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Abstract

The field of Counselling as a profession and that of Counselling Psychology is a relatively new and developing discipline in Greece. As in other European countries, it is only in the recent years that this postgraduate training started to be delivered by a state/national University Institution in Greece. The present study focused on attempting to capture the qualitative experience of the first two cohorts of graduates from the 1st postgraduate programme in Counselling and Counselling Psychology delivered by the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens in collaboration with the Democritus University of Thrace. This data was collected via two focused group interviews using a thematic analysis approach which facilitated the immersion of the following main themes: motivating factors (for choosing such discipline), reflections on placements, the role of personal development, the evolving professional identity, issues of professional recognition, opportunities for employment, vision for the future.

In conclusion, the participants expressed the opinion that the provision of such a postgraduate programme by a Greek University was delivered in a rigorous way with high standards and has equipped them with the reflexivity and critical thinking required to build their professional identity and influence the developments still to come.

Keywords: professional identity, Greek context, counsellor, counselling psychologist, counsellor training

Introduction

This paper is an attempt to reflect upon and evaluate the development of a relatively new discipline in the field of psychological training and practice in Greece, that of the counsellor and counselling psychologist, through the lens of the first cohort graduates of the first Master's programme delivered by a Greek State University. The authors have collaborated, together with a broader team, in setting up this course and providing input in the roles of Lecturer, clinical supervisor, tutor and co-ordinator. Having allowed a period of up to 3-year post graduation, they invited those graduates from the first 2 alumni cohorts who were interested in participating in two focus group sessions to explore their views and experiences of both undertaking such study and what happened at identity and professional levels post qualification.

Cultural Context

Given that Greece has been traditionally characterized as a collectivist culture where traditionally psychological help-seeking was attempted via family structures (Malikiosi-Loizos, 2005; Christodoulidi & Malikiosi-Loizos, 2008) there has been a shift in recent years, particularly in urban centres for Greek people to be seeking counselling support via a trained professional (Malikiosi-Loizou & Ivey, 2012)

Counselling was introduced as a module within the curriculum of psychology degrees in the late 80s; later on a number of private institutions, mainly organised by repatriate counselling professionals who had qualified abroad – mainly in the US and the UK - started offering such courses (Filippopoulos, 2009).

What is confusing – and one could say even 'unethical' according to the standards in many other countries worldwide, both for professionals and the public in Greece, is that one only needs a bachelor's degree in Psychology in order to gain state licensure (Lampropoulos & Stalikas, 2009). This means that such graduates do not have sufficient skills training and other components required to deal with mental health, and yet they get 'permission' to practise. When it comes to what Greeks understand by the terms 'counselling' or 'counsellor', it tends to be associated with guidance perhaps more in an educational setting, rather than a psychotherapy professional. Counselling psychology has many diversifications across the Western world (Pelling, 2004) but certainly, it is clear that the practice of a 'talking

therapy' requires emphasis on skills development, experiential learning and personal development of the practitioner, rather than gaining the theoretical knowledge which is often the emphasis in an undergraduate degree in Psychology (Rizq, 2010).

The most common postgraduate path for Psychology graduates in Greece is that of clinical psychology. For several years it was the only post-graduate psychology programme offered by the Greek universities. It is only in the last 10 to 20 years that a more sincere interest emerged for counselling psychology in Greece (Malikiosi-Loizos, 2017). That creates a certain 'attitude' on how human suffering is perceived, which is emphasising diagnosis and classifications around pathology and disorders, which is away from the more humanistic and phenomenological perspective that permeate the philosophy on which counselling has developed (McLeod, 2013). In Greece as in several other European countries, counselling psychology training is based on the scientist-practitioner model whereas counsellors' training is based on the reflective-practitioner model. Both specialties train students to possess the basic facilitative and counselling skills before being placed for their practicum in the appropriate placement. They are equipped with similar professional competencies but are not qualified to apply for the same posts. They are represented by different professional bodies. Nevertheless, there still is no clarity around their distinct identity, one of the reasons being that counsellors often act as psychologists since they are labelled as 'mental health practitioners' and can work in private practice. No clear accreditation and licensure criteria exist to differentiate the two specialties. The issue of the distinctive role of these two professions is still debatable in Greece. Furthermore, the Greek audience is not yet fully familiar with the term "counselling".

The first post-graduate programme (Master's degree) in counselling psychology and counselling offered by a state/national university institution in Greece started in 2009. It is a two-year master's programme consisting of 10 to 12 36-hour semester courses, 900 to 1000 hours of supervised practicum, (the program requires 900 hours of practicum. These include all hours attended on a placement during training, out of which at least 130 hours should cover therapy sessions. In some placements students are allowed to cover up to 1000 hours of practicum according to their personal time and interest and to the placement's needs), 40 hours of individual therapy plus a research thesis. Due to the fact that many students work parallel to their post-graduate studies it takes them about three years to complete the programme.

With such context in mind, the main research questions that have shaped this study are as follows:

1. How do research participants (i.e. graduates of this particular postgrad programme) describe their experience of undertaking this programme in counselling/counselling psychology in this particular setting and cultural context?
2. How do these first graduates in counselling/counselling psychology perceive their professional identity, given it is an emerging and developing profession in Greece?

Method

Given that the purpose of this research was to obtain individual perceptions and experience, a qualitative approach appeared suitable, based on phenomenology which captures subjective perspectives. The aim of phenomenological research is to attempt to explore experiences and meanings and "to capture as closely as possible the way in which the phenomenon is experienced within the context in which the experience takes place" (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003, p.27). In this study, the significance of context (State University is Greece and the Greek society dynamics) is central, hence such a paradigm has underpinned the authors' approach towards making sense of the data.

Focus Group Research

The use of focus groups (FC) is very popular, particularly for practitioners within health research and when addressing human experience, as the group dynamics can facilitate tapping into dimensions that otherwise may remain invisible (Kitzinger, 2005). Focus groups are known as a suitable method for collecting info and assessing attitudes, opinions, feelings and experiences that refer to a particular context, hence they have been a popular choice in counselling and psychotherapy research (Kress & Shoffner, 2007). The conduct of focus groups was chosen for this study as a focus group can a. provide a ground for explorative studies to reveal the parameters involved and b. bring participants into a group-interaction with certain group-dynamics that often constitute valuable data in itself.

Focus Groups Procedure and Schedule

Alumni graduates who had completed the two-year postgraduate programme in 2011 and 2013 were contacted via email which included an information sheet about the purposes of this research, together with an invitation to participate in a 2-hour focus group. The total number of Alumni graduates was 20 for the first cohort (2009-11) and 22 for the second cohort (2011-13). There were 40 women and two men, their average age was 30 years old and most of them had worked during their post-graduate study. Out of 42 graduates, 33 responded on the information sheet, and 19 expressed their interest to participate in the focus groups.

Focus Groups Participants

There were 2 different focus groups sessions, one consisting of 10 participants and one consisting of 9 participants randomly assigned to each group. 11 members had followed the Counselling Psychology Master's direction and 8 the Counselling Master's direction. All of them were women. Each focus group was conducted by the same facilitator and lasted about 2hrs. Notes were taken by two observers in each focus group. All participants were graduates who attended the programme between 2009 and 2013 (2009-2011 cohort and 2011-2013 cohort) and had a few years post-graduation to explore the alumni market and gain understanding of their forming professional role. The table below provides information for each participant: (CoP: Counselling Psychology, C: Counselling)

Focus Group A:

Pseudonym	Cohort	1st Degree	Master's Direction
X.	2009-11	Psychology	CoP
O.	2009-11	Social Work	C
F.	2009-11	Psychology	CoP
N.	2009-11	Psychology	CoP
A.	2009-11	Psychology	CoP
S.	2011-13	Early Childhood	C

Focus Group B:

Pseudonym	Cohort	1st Degree	Master's Direction
M.	2009-11	Psychology	CoP
P.	2009-11	Psychology	CoP
I.	2009-11	Early Education	C
N.	2009-11	Psychology	CoP
If.	2009-11	Psychology	CoP
E.	2011-13	Social Work	C

T.	2011-13	Philosophy majoring in Psychology	C		A.	2011-13	Psychology	CoP
Xr.	2011-13	Philosophy majoring in Psychology	C		El.	2011-13	Psychology	CoP
M.	2011-13	Philosophy majoring in Psychology	C		K.	2011-13	Psychology	CoP
Ag.	2011-13	Early Childhood	C					

Data collection

The facilitator in both groups was a licensed psychologist, experienced in running focus groups. Time was allocated to build rapport with the participants. The interview schedule which was used for facilitating the discussion included the following open-ended questions:

1. What prompted/motivated you to pursue the path of training as a counsellor/counselling psychologist?

2. How do you perceive yourself as a counsellor/counselling psychologist?

3. How would you describe your experience of undertaking a placement with clients, as part of your completing this particular postgraduate professional programme?

4. What do you think differentiates/is distinctive (about) your role as a counsellor or counselling psychologist, as compared to other mental health professions currently practised in Greece?

5. What are your thoughts on the future of counselling/counselling psychology in Greece in the current climate?

6. If you were to use a 'metaphor' that would represent how you perceive your identity as a counsellor or counselling psychologist right now, what would that be?

After completion of each focus group session, the recording of the conversation was transcribed for the purposes of data analysis. The hand-written notes taken by the two observers were used to facilitate the debriefing of the discussion.

Ethics

Pseudonyms were used to respect participants' anonymity. Their confidentiality was explained in the context of informing them that sections of the focus group transcriptions may be parts of the final version of this article. Taking into account the significance of informed consent (Moustakas, 1994), participants were informed about the purposes of this research in assisting them to decide whether to participate and offered the opportunity to ask any questions or withdraw from the study, if relevant.

What felt important in the conduct of these focus groups was the value of generating a 'shared vision' which evoked participation and sharing (Carter, 2017). Care was taken in creating an environment which was conducive for group discussion. The facilitator (or moderator) of each focus group paid attention to offering opportunities for each member to express their voice taking into account what Myers (1998), describes as three ways that can influence 'equal' turn-taking among focus group members: "(a) The moderator introduces topics and closes them, following a plan;(b) The moderator can intervene to control turn-taking; [and] (c) The moderator elicits and acknowledges responses" (p. 87). Each focus group session ended with an informal debriefing where participants could raise any matters of either impact upon them or of concern or clarification

Analysis/Discussion

The analysis and interpretation of focus group data requires sensitivity and care as it involves a multi-voiced 'orchestra' that brings the challenge of attempting to capture the essence of the phenomenon investigated. In this particular study – where the data was collected in the Greek language – the interest was focused on both the language used by the participants to describe their experience and the content of the experience itself. Hence a thematic analysis (Benner, 1994) was followed to draw on the insights discussed. The transcripts were analysed in two phases: a. looking at each as a whole and identifying the main themes and items of discursive significance and b. re-visiting each transcript through the lens of each question in the interview schedule, aiming at identifying deeper layers of meaning. Below, such themes are being presented, brought into light with examples of participants' own words.

Motivating factors

Before pursuing their postgraduate studies in Counselling or Counselling Psychology on this programme, these participants have completed an undergraduate degree in Greece in disciplines such as education, special education, psychology, social work. It seems that the decision to pursue counselling or counselling psychology was influenced by factors such as:

- What was 'available' to them as a 'route' at that point in their life or educational path

- Whether some professor has inspired or encouraged them to consider counselling as a career

- Counselling embodied for them a more humanistic philosophy with values that were appealing to them, as compared to other approaches or branches in psychology which are more stern or clinical or 'pathologising'. They were looking for a way of practising that would focus more on the positive side and the growth potential of human nature rather than focusing on 'disorders' or 'interventions' that were more intrusive and were placing the 'therapist' in a powerful position.

A participant said:

(N. Gr. A) *"what inspires me in the counselling training is that the emphasis is on the empowerment of the client, not on their pathology…there is a holistic perspective"*.

Also, the emphasis on application from theory to practice appeared attractive, as stated by a participant

(F.Gr A): *"I wanted a course which would be focusing on how to apply theory to practice…something that applies to the general population and that has a philosophy on the positive human nature rather than on pathology"*

Even for Psychology graduates, their first degree did not appear sufficient, in terms of acquiring skills

(If. Gr.B): *"As a psychology graduate I felt unequipped to provide a 'talking therapy'…the degree was very theoretical"*

Participants elaborated on elements of the course that appeared central in their experience and they appear as themes in the sections that follow.

On placements & the opportunity for skills development

Participants reported clearly that one aspect that attracted them to undertaking this counselling training was the fact that, instead of gaining theoretical input alone, like in their undergraduate courses, the emphasis here would be on how to apply theory to practice. The role of supervision was also acknowledged

(A.Gr.B): *"This course taught the invaluable role of supervision, something that was neither taught nor provided during my first degree…you need to be in constant training and development, it does not stop because you complete a training programme"*

Participants reported being given opportunities to work with broader client groups, the general population: parents' education, working with addictions, student counselling, working with children and young people and so on, an experience that helped them form their professional identity and decide what kind of clients they would like to focus on in their professional career

(N.Gr.A): *"I told them that I didn't want to work at all with children. They said: Okay, you will work with adults but you must see some children too. With the first child I saw I had already decided that I want to be trained to work with children"*

However, they also spoke about challenges that relate to how their professional role is currently perceived in Greece, for example

(A Gr.A), *"It was a mixed experience because at the beginning there was suspicion on their part concerning the identity of counsellors"*

(M.Gr.B): *"Sometimes I encountered a certain suspicion on placements, maybe because counselling is new and there is still the old stereotype-driven way of thinking around roles and professions"*

On personal development

Participants shared that they enjoyed the 'experiential component' of the course, which is not as usual within the Greek Higher Education context. (Limberg, Bell, Super, Jacobson, Fox, et al. 2013). They spoke about opportunities for personal growth, developing maturity as thinkers, building confidence and finding fulfilment in their role

(X.Gr.A): *"I feel that counselling suits me because it is a process that is not only helping the client but also develops the practitioner; therefore it is something that I do with pleasure and a sense of satisfaction"*

The emphasis on personal development, the relational dynamics, the skills of empathy and active listening have been very important for them (Athanasiades, 2008; Giovazolias, 2005), as they were used to be talking about clients in a clinical way and generally they were tired from the more traditional psychological theories that tend to 'categorise' people. Also, there was reference on the course bringing up a more 'existential dimension' and offering opportunities for reflection on many areas of life, through the curriculum itself but also the engagement with personal therapy. That also offered more of a *sense of 'belonging'* and finding fellow colleagues to share a *'common language'*.

A holistic approach: flexibility and the integrative/pluralistic framework

Participants spent time reflecting on the theoretical basis of their postgrad training, the role of research and the significance of being exposed to ideas that were not introduced during their traditional undergraduate studies. One example is the concept of the 'scientist-practitioner' or 'practitioner-researcher', which refers to integrating theory, research and practice (Meara, Schmidt, Carrington, et al. 1988; Ridley & Laird, 2015), where they gained opportunities to acquire reflexivity in their work, rather than abide to protocols or therapeutic manuals, as well as learn to practise with 'flexibility' rather than strict formulations (Giovazolias, 2005). Certain participants referred to this framework as having a *multidisciplinary lens,* another spoke about a *psycho-educational scope* and a shared perspective was cultivating an *attitude of curiosity* whilst seeking *deeper meaning* and being given permission to *'think outside the box'* about their client work, as opposed to professional absolutism. They spoke about the value of being taught through a pluralistic framework where they could learn to incorporate different philosophical concepts though *critical thinking* and robust supervision input. As stated by a participant:

(A.Gr.B): *"Unlike my training prior to this course, we were taught and supervised in a more democratic and collaborative way which has been quite empowering. I started understanding more 'unorthodox' ways of viewing the human condition, with emphasis on relational dynamics rather than the so-called professional expertise"*

Professional distinctions and the (lack of) professional recognition

One of the biggest challenges or even a barrier for some of the participants has been the competition/rivalry amongst mental health professionals. There is an issue about how to

address the differences in disciplinary backgrounds with an attitude of respect and recognition instead of having the dominant presence of psychologists. Of course there are many practitioners who claim to be offering 'counselling' when they aren't adequately trained. Equally, those who only hold a psychology degree do not have the skills to be offering a 'talking therapy'. This leads to 'lack of trust' and a resistance or rejection towards those very skilled professionals who do not hold a psychology degree. A participant spoke about rigidity

(F.Gr.A): *"the system in Greece is very rigid; perhaps it could be helpful if we managed to make boundaries clearer whilst allowing those that are skilled professionals due to the training they have acquired (which may not be as traditional) to gain their rights and professional recognition"*

Even amongst trained professionals, stereotyping around modalities was also discussed, together with the significance of the integrative philosophy of this course which could counter-balance that

(Xr.Gr.A): *"There are still many stereotypes around modalities in Greece; the integrative basis of this course is a great contribution about finding a more 'flexible language', even though there is still a long way to go for things to change"*

Those who had the experience of working abroad, spoke about the contrast of experience, for example

(A.Gr.A): *"I have worked in the UK and there I felt 'at home' because I was accepted by all professionals and belonged to different professional associations without conflict. Here in Greece, this is still difficult, it is almost like you are expected to be in one camp only…but this wouldn't include the whole of my identity"*

There was also discussion around 'roles' and the confusion around the boundaries of each professional - for example who is suitable to conduct assessment or use diagnostic tools

(S.Gr.A): *"Things in Greece are confusing in terms of who is qualified and skilful to actually deal with pathology"*

The issues involved in gaining professional recognition and clarifying the way counsellors and counselling psychologists are perceived in the Greek context, led to discussion around the participants' vision for the future of the profession.

Vision for the future

Participants expressed certain optimism about 'gaining voice' and shared a feeling of the responsibility of creating some vision for the development of the profession as the first graduates. But to safeguard this, they spoke about the need of 'formal action' by professional bodies in

(M.Gr.B): *"...setting standards of training and competence criteria, a mission statement, clear values, placement hours and so on. This would help to prevent anybody to call themselves anything, even when they do not have the skills"*

Also, they envisage a future where professionals can value each other across similar disciplines.

(F.Gr.A): *"Cross-disciplinary dialogue is required in the Greek context, to not just stick to the 1ˢᵗ degree...I know of many professionals who are very skilled even if they started from a different degree"*

Certain participants spoke about the fact that often private practice seems like the only option of employment, as the public services may not offer equal opportunities to practitioners who have received robust training – if it is one that is unknown to both the public and to fellow professionals who have undertaken the more traditional educational paths. Also, there are many practitioners in Greece who work privately after they have completed their training abroad.

A need and desire to build bridges between government structures and professional bodies was raised, as well as making every effort towards raising awareness around what counselling is, how it has been successfully practised for years in other countries and how it can contribute to providing suitable support and therapeutic services in the Greek context.

Metaphor(s) to describe an 'identity-in-flux'

This research has focused on understanding the factors that contribute to the development of an evolving professional identity within the Greek culture (Athanasiades, 2008). The use of figurative language, such as 'metaphor' has been seen as a creative and revealing way of attempting to capture issues around perceptions of one's identity (Hunt, 2006), hence

participants were invited to offer such metaphors that come to mind when considering their counselling work. Below are some of the metaphors shared during the focus group sessions:

road'/'path'	'togetherness'	'the inner voice'	'love'
'Journey'	'companion'	'healing essence'	'embrace'
'co-travelling'	'agent'	'development/growth'	'clarity'
' a boat without a compass'	'co-creator'	'sth with transformational capacity'	'containment/holding'
'caring'	'bitter-sweet'	' facilitator'	'interaction''

The metaphor 'bitter-sweet' was extensively discussed; it related mainly to the mixed feelings as to what the program offered in terms of their professional identity, but also to the nature of the counsellor's work.

(I.Gr.B): *"I believe that the nature of our work is bitter-sweet, when we talk about human pain, human difficulty, but it is also very rewarding when you love what you are doing"*

It is apparent that there was a sense that the counselling relationship relates to a journey, a co-created process that is facilitative of growth and development, also bringing a more spiritual dimension of relatedness.

Conclusions - Implications for Future Developments

The questions addressed within these two focus groups and the results obtained, showed the ambivalent perception of counselling and counselling psychology in Greece. The largest part of the population is not sufficiently familiar with this specialty and therefore suspicious as to what counsellors and counselling psychologists are equipped to do. However, both groups expressed their satisfaction regarding the scientist-practitioner model, which equipped them with the necessary skills to reach accountability.

It goes without saying that the maintenance of high educational and professional standards will secure effectiveness and make the profession even more accountable to the

public; this is a crucial step that would also strengthen the professional position of counsellors among the mental health professionals and provide counselling with the needed legal recognition (Malikiosi-Loizos & Giovazolias, 2012).

Great effort is being undertaken by the Counselling Psychology Division of the Hellenic Psychological Society as well as the Hellenic Association for Counselling in order to protect, promote and safeguard the developing identity of the counselling psychologist and even more that of the professional counsellor in Greece. The hope is that this shift will also materialise in the attitudes of multidisciplinary teams working in the mental health field in Greece who are called to step away from professional boundaries and acknowledge the possibility that their collaboration brings best practice which ultimately serves the clients and service users. The general population in Greece has changed in recent years through both forced and voluntary migration, hence the culture-specific developments in how psychological distress is approached shall very much be based in the pluralistic framework that such trainings provide (Cooper & McLeod, 2010; Cooper & Dryden, 2015)

The model of the 'practitioner-researcher' or 'scientist-practitioner' identity is something that has been supported by the field of counselling psychology (Vespia & Sauer, 2006) but more for those training at Doctoral level. It is evident that such a critical thinking approach is needed at earlier stages of Education in Greece, something that could plant the seed for a more collaborative approach amongst professionals; this could also influence the perceptions of the general public around the role of counsellor and counselling psychologist and as such facilitate a process of psychological help-seeking that is well informed and encourages the advancement of the profession in countries across Europe and beyond where still developing.

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