

Perspectives of psychology graduates on the registration of psychologists in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This study sought to explore the views of psychology graduates on the process of registration as a psychologist in Zimbabwe. An interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was done by conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews to 12 purposely selected psychology graduates. All participants had a master's degree of which five were registered psychologists and the rest were not. Three major themes were generated from the analysis of the participants' interviews and these were: academic qualifications for registration, post-graduate internship, board examinations and continuing professional development (CPD). The results reveal lack of choices at masters' degree programmes resulting in participants embarking on counselling and community psychology degrees. They showed dislike on the CPD points due to barriers such as localisation of workshops and lack of time to do research. The study recommends that the Allied Health Practitioners Council of Zimbabwe needs to collaborate with universities, psychology interns and registered psychologists in registration and practice of psychologists.

Keywords: Registration, internship, psychologist, qualification, board examination.

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1. Introduction

What impacts the professional development of psychologists? According to Lorentzena, Rønnestad and Orlinsky (2010) such a question may have implications for the preparation of psychologists. The preparation of psychologists is context specific and this research seeks to understand the experiences of psychologists with regard to the Allied Health Professions of Zimbabwe (2016) new regulations on registering psychologists. The paper does not focus on any specialty area of psychology.

Organisations that serve the interests of psychologists in Zimbabwe are the Allied Health Practitioners Council of Zimbabwe (AHPCZ) and the Zimbabwe Psychological Association (ZPA) (Mpfu, Mutepe, Chireshe & Kasayira, 2007). The AHPCZ controls the training and education of psychologists and collaborates with the Health Professions Authority and the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (AHPCZ, 2016). The board recognises psychology registration and internship training in clinical, community, counselling psychology, neuropsychology, occupational/industrial and research psychology (AHPCZ, 2016). ZPA, which is currently launching regional charters, provides a professional identity as well as education and training for all psychology specialties (Mpfu et al., 2007).

The major areas of study before 2011 were educational psychology, organisational or industrial and clinical psychology (Mpfu et al., 2007). The Master of Science degree programme in educational psychology was offered at University of Zimbabwe and enrolled 10 students biennially (Mpfu et al., 2007) and had its last intake in the year 2011 because of unavailability of lecturers with requisite qualifications. Similarly, the Master of Science degree in clinical psychology at the University of Zimbabwe had its last intake in 2011. The most recent programmes being offered are at Midlands State University (Master of Science degree in Community Psychology) and Great Zimbabwe University (Master of Science degree in Counselling Psychology). This entails that the other programmes are not offered locally.

2. Preparation of psychologists in Zimbabwe

The AHPCZ (2016) indicates two main programmes that prepare psychologist: the first route is attaining of a Bachelor of Science (honours) degree in psychology and Master of Science degree plus 1-year internship and the second route a Bachelor of Science (honours) degree plus a three-year internship programme which should include a psychology masters' degree before applying for final registration. Attainment of a master's degree requires 2 years, of which 1 year is a supervised internship at local universities.

The supervising psychologist (senior psychologist) is required to spend 60 hours (or 1 hour per week) on individualised interaction with and observation of each intern and such supervision is pegged at \$100 per month per intern with each supervisor having no more than 6 interns (AHPCZ, 2016). These are the changes from the previous regulations which required a 3-year internship programme for holders of a foundation psychology degree while those with a master's degree would automatically register (Mpfu & Khan, 1997; Nyanungo, 2000) maybe because of the internship programme at masters' level and shortages of psychologists in the early 1990s.

Trainee psychologists are required to produce an internship portfolio for evaluation by the AHPCZ. The portfolio should show evidence of continuing education, papers presented at professional seminars and workshops, research reports and assessments reports (Mpfu et al., 2007). In addition to these old regulations, the new regulations stipulate continuing professional development (CPD) for practicing psychologists and interns. Registered psychologists and interns need to accrue a minimum of 50 CPD points per year in order to renew their practicing certificates (e.g., achieving an extra psychology qualification gives 10 points or publishing in a peer-reviewed journal is awarded 20 points).

As from January 2016 the regulations indicate that all those persons requiring to be registered as psychologists need to pass the board examinations which assess applied psychological knowledge in oral and written work. This emphasises the importance of a scientist-practitioner model for professional preparation and practice (Jimerson & Oakland, 2007). This model advocates the belief that applications of psychology should be supported empirically and theoretically and derived from the body of literature held in high esteem (Jimerson & Oakland, 2007). This model emphasises the importance of reciprocal relationships between scholarship and practice within psychology; each contributing to the other.

The socio-economic meltdown between 2006 and 2008 had seen most professionals leaving the country (Nkoma, Zirima & Chimunhu, 2012). The job attrition rate among senior psychologists was high leaving interns with little or no supervision. A senior psychologist refers to someone with at least 3 years of experience after registration as a psychologist. Most psychologists are now lecturing at universities where there is better remuneration (Mpofu et al., 2007). The \$100 payment per month by interns to supervising psychologists is a way of motivating supervision. The requirements of CPD points, masters' degree and payment of supervision may frustrate interns. Interns in this study refer to someone who has attained a master's degree. Achievement of CPD points is easier for university lecturers whose core area is research and challenging for government employees.

It is important to determine psychologists' views and practices with regard to the AHPCZ (2016) regulations. Presently there is no study on Zimbabwean psychologists' experiences with regard to the new regulations and previous studies have focused on specialty areas (e.g., educational psychology or industrial psychology). What has been noted is that interns were spending 6 or more years without registering due to acute shortages of senior psychologists rather than a maximum of 3 years. The new regulations came into effect in 2016 and appear to compound rather than lessen their challenges. It is against this backdrop that the research seeks to determine psychologists' views on their preparation. More specifically the study seeks to determine psychologists' views on board examinations, CPD points and internship programme.

This research sought to address the following research questions:

1. What are the views of psychology graduates on the academic qualifications required for registration as a psychologist?
2. How do psychology graduates view the post-graduate internship programme?
3. What are the views of psychology graduates on the board examinations?
4. How can the registration of psychologists be improved?

3. Methods

The study was informed by the qualitative research paradigm. The qualitative research paradigm mainly focuses on discovering and understanding the experiences, perspectives and thoughts of participants (Harwell, 2011). In order to gather data from this phenomenological study, the use of IPA was done by conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews (Chapman & Smith, 2002, p. 127), with the aim of producing rich and meaningful data about a small number of people (Patton, 2002; Silverman, 2006). IPA (Smith, 1996) focuses on exploring how participants make sense of their personal and social world. This phenomenological study tries to explore personal experiences of Zimbabwean psychologists with regard to registration requirements by getting close to the participant's personal world through a process of interpretative activity. This allows the researchers to examine how participants perceive the particular situations they are facing.

3.1. Sample and sampling strategy

An IPA approach uses very small sample sizes, thereby sacrificing breadth for depth (Smith & Osborne, 2008) and in this research a sample size of 12 participants (8 males and 4 females) was purposely selected. Refer to Table 1 for demographic information of participants.

Table 1. Demographic information of participants

Participant	Gender	Highest education	Status	Experience
1	M	MSc educational psychology	Registered	1 year
2	M	MSc educational psychology	Registered	2 years
3	F	MSc clinical psychology	Unregistered	-----
4	M	MSc educational psychology	Unregistered	-----
5	M	MSc community psychology	Unregistered	-----
6	M	MSc community psychology	Unregistered	-----
7	F	MSc educational psychology	Registered	1 year
8	F	MSc community psychology	Unregistered	-----
9	M	MSc educational psychology	Registered	2 years
10	M	MSc clinical psychology	Registered	-----
11	F	MSc counselling psychology	Unregistered	-----
12	M	MSc Counselling Psychology	Unregistered	-----

3.2. Data collection

The semi-structured in-depth interviews with the participants were recorded using a cell phone with consent from participants. Such a form of interviewing allows the researcher and participant to engage in a dialogue whereby initial questions are modified in light of the participants' responses and the investigator is able to probe interesting and important areas which arise (Smith & Osborne, 2008). Also this form of interviewing technique views the ordering of questions as less important and therefore follows the respondent's interests or concerns.

3.3. Procedure

The researchers made use of the ZPA social media platform to get the contacts of the participants. The participants were then contacted and the interview schedule was given to them 3 weeks in advance of workshop for psychologists in Harare through the email addresses they provided. The interviews were done after the workshop in a quiet room and lasted between 30 and 46 minutes for each participant.

3.4. Data analysis

The focus of the researchers was to understand the meaning and content participants' mental and social world by a process of interpretation (Brocki & Wearden, 2006) and this is dependent on participants' abilities to express their thoughts and experiences. IPA thus involves a two-stage interpretation process wherein participants make sense of their world and the researchers' role is to make sense of their participants' sense-making process (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 53). The standard analytic procedure followed Smith and Osborn (2008) guidelines on verbatim scripts. The approach focuses on a case by case analysis of each individual transcript which was read repeatedly in order for the researchers to be familiar with the contents. Any significant meanings by the participant were noted down to the left-hand margin of the transcripts. When complete the transcripts were re-read this time to note any emerging themes, from the initial notes that captured the essence and importance of the text.

A preliminary list of initial themes was created from which a second list connecting the themes was created, illustrating the clustering of these themes into a smaller number of higher-order ones that were checked against participants' phrases to ensure they supported the connections made. A table of themes was then developed by giving a name to the clusters of themes to form super-ordinate themes. The themes from the first transcript were used to help direct subsequent analysis of transcripts while ensuring that similarities and differences were highlighted between the accounts until a table of master themes was arrived at for the entire sample.

3.5. Trustworthiness

Triangulation in this study utilised individual interviews and documents so that these collaborative different sources would shed light on a theme, and thus locating evidence to document a theme from these sources. This triangulation provided credibility to the findings. Any document referred by participants during the interview was examined in order to explain the behaviour and attitudes of participants.

Voluntary participation entails that participants would be genuinely willing to participate in the study and thus ensuring truthfulness. Participants were encouraged to be frank and that there were no right or wrong answers to the questions so that participants can freely contribute ideas and experiences. Participants were told that they can withdraw from the study at anytime and they need not disclose the reason for doing so to the researcher.

3.6. Ethical considerations

The purpose of the research was disclosed to participants 3 weeks before the interview. Participants were told that there would be no perceived physical, mental and emotional harm that might occur to them in the study and that participating in the study is voluntary. This principle of informed consent means that research participants are provided with sufficient and accessible information about the research so that they can make an informed decision as to whether to become involved, or not (Crow, Wiles, Heath and Charles cited by Gray, 2014) and that they have the right to withdraw from the research for any or no reason and at any time during the research. Also participants were told that there would be voice recordings of their responses and that these would only be used for the research purpose only. They were told that their real names would not be disclosed in the study but would be labelled as 'participant 1 or participant 2' depending on the order they are interviewed). Participants were notified that the research would be carried out in the evening after each day's workshop in Harare so that there will be very little disruption during the workshop proceedings.

4. Findings

The findings include verbatim examples from participant transcripts. The identities of participants were protected using participant number. Three major themes were generated from the analysis of the participants' interviews. These are academic qualifications for registration, post-graduate internship, board examinations and CPD.

4.1. Academic qualifications for registration

Participants' experiences across the sample indicated that there were few options for masters' degrees in Zimbabwe. The following excerpts illustrate degrees of unhappiness due to lack of choices.

...after I completed my first degree in 2007, I wanted to do an Msc in Clinical Psychology but I never got the opportunity because when I had the funds, UZ was not offering the programme and this demotivates me (Participant 5)

Similarly, participants 8 and 12 indicated the non availability of masters' programmes of their choices.

....I ended up doing community psychology because at that time it was the only masters' programme on offer....it's not as if I had a choice... (Participant 8)

...after my first degree, I wanted to do clinical psychology, even up to this day I still want to pursue a career in clinical psychology....I ended up doing an Msc in Counselling Psychology because I felt it was closer to my preferred choice... (Participant 12)

The experience of participants shows lack of choices at masters' degree programmes resulting in them embarking on counselling and community psychology degrees.

4.2. Post-graduate internship

Participants' experiences indicated mixed sentiments on the post-graduate internship. Some participants indicated that the post-graduate internship programme was unnecessary and viewed it as a gate-keeping measure. Others viewed it as necessary because it provides evidence-based practices. The following extracts from participants clearly illustrate the duplication of the internship programme and the constraints in payments:

I went through internship during my Masters' degree, I did it in one year, I was supervised by a registered psychologist, why do I have to do another internship. To make us continue paying supervisors for the internship? (Participant 4)

The following experience indicates the repeated internship programme after the foundation degree, during a master's programme and after a master's degree.

I have adequate internship after completing my foundation degree and I also did this during my masters...why then should I then do the same internship after masters and foundation degree (Participant 3).

Similarly, the following extract from participant 7 indicates frustration about the internship and suggests that they pay external supervisors for training.

The AHPCZ needs to consult before they put regulations...this is a form of money generating venture for senior psychologists....I see no need for this after the masters nor value...let them try to pilot this by giving us the examinations and then see if we don't have the requisite knowledge

Some participants indicated satisfaction with the internship programme but highlighted the lack of explicit contents of the internship file. The following experiences depict this:

Eer...the programme is ok as it provides evidence-based practices but they (AHPCZ) need to be clear about programmes or syllabuses of what interns should complete by the end of the year, otherwise an intern may think they have done all that is required only to be told that they are not yet ripe (Participant 10)

Similarly, another participant showed lack of guidelines in the internship file.

I do not even know what I should include in my file ... the guidelines do not even give a hint (Participant 6)

The experiences depict mixed views on the post-graduate internship programme.

4.3. Board examinations and continuing professional development

One participant had experienced the board examination and is a registered psychologist, while the others expressed views based on their interpretation of the AHPCZ 2016 document. The following extract depicts the views of participant 1 who is a registered psychologist:

...the board exam was tough but I think it was fine in that it provides the assessors a chance to see if you really know your stuff....I however feel in future, they should provide an outline of areas in which the examinee should prepare for, that outline can be provided when they start their internship....the board exam should not be an ambush.

The participants showed dislike on the CPD points. Such barriers included localised workshops and lack of time to do research. The following experience indicates localisation of workshops and lack of financial reimbursements.

This is good for evidence-based practices. However, it is difficult to accrue the points because workshops are done in Harare, at night and during the week. This is an advantage for those who stay in Harare. Some of us who stay outside Harare had to find own bus fare to and from Harare...also we are needed at work the following morning. (Participant 4)

The Ministry of Primary and Secondary education does not provide leave days for employees to do research or payment of workshop registration fees.

This is the only way of accruing points for some of us (attending workshops) because it is difficult to do research because the Ministry does not provide leave days for research. We earn so little and can't afford the pay the workshop fees. (Participant 11)

The experiences of participants indicate that there are no outlines in board exams and therefore lack focus on study areas. Continuing development workshops are centralised in the capital city and psychologists residing in other towns do not have adequate funds for transport. Also the departments they work for do not recognise the importance of research in psychologists work.

5. Discussion

Local universities are not offering graduate degree programmes in clinical psychology and educational psychology. These were last offered at University of Zimbabwe in 2011. The available programmes are in counselling psychology and community psychology offered by Great Zimbabwe and Midlands State Universities respectively. The lack of choices in degree programmes resulted in frustration on the part of participants which may be due to a compromised career path. Intrinsic motivation is thereby affected. For example, Ducheny, Allezhause, Crandell and Schneider (2001) defined professional development as an ongoing process through which an individual derives a cohesive sense of professional identity by integrating the broad-based knowledge, skills, attitudes within psychology with one's values and interests (cited in Elman, Illfelder-Kaye & Robiner, 2005, p. 368). Similarly, Jimmerson & Oakland (2007) suggested that each professional has a distinct and unique style of lifelong learning, which is influenced by that individual's background, characteristic traits and the immediate demands of the environments.

There appears to be some misinterpretation and or lack of knowledge on continuous professional development and initial training or internship from participants and AHPCZ regulations. Continuous professional development points were experienced by both registered and unregistered psychologists. Some participants wanted the post-graduate internship to be scrapped because it was similar to their practicum at master's degree while others did the training after completing their foundation degree in psychology. Initially, trainee psychologists (those without a master's degree) used to undergo a 3-year trainee programme before being registered as a psychologist (Mpofu et al., 2007). The new regulations now stipulates that an applicant may commence internship training after a basic degree in

psychology and then register and complete a masters' degree during the internship, that is, within 3 years while those who are registered psychologists but without a master's degree need to register for appropriate master's degree within 3 years registration (AHPCZ, 2016). Continuous professional development is a self-monitored practice that continues throughout psychologist's career and focuses on refining and building on skills, updating knowledge, facilitating retention of existing knowledge and skills, and developing specialties of practice (Elman et al., 2005). This implies that CPD is for registered or practising psychologists who engage in such activities. In contrast, initial training period comprises supervised practice and is guided by minimum education and training requirements for gaining registration (Elman et al., 2005). In Zimbabwe, the minimum period is 12 months of full practical training in a specific registration category of psychology. Such a period has a strong academic focus, with an emphasis on development of knowledge and skills than on their application to clinical practice (Kennedy & Innes, 2005). In this study, it appears that CPD is a mandatory requirement for renewal of registration for both intern and registered psychologists. The AHPCZ regulations indicate professional development points for both interns and registered psychologists, and supervised practice for interns for a minimum of 1 year. Also participants indicated that they pay a fee for their training. There is an acute shortage of senior psychologists in Zimbabwe (Mpofo et al., 2007) which has resulted in the AHPCZ stipulating a \$100 payment per month by interns to supervising psychologists as a way of motivating supervision (AHPCZ, 2016).

Dissatisfaction by some participants with CPD undertaking maybe partly because they lack curiosity and desire for enrolling in CPD prescribed to them or some components of CPD lack an experiential component, such as conference attendances. Localised conferences have financial burdens on the part of participants who stay far away from the capital city of Harare. Organisations which these participants work for do not value psychologists' critical area of research resulting in them not giving research leave. According to Fowler and Harrison financial reimbursement of expenses, perceived need and personal interest increase the likelihood that psychologists will seek CPD (cited in Tysinger, Tysinger, Diamanduros, Terry & Smith, 2015).

The Board Examination was viewed positively by one participant but indicated that there is need for a reading list. The Board Examination applies to all provisionally registered psychology interns and is meant to assess whether a person has adequate professional knowledge, skills and competencies for independent practice in the profession. The assessment focuses on a candidate's ability to apply knowledge and skills to a specific registration category and therefore does not examine theoretical knowledge (AHPCZ, 2016). An analysis of the AHPCZ regulations showed lack of reading material for examinations in the Zimbabwean context but rather states that the reading list is recommended but not mandatory (AHPCZ, 2016). However, the examination questions are derived from the internship curriculum.

6. Conclusion

The study revealed that the regulations pertaining to the registration of psychologists in Zimbabwe exert too many requirements for the interns. The intern psychologist is required to engage in a number of programmes that are unavailable, unnecessary or unclear. The Bsc Honours in Psychology graduate is given to nine fields of psychology to pursue but in reality only two are available in Zimbabwe. After completion of the Masters' programme which consists of an internship programme done over two semesters, the intern is expected to do another internship programme for 1 year. The participants experienced this repetition as a gate-keeping measure suggesting some misinterpretation of initial training or internship. The participants showed dislike on the CPD points due to barriers which include localised workshops, lack of financial reimbursements and time to do research. Board examinations were viewed positively as they assess whether a person has adequate professional knowledge, skills and competencies for independent practice in the profession. There appears to be some misinterpretation or lack of knowledge on continuous professional development and initial training or internship from participants and AHPCZ.

The study is limited to the Zimbabwean context for participants with masters' degrees in psychology.

6.1. Recommendations

In light of the findings gathered from this study, the following recommendations are therefore proffered.

- The AHPCZ should work together with universities to develop curricula that meet basic standard practice of psychologists.
- Universities should introduce more masters in psychology programmes to meet the needs of Bsc Honours in Psychology graduates.
- There is need for constant engagement with stakeholders in the field of psychology so as to get their opinions on how to develop the field.
- Consultation with psychologists is needed when there is a need for a review of psychologists training and registration regulations.

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