange, 2016).

According to John Holland's Theory of Career Choice, also known as RIASEC, individuals tend to be drawn to occupations in which they can collaborate with others who possess similar attributes and interests (Hughes, 1972). This theoretical framework delineates six distinct work environments, namely realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, and conventional. A vocation in psychology corresponds to the social work environment, wherein professionals exhibit a proclivity for activities that involve healing, assisting, instructing, training, informing, treating, healing, curing, serving, greeting, and evincing concern for the welfare and well-being of others (Erdogan, 2022). The opportunity to work with clients who have experienced comparable circumstances or obstacles as the practitioner can engender a sense of purpose and affiliation, thus fortifying the alignment with the social work environment (Hughes, 1972).

By the theory, individuals who aspire to work with clients who have endured trauma, neglect, and abuse may perceive an opportunity to facilitate their healing through the process of interaction. This interaction, along with their previous experiences, can enhance their commitment and proficiency in a manner that is particularly effective, giving rise to the concept of the "wounded healer". This term refers to an individual who, as a result of their encounters with illness or adversity, has endured enduring consequences that subsequently shape their ability to assist others. These consequences may manifest as acquired knowledge from their own experiences, which they then utilize to support individuals facing similar challenges, or they may manifest as symptoms or attributes that positively influence their therapeutic endeavors.

Adverse childhood experiences and poor relationships with parents are two major reasons for people ending up in therapy (Lange et al., 2018). Trauma theory asserts that experiences characterized by trauma, such as adverse childhood events (ACEs), have the potential to hinder the psychological state of individuals by manifesting three symptom clusters, which are hyperarousal, constriction, and intrusion. These symptom clusters encompass a range of psychological responses that can arise as a result of traumatic experiences, encompassing heightened arousal, emotional and physical constriction, and the intrusive nature of traumatic memories and thoughts (Huang et al., 2021; Webster, 2022).

The influence of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) on an individual's career choice in psychology has been brought to light. Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) refer to distressing incidents that transpire during the early stages of life, typically between the ages of 1 and 18. These occurrences encompass a range of maltreatment forms, including emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, as well as neglect in both physical and emotional aspects. They also encompass exposure to domestic violence or substance abuse, having a family member incarcerated, and undergoing parental separation or divorce. ACEs have been associated with unfavorable health and social outcomes, influencing both physical and mental well-being. Research indicates that exposure to ACEs can disrupt the maturation of the nervous, immune, and metabolic systems in children, leading to enduring health

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consequences that persist into adulthood. ACEs are linked to various health issues such as cardiovascular disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, autoimmune disorders, substance abuse, and depression. Certain ACEs, such as sexual abuse, emotional neglect, bullying, and mental illness in a household member, have been repeatedly linked to decreased adult resilience among women (Dánielsdóttir et al., 2022). The prevalence of ACEs is significant across all sectors of society, with a considerable proportion of individuals reporting at least one ACE and a noteworthy portion experiencing multiple ACEs. Research indicates that about 19% of the world's children live in India, making up 42% of the total Indian population (Dar et al., 2022). The prevention of ACEs is of utmost importance due to their potential long-term effects on an individual's health, overall well-being, educational attainment, employment prospects, and general quality of life.

The impact of childhood trauma extends to professional decisions and developmental trajectories, even within the realm of helping industries. Research suggests that the selection of employment in helping professions is associated with dysfunction within the individual's family of origin, the formation of personal qualities through adversity, and experiences encountered. In alignment with the wounded healer archetype, individuals who have undergone traumatic experiences during childhood may be motivated to pursue careers in helping professions as a means of self-healing. As a result, negative experiences during childhood can significantly shape a person's decision to embark on a career in psychology, particularly within the helping professions, and serve as a driving force to confront their trauma while aiding others (Tzouvara et al., 2023). Research suggests that individuals who have experienced adverse childhood experiences may be more drawn to careers in psychology due to their personal experiences and a desire to understand and help others who have faced similar challenges (Trusty et al., 1997).

Additionally, parental relationships play a crucial role in career choice. Parents have been found to have a significant impact on their children's career choices, often influencing them more than counselors, teachers, or other individuals in the field of interest. Parents want to support and guide their children in making career decisions, and their involvement can be instrumental in shaping their children's career paths (Jungen & Jo, 2008). The quality of the parent-child relationship is related to young adult's career choices, their professional occupations, and the emotional support provided can significantly shape the career trajectories of young adults (Dorot & Davidovitch, 2023).

Moreover, the family environment plays a pivotal role in shaping children's career aspirations, attitudes toward work, and professional aspirations. Parents serve as primary role models and sources of career-related information, influencing children's perceptions of various occupations, work ethics, and career possibilities. Additionally, familial support, encouragement, and resources can significantly impact children's educational attainment, skill development, and access to career opportunities. More than the facts of the childhood of individuals pursuing a career in psychology, we are interested in their perspective of the experience and how they make sense of it. The concept of mentalization introduced by Fonagy, involves understanding human behavior through intentional mental states. Mentalization is crucial for comprehending experiences and relationships, including with parents. These skills develop gradually and are influenced by attachment relationships and maternal reflexive functions. Mentalization underpins various psychological processes like empathy and problem-solving. Higher mentalization levels are linked to better social skills and adaptive engagement with surroundings. Originating from the theory of mind, mentalization embodies an intricate interplay of cognitive constructs, extensively explored

in contemporary philosophical discourse. It aids in adapting to reality and diverse social environments, benefiting individuals' understanding of experiences and others (Fonagy et al., 1998).

In this conceptual framework, reflective function (RF) emerges as a pivotal mental faculty responsible for structuring individuals' experiential understanding of their own and others' behaviors through the prism of mental states. RF, characterized by a multifaceted comprehension, encompasses discernment of experiential antecedents precipitating specific beliefs and emotions, as well as the reciprocal interplay between emotions and beliefs arising from distinct situational contexts. Furthermore, RF entails the capacity to anticipate behaviors predicated upon an awareness of underlying beliefs and desires, thereby delineating the intricate transactional dynamics between cognitive and affective domains. Additionally, RF encompasses a nuanced appreciation of emotional and cognitive states characteristic of various developmental stages and interpersonal relationships. Moreover, the intentional stance, encompassing both conscious and seemingly irrational unconscious acts, serves as a linchpin in explicating intentional behaviors and fostering a continuum of self-experience essential for the coherence of self-identity (Fonagy et al., 1998).

Investigation of a qualitative nature concerning the factors that determine the decision-making process about career choices in the domains of psychology, with a specific focus on clinical, counselling, and industrial psychology, is only fitting to gain a comprehensive understanding of the cultural relevance and perceptions within the Indian context. This meticulous inquiry permits the deduction of motivational elements that propel individuals towards particular career paths within the field of psychology, as well as the evaluation of potential disparities in motivations and objectives among the aforementioned subfields.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The components of career decision making, adverse childhood experiences, parental relationship and reflective functioning in the context of pursuing a career in psychology will be discussed here. The decisions made by individuals in their youth are shaped by their past encounters and established dispositions (Markiewicz & Kaczmarek, 2013). The decision to become a psychologist is largely influenced by personal reasons. More specifically, the drive to understand and support others is consistent with good clinical practice, suggesting that those drawn to the field by a sincere desire to help others could be good candidates for therapeutic jobs. This deduction emphasizes the value of empathy and intrinsic drive in promoting favorable treatment results in psychology (Murphy, 1993).

The motivations behind individuals choosing to pursue careers in psychology as clinical psychologists, who collaborate closely with psychiatrists in the treatment of clinical populations, are distinct from those of individuals pursuing a career in medicine (O'Riordan, 2019; Smiiianov et al., 2017). The inclination of medical students to work in academia and seek career opportunities within the field may be considerably influenced by their aspiration to participate in teaching, conduct research, and encounter the intellectual demands and stimulation associated with such positions (Straus et al., 2006). Psychologists and social workers are both trained to observe and assess an individual's cognitive, social, and emotional behaviors. Their objective is to furnish people with direction, tactics, and materials to assist them in managing the challenges they encounter. Therefore, given the similar goals, the variables influencing the decision of a career in social work may also influence that of a career in psychology as both are helping professions. The choice of a social work job among university students was influenced by several characteristics,

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including gender, psychological trauma experience, impact from role models, values, and personal goals (Couturier et al., 2021). This may resonate with students pursuing a career in psychology. Several studies (Cox and Deck, 2006; Davey, 2001; Davey and Lalande, 2001; Holland, 1985) propose that women are more inclined than men to select careers based on altruistic motivations like wanting to help others or improve their situation (Mudhovozi & Maree, 2016).

Adverse encounters faced during the formative years of an individual, namely childhood, adolescence, or early adulthood, have been observed to exert a direct influence on the selection of one's profession, thereby influencing the cultivation of empathy towards fellow beings. Positive and negative interactions with other helping professionals also played a significant role in instilling within them a profound sense of compassion and an unwavering yearning to aid others who find themselves in similar predicaments (Huynh & Rhodes, 2011).

Undoubtedly, the family exerts a profound influence on the child across multiple dimensions, including their developmental trajectory, character formation, and career development (Suvajdzic, 2016). The family environment serves as the primary context within which children acquire foundational skills, values, and beliefs that shape their understanding of the world and themselves. Moreover, the quality of familial relationships and interactions profoundly impacts children's socioemotional development, cognitive growth, and psychological well-being (Shaito, 2019).

Within the family unit, children learn essential life skills, interpersonal dynamics, and cultural norms that lay the groundwork for their future endeavors. Furthermore, familial relationships serve as models for social behavior, communication patterns, and conflict resolution strategies, which significantly influence children's interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence. As children navigate their developmental journey, they internalize familial values and expectations, which often serve as guiding principles in their decision-making processes and life choices (Soares, 2022).

By assigning cognitive states to other individuals, individuals can infuse significance and foreseeability into their conduct. This ascription empowers them to dynamically execute the most appropriate reactions, facilitating adaptive engagements in diverse interrelational transactions, notably within professional environments (Frolli et al., 2022) which is essential in the field of psychology. In psychology, mentalization is a major factor in determining professional choices. Furthermore, mentalization is strongly associated with theory of mind and empathy, both of which are necessary for developing successful communication skills and understanding the viewpoints of others (Cerniglia et al., 2019). According to a study, first-year psychology students had significantly better self-reported mentalization abilities than their engineering peers. Additionally, it was discovered that among participants, higher MentS-scores were correlated with older age and female gender (Fagerbakk et al., 2023).

Another significant factor mentioned in many research papers is the need to understand themselves and their experiences better through the course; however, the current courses in India do not give enough importance to trainees working on themselves to be able to perform better in their profession (Agarwal, 2015). And many will be disappointed by the lack of such emphasis in much psychology training at present. Indeed, Dozier (2003) found that clinical psychology students were most dissatisfied with the attention their program paid to personal development.

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Farber and colleagues carried out a thorough analysis of the body of research on the factors that influence people's decision to become therapists. The personal histories of therapists were found to be a recurrent feature in their review, with many of them reporting experiences of emotional pain, somberness, or loneliness in their childhood. As a result, these people were drawn to the therapeutic field to fulfill their unfulfilled desires for closeness and emotional connection. Moreover, these therapists frequently took on duties similar to those of parents, guardians, or negotiators in their social and familial networks, committing themselves to helping people for the rest of their lives (Farber et al., 2005).

Participants in a study emphasized a range of factors that impacted their decisions regarding their professional paths. These factors encompass guidance from family members or close relatives, networking opportunities within their chosen industries, their unique talents, capabilities, and proficiencies, perceived prospects within the business realm, as well as their passions and interests (Adams, 2014). Research conducted with the participants from Massachusetts indicate that, in comparison to social psychologists, therapists' job decisions are more heavily impacted by reasons for achieving professional success, dealing with personal issues, going through personal difficulties, and disruptions in their family of origin. Even though both social psychologists and therapists have experienced psychological anguish, they believe that their employment choices have improved their ability to perform professionally. As a coping strategy for handling negative career effects, therapists are more likely than social psychologists to participate in professional development and personal treatment. This suggests that to successfully navigate the difficulties present in their line of work, therapists place a higher value on personal development and self-awareness (Murphy, 1993; Aponte, 2021). Family influence and academic satisfaction were positively correlated with career decision (Koçak et al., 2021).

This study addresses a literature gap in India on factors affecting career choices in psychology. Despite global attention to psychology and career decisions, there is a lack of research in the Indian context (Aashita Galundia, 2018). Existing studies do not thoroughly explore how cultural, familial, and societal factors influence career paths in psychology in India. The research aims to fill this gap by deeply exploring the experiences of aspiring psychologists in India. It seeks to provide insights into the motivations, challenges, and aspirations shaping career decisions in clinical, counselling, and industrial psychology. The study also examines how cultural contexts, familial dynamics, and personal experiences impact career choices to offer a comprehensive understanding of the factors involved. Overall, this research aims to contribute valuable knowledge to the literature, bridging the gap in understanding career choices in psychology in India and paving the way for future research and interventions tailored to the Indian socio-cultural context. This study attempts to fill that gap albeit on a smaller scale.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The Sampling involved the convenient selection of ten participants from the population of 2nd-year master's students enrolled in clinical, counselling, and industrial psychology programs. The mean age is 23, with four male participants and six females. The sampling strategy aimed to achieve diversity in terms of gender, age, and academic backgrounds, facilitating the capture of a broad spectrum of perspectives. Specifically, four participants were selected each from the clinical psychology and counselling psychology specializations, while two participants were chosen from the industrial psychology program for interviews.

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Informed consent was obtained from all participants. All participants were from a medium socioeconomic class.

Instruments

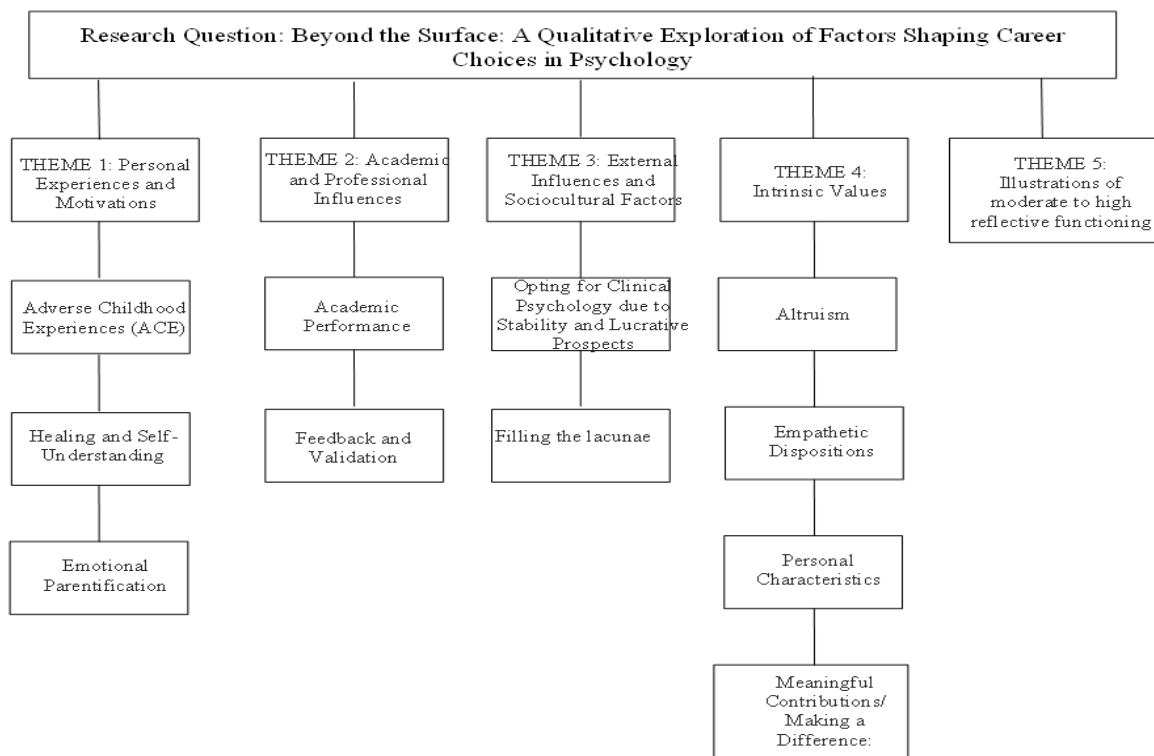
Structured Interview Questionnaire

Procedure

Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns, themes, and relationships within the data. Transcripts were coded and analyzed iteratively to develop a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing career choices in psychology. The data was analyzed using thematic analysis, a method utilized to identify, analyze, and elucidate patterns within a dataset (Braun & Clark, 2006). A reflexive approach to thematic analysis was employed, wherein themes were construed as patterns of shared meaning derived from interpreting the data (Braun & Clark, 2019a, 2019b). Proponents of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006, 2019a, 2019b) argue that notions of data or theoretical saturation are incongruent with reflexive qualitative methodologies. The Reflective-Functioning Manual Version 5 designed for use with Adult Attachment Interviews (AAI) was also incorporated. The manual offers a systematic approach to evaluate reflective functioning, focusing on the ability to comprehend and analyze one's own and others' mental states.

RESULTS

Figure 1: Themes and Subthemes



Personal Experiences and Motivations

The theme of Personal Experiences and Motivations shows that students' choices in psychology are molded by their unique life experiences and inner drives. From challenging childhood events to positive mentorship, these shape their values and aspirations. Motivations include a desire to help others and find personal fulfillment. Adverse

experiences can fuel their determination to tackle mental health issues, while positive encounters inspire them to make a difference. This theme underscores the profound impact of personal experiences on students' intrinsic motivations, revealing the deeply personal nature of their career decisions in psychology.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE)

Participants shared stories of childhood adversity, such as physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect. Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) theme shows a range of traumatic encounters from childhood. The participants' narratives highlight the challenges faced during their formative years. They openly discuss the impact of these events on their lives and well-being. Acknowledging these experiences helps participants address past traumas and emphasizes the importance of understanding ACE in psychology. Trauma-informed approaches and interventions are crucial for supporting individuals who have faced childhood adversity, promoting compassion, validation, and healing in their recovery journey.

“I went through a lot of bullying in school” “I didn't deserve that much physical aggression.”
“I have experienced verbal abuse, body shaming, and color-based discrimination from my own family members, and it has been deeply disturbing for me.”

Bullying. It was the most common ACE among the participants. Many of them tried taking solace in their school counselors, parents and others did not reach out at all.

“I think the bullying did impact me a little but I feel like everything that happened after 13 just kind of dims it down kind of makes it like nothing.”

Abuse. Physical abuse by parents in India is a complex issue. Since it is culturally normalized as a part of child-rearing, children also find themselves in internal conflict attempting to recognize instances of abuse. Out of 10 participants, 8 experienced physical and verbal abuse from one or both parents. Among these, only 6 individuals who were also victims of emotional abuse were able to acknowledge the abuse and its effects on their personal and professional well-being.

“There was a lot of verbal abuse, though, and it took a lot of time to understand that. Okay. It was verbal abuse by one of my primary caregivers... I think they do impact me still”

Sexual abuse. All 6 female participants had experience sexual harassment at least once which impacted them emotionally and they often found themselves not confiding in anyone but themselves. Intimate partner abuse was also experienced by one of the participants which played a vital role in their choice of career and relationship with psychology as a subject.

“I had a sexually and emotionally abusive relationship for two years. That impacted me a lot I think and whatever I learned in psychology also helped me understand what was going on there ... I think psychology has helped me a lot to heal from it as well.”

Healing and Self-Understanding

Participants turn to psychology to comprehend and overcome personal traumas and adverse experiences. Psychology plays a crucial role in individuals' journeys, focusing on personal growth, emotional healing, and self-awareness. Many are attracted to psychology due to their own psychological distress or challenges in life. Studying psychology allows for self-reflection, exploration, and healing. Therapeutic modalities help individuals understand their emotions, thoughts, and behaviors, promoting self-awareness and self-acceptance.

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Psychology equips individuals with tools to navigate life's challenges, manage stress, and build resilience. The theme of healing and self-understanding emphasizes psychology's transformative potential in fostering personal growth and empowering individuals to help others in their healing journey and self-discovery.

“... maybe I would be able to heal my inner child”

“... I came across things that validated me”

“... because I didn't want to be helpless like that again.”

Emotional Parentification

Participants in families often take on caregiving roles, influencing their interest in professions like psychology. Emotional Parentification is a key theme, showing how children handle parental responsibilities early on. This involves kids carrying the emotional burdens of caregivers due to parental incapacity. Participants share how they felt obligated to support and guide family members from a young age. This early caregiving role can lead to stress, confusion, and blurring of parent-child boundaries. Emotional parentification can affect psychological development and relationships, as individuals balance their needs with their family. Participants stress the importance of recognizing and addressing family dynamics in psychological assessment and intervention. They highlight the need for therapy that acknowledges experiences, establishes boundaries, and builds resilience against emotional parentification effects.

One of the participants had to support her mother emotionally because her mother couldn't find comfort from her husband, who was emotionally distant. As a result, the participant felt like she had no other option but to be there for her mother.

“I was being a spouse to her... maybe it's a bad thing, but she used to share a lot with me even when I was a kid.”

“... constant comparison with my brother in childhood... having to compensate for his demanding nature by being the quiet and understanding child”

Academic and Professional Influences

Positive Experiences with Professionals

Encounters with professors and mentors inspired interest in psychology. The theme emerges in narratives, highlighting early exposure to psychology. Participants describe being introduced to psychology through coursework, professionals, or personal exploration. Early exposures sparked interest in psychology. Positive experiences with professors, mentors, and learning opportunities strengthened their commitment to psychology. Participants stress the impact of early encounters on their professional aspirations and personal growth. Importance of supportive learning environments and connections in psychology is emphasized for inspiring future practitioners.

“I still remember our professor. She was the one who developed my interest in the subject.”

“... it was like an eye-opening moment that people from this field are so helpful. They are open to, you know, they're so humble.”

Academic Performance

High academic success in psychology-related courses enhances career goals and confidence in pursuing psychology. Academic Performance was a key theme in participants' stories, highlighting the impact of academic achievements on their path to psychology. Participants mention their high grades as reasons for choosing psychology. Good academic performance shows participants' intelligence and dedication, validating their interest in psychology. Academic accomplishments also indicate progress and skill, boosting participants' confidence in psychology. Poor academic performance may lead individuals to reevaluate

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career goals or seek help. Academic success is crucial for motivation and success in psychology. A good number of participants realized that they could score better in this subject than other subjects of science like biology or chemistry.

“I did not get good scores for biology...psychology was the highest score.”

Feedback and Validation

Positive feedback from peers, educators, and family members confirms individuals' potential for a career in psychology. The importance of "Feedback and Validation" is evident in participants' stories, showing the impact of external recognition on their career choices in psychology. Participants value constructive feedback, encouragement, and validation from various sources in psychology. Feedback motivates individuals and boosts their confidence in pursuing psychology. Validation from trusted individuals strengthens participants' commitment to psychology. Lack of validation may lead individuals to seek support to overcome doubts. Supportive relationships and feedback are crucial for professional growth in psychology.

“The feedback I received from others about myself was something that influenced me.”

“...I think it really goes with how you are as a person.”

External Influences and Sociocultural Factors

Opting for Clinical Psychology due to Stability and Lucrative Prospects

It emerges as a pragmatic motif in the narratives of participants, reflecting their considerations of stability and financial security in the process of making career decisions. The participants emphasize the perceived stability of clinical psychology as a crucial factor influencing their decision to specialize in this field. They acknowledge the existence of established frameworks, such as registration boards and standardized procedures, that contribute to the perceived stability of clinical psychology as a career trajectory. Moreover, the participants recognize the potential for financial stability and economic viability linked to clinical psychology, highlighting the demand for mental health services and the potential for profitable career paths in clinical settings.

This motif underscores the pragmatic drivers that lead individuals to opt for clinical psychology, as they prioritize stability and financial security in their career choices. Although the aspiration for stability and financial prosperity may impact their choice of specialization, participants also demonstrate a genuine interest in the clinical facets of psychology and a wish to have a meaningful impact on others' lives. Therefore, while stability and financial aspects play a significant role, the motivations of the participants are also influenced by their enthusiasm for assisting others and their belief in the significance of advocating for mental health and providing treatment. In essence, the motif of selecting clinical psychology for stability and lucratively emphasizes the multifaceted nature of career decision-making in psychology, where practical considerations intersect with personal values and professional ambitions.

“...it's the most stable thing in India, and it has a whole registration board, even though the committee doesn't have any psychologists.”

Filling the lacunae

Participants commit to addressing gaps in psychology or society by filling lacunae. They acknowledge shortcomings and work towards improvement through their skills and efforts. The theme involves proactive identification and remedy of deficiencies through various means like interventions, advocacy, research, or community engagement. Participants aim to expand mental health services, raise awareness about psychological concepts, and advocate

for policy changes. By filling lacunae, they enhance care quality, promote social justice, and foster inclusivity in psychology and society.

“I felt it was necessary, especially considering the scarcity of psychologists in India.”

Poor experiences with counselors. Three participants had a poor experience with their school counselors and stated that their motivation to become a counseling psychologist was to provide better experience for others and increase the quality of mental health services.

“I went to the counselor in my secondary school and she was not very good... And then it was like a blaming sort of thing that I can't move on.”

Intrinsic Influences

Altruism

Awareness of societal issues like discrimination, domestic violence, and mental health stigma inspires people to study psychology to contribute to the well-being of society. Participants show a strong desire to help others in the field of psychology, reflecting selfless commitment driven by empathy and compassion. They are motivated to alleviate suffering, support individuals, and promote social justice, revealing a dedication to serving others for the greater good. Participants' narratives demonstrate various forms of altruism, such as listening, supporting, advocating for those in need, and addressing societal issues and injustices. Their altruistic motivations focus on making a positive impact on individuals and communities rather than personal gain or recognition. By embracing altruism in their professional pursuits, participants highlight psychology's ability to bring about social change and improve collective well-being. Altruism plays a significant role in guiding career choices, shaping professional identities, and fostering purpose and fulfillment in the field of psychology.

“I just want to, you know, give back to the community.”

Empathetic Dispositions

Participants express empathy and altruism in their narratives, driving them towards psychology. They show a natural empathy that affects their motivations and client care. Instances of providing support and advocating for marginalized groups are highlighted. The impact of empathy on their roles, ethical decisions, and commitment to social justice is emphasized. Participants view empathy as a foundational value that transforms their practice and relationships.

“I wish someone had been there for me when I was young. Therefore, I want to be there for others, to let them know that there is a way out.”

Personal Characteristics

Personality traits like empathy, compassion, and resilience play a crucial role in career choices in psychology. Personal Characteristics are unique attributes that influence individuals' paths and roles in psychology. Traits such as empathy, resilience, and adaptability shape how individuals handle challenges and interact with clients. These personal characteristics help professionals build therapeutic relationships, enhance cultural competence, and address societal issues. Recognizing and utilizing their strengths, individuals improve their practice and contribute significantly to psychology.

“I was a person in a friend group who everyone approaches, like whenever they are going through a bad time, if they want to share something. And I always felt like I'm a good listener.”

Meaningful Contributions/ Making a Difference

Participants articulated a longing for work that holds significance and a feeling of satisfaction originating from assisting others and creating a positive influence on the lives of individuals. The term embodies the determination of participants to generate a positive impact within the realm of psychology. It signifies their aspiration to instigate change, enhance lives, and tackle societal issues through their professional capacities. This concept emphasizes the deep-rooted sense of mission and contentment derived from effecting a change, emphasizing the dedication of participants to moral conduct and societal obligation. Through actively pursuing chances to contribute, participants showcase a commitment to progressing the field and enriching the welfare of others.

“Feeling a sense of satisfaction and contributing to something meaningful is essential to me.”

Illustrations of moderate to high reflective functioning (RF)

Moderate to high RF is characterized by an awareness of mental states, attempts to comprehend underlying behaviors, recognition of developmental aspects, and an awareness of mental states in connection to others. The theme illustrated in these statements revolves around the individual's capacity for moderate to high reflective functioning (RF), particularly in the context of their relationship with their parents and their upbringing.

The individual demonstrates an awareness of their parents' efforts and limitations in parenting, acknowledging that despite their best efforts, mistakes were made due to various factors such as youth or past traumas. This reflects an understanding of mental states and attempts to comprehend underlying behaviors, as they recognize the complexities and challenges their parents faced in raising them.

“I think they did what they could to the best of their abilities.”

There is also a recognition of developmental aspects, as the individual reflects on how their parents' own childhood experiences shaped their parenting styles and behaviors. They understand that their parents' actions were influenced by their past, indicating an awareness of how mental states evolve over time and across generations.

“They were too young. They were too young when they had me.”

“It's just that her childhood experiences didn't really help her understand...”

The individual evaluates their own experiences within this framework, acknowledging instances of physical aggression and expressing a desire for better handling of such situations. This demonstrates an awareness of the impact of past experiences on their own development and well-being. Furthermore, there is an acknowledgment of the complexity of parent-child relationships, as the individual reflects on their evolving relationship with their mother and the challenges they face in understanding each other, particularly given their intensified emotional experiences and the generational gap between them.

“I didn't deserve that much physical aggression. Like, it would have been handled in a better way. It was not that much of an issue.”

Other Factors

One of the participants, with a keen interest in advancing a professional path in the realms of industrial psychology and human resources, identified the factor of reduced competition within the industry as a significant influencing element.

“... it's a new field, a lot of opportunities, a lot of scope to grow.”

DISCUSSION

The discourse on the objectives of the dissertation presents a methodical framework for scrutinizing the findings of the study and their implications within the sphere of career selections in psychology.

The investigation delved into various factors that are involved in the pursuit of a career in the field of psychology (Galundia, 2018). The field of psychology is not commonly chosen as a profession, especially in the context of India. It is often associated with taboo and stigma, necessitating a strong dedication to the discipline in order to sustain oneself financially, yet individuals from diverse economic backgrounds find themselves drawn to this field. Motivated by a desire to comprehend their own challenging experiences or those of their loved ones, they also recognize the societal gaps and the dearth of competent professionals in the country. Despite the increasing number of mental health patients, the existing professionals are insufficient in both effectiveness and quantity with only 8,855 registered clinical psychologists and psychiatric nurses in the country for the prevention of problems related to mental illness according to Sansad, 2023. The themes highlighted in the findings offer valuable insights into the myriad factors that influence individuals' choices to pursue a career in psychology. These themes encompass personal experiences, motivations, academic and professional influences, as well as external and sociocultural factors. Furthermore, the depictions of moderate to high levels of reflective functioning (RF) provide a deeper comprehension of how individuals navigate their interpersonal relationships and past experiences, particularly within the context of their upbringing and family dynamics (Fonagy et al., 1998).

The theme of personal experiences and motivations emphasizes the significant impact of individuals' life experiences on their intrinsic motivations for pursuing a career in psychology. Participants' accounts reveal a variety of experiences, ranging from adverse childhood experiences (ACE) to processes of healing and self-awareness. Adverse childhood experiences, encompassing instances of trauma and adversity, not only influenced individuals' self-perceptions and perceptions of others but also motivated them to address mental health concerns and promote recovery. This discovery corresponds with existing literature that underscores the connection between childhood trauma and psychological distress, along with the role of personal journeys towards healing in guiding individuals towards psychology careers (Cicchetti & Toth, 1995; Herman, 1992).

Moreover, emotional parentification emerges as a prominent theme, illustrating how individuals' early experiences within their families influence their career decisions and relational interactions. Participants' stories elucidate the emotional responsibilities they shouldered as children, often taking on caregiving roles due to parental incapacity or dysfunction (Sroufe et al., 2005). This phenomenon highlights the intricate interplay between family dynamics and psychological growth, underscoring the importance for therapists and practitioners to acknowledge and tackle familial influences on clients' well-being (Jurkovic, 1997).

In addition to personal experiences, academic and professional factors also significantly impact individuals' paths in the field of psychology. Positive interactions with professionals, like supportive mentors and engaging coursework, act as catalysts for sparking interest and dedication to the discipline (Lent et al., 2000). Furthermore, academic performance emerges as a key element, where strong performance in psychology-related courses validates individuals' career aspirations and enhances their self-assurance. These results align with

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studies emphasizing the significance of early exposure to psychology and positive academic encounters in fostering professional growth and dedication to the field (Leong & Zachar, 1999).

Externally, societal expectations and cultural norms wield substantial influence on individuals' career choices in psychology. Participants' narratives underscore the perceived stability and altruistic nature of psychology as a profession, driven by societal values and aspirations for societal change (Flores et al., 2008). Additionally, the theme of addressing gaps underscores individuals' proactive endeavors to bridge mental health service disparities and advocate for marginalized groups, revealing a commitment to social justice and community well-being. These results align with research highlighting the impact of sociocultural factors on career decisions and professional identities, as well as the importance of advancing diversity and inclusivity within the field of psychology (Sue et al., 2019).

The depictions of moderate to high reflective functioning contribute to a nuanced comprehension of individuals' ability to introspectively examine their past experiences and relational dynamics (Sharp et al., 2006). Participants' reflections on their upbringing and parent-child relationships showcase an understanding of mental states, efforts to grasp underlying behaviors, and acknowledgment of developmental influences. Furthermore, their recognition of the complexity of interpersonal interactions and generational disparities underscores the significance of empathy, perspective-taking, and effective communication in therapeutic settings (Fonagy et al., 2002).

While comparing between the participants pursuing specialization in clinical, counseling and industrial psychology, it was found that clinical and counseling students exhibited a strong drive to enact change, often employing the term 'healing' in reference to themselves and others, as a source of motivation, whereas industrial students directed their attention towards the expansiveness of the discipline. The male counterparts demonstrated a higher level of interest in the financial rewards associated with the profession compared to their female counterparts. This observation may be indicative of societal norms dictating that men bear the responsibility of providing for their families, resulting in greater pressure to secure a substantial income (Jost & Möser, 2023).

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Acknowledgement

I want to express my deep appreciation to Arjun Sekhar PM, professor in the department of psychology, for his thoughtful guidance and continual support throughout this project. He has become a mentor in the truest sense of the word, and my own process of becoming a clinical psychologist has been tremendously enriched by our relationship. I am honoured to be working with him. I also want to express my gratitude to the head of the department, Dr. Sruthi Sivaraman, who was a great mentor during this project for it to be a pleasure and a success.

Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Singh, K. (2024). Beyond the Surface: A Qualitative Exploration of Factors Shaping Career Choices in Psychology. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, *12*(4), 2995-3012. DIP:18.01.282.20241204, DOI:10.25215/1204.282