



## The Positive Experiences of Becoming a Psychologist: A Master's Student's Journey

by L. Nel and P. Fouché

### Abstract

*Since most research on the topic of experiences related to becoming a psychologist is conducted from a pathogenic paradigm, the study reported in this paper aimed to describe the journey of a clinical master's student from the perspective of positive psychology. A strengths-based paradigm allowed the researcher and the participant to understand the journey through the lens of personal growth, professional development, coping strategies, and attempts to make sense of the related difficulties. In this study, a qualitative research approach was used and a single case study design was employed. Data analysis followed the procedure of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Themes that were conceptualized and operationalized within the structure of psychological well-being (Ryff, 1989) comprised six well-being domains, namely (a) personal growth; (b) purpose in life; (c) autonomy; (d) self-acceptance; (e) positive relationships with others; and (f) environmental mastery. The most prominent finding was that, while the experience of becoming a psychologist is known to be a long and difficult journey, it can also be rewarding and positive, and holds the potential to enhance psychological well-being.*

### Introduction

The literature on the life of practising psychologists consistently indicates that psychologists are faced with a variety of stressors and demands and that the practice of psychology can be emotionally taxing (Barnett, Baker, Elman, & Schoener, 2007; Case & McMinn, 2001; Green & Hawley, 2009; Jordaan, Spangenberg, Watson, & Fouché, 2006; O'Connor, 2001; Schwebel & Coster, 1998). A South African study conducted in 2007 found that 56.3% of psychologists have above-average anxiety levels, while 54.2% of psychologists are mildly depressed (Jordaan et al., 2006). Another study by Jordaan, Spangenberg, Watson, & Fouché (2007), which explored burnout and its correlates among South African psychologists, indicated that, of the 238 participants in the study, approximately half experienced moderate to high levels of burnout; which resonates with Corey, Schneider Corey, and Callanan's (1993)

reference to psychotherapy as a "hazardous profession" (1993, p. 47). Understanding the causes of stress is important in the journey of becoming a psychologist (El-Ghoroury, Galper, Sawaqdeh, & Bufka, 2012), in that it creates the opportunity to address the above-mentioned stressors more effectively. However, more research is needed to inform professionals and trainers of effective ways to promote stress management and psychological well-being (Myers et al., 2012), since wellness behaviours learned and adapted habits set may endure throughout the course of the career (El-Ghoroury et al., 2012).

Even though the journey of becoming a psychologist starts long before the master's degree course, it is during these years that most students tend to realise the reality and experience the effect of their psychology studies. Master's students in psychology are a unique population, in that they have to deal with academic stressors and

demands as well as take on the new role of being a psychologist. It has been shown that high stress levels can affect both clinical practice and the overall training experience (Elman & Forrest, 2007; Gaubatz & Vera, 2006; Kottler & Swartz, 2004; Myers et al., 2012; Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003; Rosenberg, Getzelman, Arcinue, & Oren, 2005). The majority of these negative experiences can be explained by the possibility that a student's psychological issues may be uncovered by studying to practise psychotherapy, by exposure to methods of self-analysis, and by balancing student roles with professional roles (Barnett & Hyde, 2001; Dearing, Maddux, & Tangney, 2005; Holzman, Searight, & Hughes, 1996; Howard, Inman, & Altman, 2006; Pillay & Kritzinger, 2007; Stratton, Kellaway, & Rottini, 2007; Truell, 2001).

This paints a rather gloomy picture of the lived reality of beginner psychologists and points to the need to explore their journey from a more positive approach. Along with taking due cognisance of the extensively documented stressors, it is considered equally important to know the degree of satisfaction, happiness and other characteristics of the good life that students experience during this journey. Another reason that a more positive research approach to this journey was considered was due to the recognition that positive elements foster willingness and motivation to undertake the necessary activities towards personal well-being and to persevere through the many and widely discussed difficulties (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Rosenberg et al. (2005) are of the opinion that, in light of the importance of personal growth and development for trainee psychologists, it is crucial that professional training programmes not only include methods of enhancing personal growth and insight, but also integrate the evaluation thereof with the curriculum philosophy in which the training programmes are embedded. The very few studies that pursued this notion indicate that trainee psychologists improve and develop across a diverse set of competencies, such as better coping strategies (Hill, Sullivan, Knox, & Schlosser, 2007), higher levels of autonomy (Tryon, 2000), more self-reflection practices (Coster & Schwebel, 1997), the maintenance of healthy relationships (Lee, Eppler, Kendal, & Latty, 2001) and personal fulfilment (Furr & Carroll, 2003).

### **Psychological Well-Being Model as Meta-Theory for the Study**

In her attempt to represent a distinct form of well-being based in the eudaimonic theoretical perspective, Ryff initially used key concepts from Aristotle to strengthen the conceptual foundations of eudaimonic well-being. Being aware of the various forms that well-being can take, Ryff then revisited earlier theories that attempted to describe levels and domains of psychological well-being. Drawing on points of convergence within these

theoretical formulations, Ryff (1989) suggested an integrative multidimensional model of psychological well-being that condensed six psychological dimensions of challenged thriving. These dimensions are: autonomy; self-acceptance; environmental mastery; personal growth; positive relations; and openness towards experiences (Ryff, 1989). Ryff's work has been used widely both as a theoretical framework and as a psychological instrument in studies. Already by 2006, her two key papers (Ryff, 1989; and Ryff and Keyes, 1995) had been cited in more than 500 published studies (Springer, Hauser, & Freese, 2006). The decision to use Ryff's (1989) model is substantiated by the fact that it offers not only a thorough theoretical basis, but also empirical evidence supporting the practical operationalization of the model (Ryff & Keyes, 1995).

### **Research Aim**

The aim of this study was to explore and describe the experience of a master's degree student in a professional psychology programme in South Africa. The constituent experiential themes were identified, conceptualized, and operationalized within the structure of psychological well-being (Ryff, 1989). Thus, the principle question asked in this investigation was, "What are the positive experiences related to being a master's student in psychology?", with the intent of discovering the positive dynamics of taking the first steps towards professional registration as a clinical psychologist.

### **Research Method**

Phenomenology is built upon the premise of social constructivism in that it recognizes the importance of the subjective human creation of meaning (Shinebourne, 2011). In attempting to achieve the aim of the study, a phenomenological approach was highly suited to help understand the significance of the journey and answer the "what" and "how" questions. By enabling the researcher to come as close as possible to the "real" experience of the participant, the choice of research design links with Starks and Trinidad's (2007) view that, at the end of a phenomenological account, the reader should feel as if he or she had vicariously experienced the phenomenon under study. The aim of phenomenological research is not to solve problems, but to describe the meaning that people attach to their daily experiences (De Vos & Fouché, 1998).

Given that a central focus of phenomenology is on how the individual perceives the world (McLeod, 2011), the participant's *own account* of being a master's student in a professional psychology training programme was therefore documented and analysed. Interpretations were rooted in what the participant said in his own words, with direct quotations used to substantiate the interpretation (Pringle, Drummond, McLafferty, & Hendry, 2011).

### Participant Profile

One English-speaking participant was purposively chosen, based on his inclusion in a psychology master's programme and his willingness to participate in the study. Jim is a 39-year-old male who decided to further his studies in clinical psychology mainly because of his positive experiences in working with people.

### Data Collection

Data was gathered using face-to-face semi-structured interviews over a one-year period. This proceeded in accordance with suggested IPA methodology and case study research (Howitt, 2010; Merriam, 2009; Pringle et al., 2011). Interviews were initiated by providing the participant with the opportunity to share all positive and negative personal experiences related to being a clinical master's student in a professional psychology programme, after which the more positive experiences shared were investigated further, taking care to avoid leading questions. The interviews thus started with a general open question from which funnelling questions developed (Gibson & Brown, 2009). In addition, the participant was asked to engage in reflective writing, given that a wealth of research suggests the keeping of journals and diaries as an increasingly common form of data collection in qualitative research, of particular relevance in the area of personal development (Jasper, 2005; Toohey, 2002). Topics such as day-to-day experiences, challenges faced and emotions experienced, as well as dealing with these challenges and emotions, were proposed in order to guide the focus of the participant's reflection and writings.

### Data Analysis

Analysis of the data gathered in this single case study followed the process of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). The understanding of human experience is the essence of psychology, and IPA offers researchers the opportunity to learn from the experts – the research participants themselves (Smith & Osborn, 2004). IPA is particularly appropriate when psychologically unique experiences are being studied from the person's own perspective, in that the interpretation focuses primarily on meaning-making processes (Howitt, 2010). This method of data analysis offered the researchers the opportunity to engage with the research question on an idiographic level where the participant's experience is coupled with a subjective and reflective process of interpretation (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005). The transparency of the approach also appealed to the researchers, as its emphasis on reflexivity throughout the process facilitates the recognition of preconceptions and experiences that might have influenced the study. Although the majority of studies that have employed IPA lie within the field of health psychology, Reid et al. (2005) stress that, "in keeping with the broad premise of positive psychology (e.g., Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 21), there is scope for IPA research to become less disease- and deficit-focused, and for participants

to be given a chance to express their views about strength, wellness and quality of life" (p. 21). Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) advise that the steps of IPA [(a) familiarisation with the data; (b) preliminary theme identification; (c) identification of theme interconnectedness; (d) systematic tabling of themes; and (e) cross-case analysis] be used as guidelines only and be open to adaptation. IPA allows for the use of a theoretical framework, in this case psychological well-being, although the analysis was not led by any pre-existing theory. The data bank remained open to new ideas emerging from the interviews, with the process of interpreting the data inductive instead of deductive (Smith, 2004).

### Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Trustworthiness was ensured through theory and investigator triangulation, reflexivity, the careful use of field notes, and constant checking with the participant. While this study did not aim to generate generalisable findings, transferability was enhanced by providing in-depth and rich descriptions. Ethical practice was ensured by the sensitive positioning of the researchers (both of whom also lecture in a similar programme), informed consent (from the participant and his head of department) and the careful storage of confidential data. The participant was permitted to withdraw from the study at any stage for whatever reason. Approval for this study was obtained from the departmental and faculty ethics committees of the institution.

### Findings

Jim's case is built upon three in-depth interviews (beginning, middle and end of the master's degree year) and three reflective writings, which were submitted between the interviews. Jim chose to describe the year with the word "curiosity", which was triggered by his openness and passion for the discipline of psychology. Four main themes evolved from the data.

#### Theme 1: *Climbing Kilimanjaro*

Continuous self-reflection made Jim aware of how the master's year contributed towards a greater narrative. Confirming this notion was his awareness of how significant the year became in relation to finding meaning in his life. In his meaning-making process, Jim used his prior experience of climbing Kilimanjaro as a metaphor for this journey.

*I am on a journey to create meaning of these huge shifts happening in my life. So where do I begin? At the base of the mountain, I looked up at this mountain I had to climb. I had heard various stories of the adventure from those who had travelled this path before, but like any great adventure, you have to experience it for yourself. If I had to look back and identify any great shifts, it would be hard to pinpoint any*

specific momentous event. Rather, it is those smaller qualitative moments, tiny events, which accumulate in reshaping my sense of who I am. I think it's just amazing. We got to the top and saw the sun at its peak. But it's not about getting to the top; it's actually about the journey. There's something so deeply satisfying about being able to walk for nine hours a day. And you can't talk, the walking is really slow. Everything slows down so you become so introspective; you go through a lot of processes yourself. There's something beautiful about that. I just wish this year would slow down; all these lecturers are coming with assignments and this research monster. Ja, the route is tougher than I thought. When I climbed Kilimanjaro I went up the easy route. I think this Master's in psychology is more of an Everest. You get mountain sickness occasionally and then you have to take a step back. Just to chill and get your head around it. Yes, I know what the pay-off is. And I think the other important lesson that I learnt there is that Swahili saying of *polé polé*, slowly slowly. And that comes back to me: slow down. I like the metaphor of Kilimanjaro; it is a slowing down for me, it is a process of deep introspection. You know what, the weird thing is I'm not scared. The big challenge is learning to trust yourself and believe in what you have to offer. Like I had to trust myself starting Kilimanjaro. Yeah, but there are some things you just believe you can do and then you do them.

### Theme 2: *Self versus Therapist or Self as Therapist?*

Jim identified areas of personal growth, of which the first was reflecting upon oneself as well as on the context. Jim connected with his emotions, and this allowed for the identification of personal character strengths and change. Through this identification, a process of integration between the personal self and therapist was catalysed. The process inevitably accompanied feelings of uncertainty and confusion, which Jim was aware of and used to further understand this integration.

*It's a simple thing of flow with clients; for me it's a real sense of flow. Doing therapy is like being in a state of flow. Before I shut my eyes, I'm so excited about waking up the next day. I just want the night to be over quickly so I can wake up as quickly as possible. I love it, it drives me completely. It's complex and challenges you on so many levels. I won't call myself a psychologist anymore. I'm a student psychologist and I'm proud of that. It's important that language, for me. There's a growth process I still need to go through. That's what it says on my card. I'm a student psychologist. I'm very comfortable, I*

*love being a student, I love this process. I also get quieter and quieter as the year progresses, I learn to listen more. To really listen and to engage with others. Whether that other is a fellow student, a lecturer or a client, to truly engage is to listen. I feel more grounded and settled. I listen a lot more, not simply to what someone else says, but I try to listen to the whole person; what they are feeling, thinking, being. You kind of go, "What am I doing here?" At the same time you ask the question, "Well, what's my voice?" From a client perspective and self-perspective I think you have to introspect all the time, just to find that sense of self again. Every day I question my own abilities ... Who am I? Why am I doing this? Do I really have what it takes to become a psychologist? Looking inward to explore my response: How do I understand this client? How do I understand myself in relationship to this client? And then, to reflect on the clients' journey: How far have they moved? Is this process working for them? Why is this client in therapy? Am I serving my client? How are my personal issues affecting the process? I was articulating who I was, who I'm becoming, what is my journey. And I think it's always going to be a process of "I am becoming". I don't think I'm ever going to reach a process where I say "I am this as a therapist". I think that is impossible. It should be impossible.*

### Theme 3: *Important Role Players*

Jim identified different role players that had had a significant influence on his experiential journey, namely the members of his class, his clinical supervisors and the academic staff members. Jim's fellow *classmates* and the atmosphere created by the group were flagged as a major positive.

*My supervisor, my class. That was the most brilliant part of this year. Therapy is about relationships, and about me developing a relationship with somebody else. That starts in the process of your class. What is my relationship with this group? What are my individual relationships with these people? And that magical area of this relationship that exists between two people or a group is sacred almost, because that is the healing process. You know, the classmates were amazing; over the year they engaged with me and we'd talk about it, you know, all that stuff you do in formal therapy with clients, the class were doing for me, and that was remarkable. I suppose that is what you get when you're surrounded by a group of psychologists. And even in the class you can't deny that there are dynamics and you just have to work that out. It's a great platform to say, is this about me? What is it*

*about? What is it about me that I'm reacting like this? One of my big learnings was the whole relational aspect. You know, this is part of my process. This is what I'm going to get in therapy. This is going to be a client of mine. So what journey can I go on? What's happening within me?*

Jim found supervision critical to his growth and development. Within supervision, he became aware of his personal growth and was challenged – with the main outcome of being more self-confident and the creation of a feeling of safety.

*It was amazing to see my growth, to acknowledge my growth, especially with my supervisor. That's what the supervisor pinpoints. They look very carefully at where you can grow, what your weaknesses are, and where your strengths lie as well. My supervisor said a few things to me. I loved that. She said to me: "You need to investigate this and that about yourself." But that wasn't criticism, it was fantastic, I thought to myself, let me explore that. The supervisor was incredibly nurturing, pushing me in the right direction, to find my voice. What is amazing about my supervisor is that by the end of the year I was sitting in a supervision session and thinking I feel so confident. It's a real sense of flow that you can feel so open and discuss issues with confidence about your client. I loved that. It was a very contained space, a very bounded space. I was articulating who I was, who I'm becoming, and what my journey is.*

Jim also revealed that support from the Department of Psychology was a constant positive aspect throughout his journey; from its selection procedure to its academic standards. He highlighted that this department focuses on motivating students to be unique and original in their thinking.

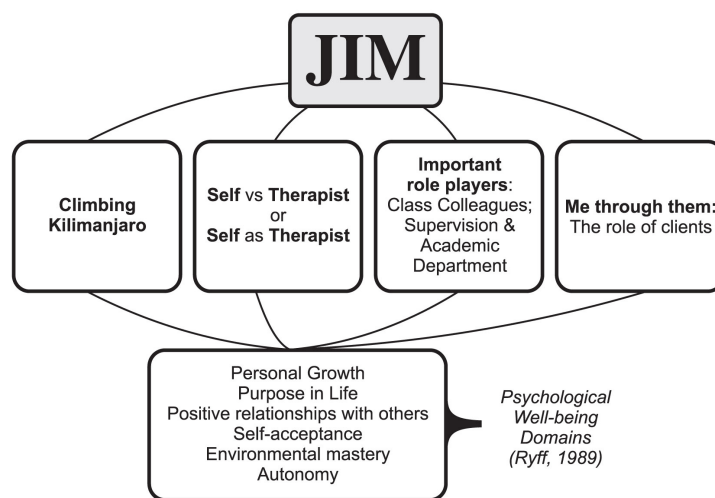
*But it was very empowering; they didn't try to break you down. They were trying to isolate you and find your strengths. And you become very aware of that early on in the process. It is a very nurturing environment and I think the philosophy is that "the department" really wants us to find our unique voice. They are aware of issues and problems and they are very perceptive of individual students.*

**Theme 4: "Me Through Them": The Role of Clients**

Jim used his processes with clients to empower his own personal journey, as it encouraged him to gain more self-insight. He drew on personal strengths through clients' narratives and was confronted with his own personality dynamics. It is clear that he recognised the opportunity to grow and develop as a therapist through his clients.

*Another important learning I will take forward is to always look for client's resources. To seek their potential, to help access their potential. It is easy to be seduced by the "problem", but to access individual resources is incredibly powerful. I had to apply the same principles to my life. You start out with an impulse to do something, you go through this huge amount of learning and training and you're growing all the time and developing as an individual. But ultimately you come back to yourself. And that should be a safe place to get back to. My clients had to conquer their own mountains. It was just remarkable. To see that devastation this individual had lived through. It was quite beautiful. And so powerful for where I was at that stage. I learnt a lot from them.*

The four themes described above are summarised diagrammatically in Figure 1 below:



**Figure 1. Diagrammatic Summary of Jim's Experience of Being a Master's Student in Professional Psychology**

## Consolidated Discussion of Themes

The themes described above all resonate with the journey of becoming a psychologist. In contrast to the majority of findings on this topic, Sheikh, Milne, and MacGregor (2007) indicate that some students do report powerful positive experiences related to clinical master's programmes in psychology. Through constant personal reflection, Jim was intensely aware of his journey, which enabled him to look constantly for the meaning in both the pleasant (e.g., working with clients) and the less pleasant (e.g., studying for examinations) activities. This practice is encouraged by Schwebel and Coster (1998), who highlight the necessity of nurturing skills of self-reflection above the pure gaining of knowledge, given that self-reflection is an essential aspect of any psychologist's developmental journey and prerequisite for optimal development (Kaslow, Dunn, & Smith, 2008; Neufeldt, Kamo, & Nelson, 1996; Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2001; Woodcock, Richards, & Mugford, 2008).

### *Personal Growth and Openness towards Experiences*

*Personal growth* is a progressive process and involves being conscious of one's thoughts as part of the process (Bauer & McAdams, 2010). First, Jim used the base of "the mountain" as his starting point. Although having experience of working with people before, he acknowledged that he knew very little of the clinical master's journey ahead. Such acknowledgement can create meaning in that it triggers curiosity and a sense of excitement. As indicated in the findings, he wanted to draw as much as possible from each exercise, activity, lecture, and therapeutic process. This is an illustration of openness with an orientation towards change and *personal growth* and is identified as one of the constructs that fits within a eudaimonic approach to well-being (Kopperud & Vittersø, 2008; Vittersø, 2004). In addition, conquering Kilimanjaro is a symbol of a slow and systematic process of perseverance. Jim's repeated comments of wanting the pace to slow down throughout the year were prominent. Jim explained that a slower pace would allow for better personal integration with the work to find meaning in the year as a whole and not only in the differentiated parts or in single experiences. An attitude of openness to learning and acceptance of the complexities of the profession are crucial for students in training programmes (Furr & Carroll, 2003; Jones, 2008; Neufeldt et al., 1996). Openness of this kind fostered a healthy sense of humility in that Jim realized how much there is to be curious about. All these factors have been proposed as broadening the thought-action repertoire by promoting interest in novel and/or challenging situations and accordingly promoting the incremental building of knowledge and well-being in a manner consistent with the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 1998; Gallagher & Lopez, 2007). The psychology Kilimanjaro symbolized is a journey of personal growth for Jim – not a reaching of a destination or a result.

### *Purpose in Life and Positive Relations with Others*

Curious exploration leads to the formation of interest, which forms the proactive stage of purpose development. The recognition and capitalization of situations and opportunities (as illustrated in this case) have been posited as the second most important ingredient in the formation of *purpose in life* (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009). Jim's process of climbing his Kilimanjaro was also not a solo endeavour. He was able to identify support systems throughout the experience and in different contexts relevant to being a master's student in psychology. These experiences relate to Ryff's (1989) domain of *positive relationships with others*. As evident in the literature, positive relationships with significant others is ranked as an important aspect affecting the well-functioning of psychologists (Coster & Schwebel, 1997), and when an experience is shared, the joys and sorrows become more significant and less daunting (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005). In this regard, Jim's class colleagues, supervisor and academic staff were mentioned as sources of support. These ties made him aware of therapy being all about relationships and of his interaction styles with people. Rosenberg et al. (2005) and Volet and Mansfield (2006) comment on the close bonds that form due to the expectation of students to work in teams and do group assignments. Among other benefits, group activities assist students in analysing different perspectives and prove to be a major source of support for students in professional psychology programmes (Lee et al., 2001; Truell, 2001). Jim used these relationships to increase both self-awareness and his understanding of individual personality types. A further significant source of support was supervision, which Jim found to be critical to his personal growth and development as a psychologist. Jim's case serves as evidence for clinical supervision being pivotal in the developmental journey of a clinical master's student in psychology (Bernard, 2006), and supports the view of formal case supervision as the most salient influence on career development (Orlinsky, Botermans, & Rønnestad, 2001; Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003).

### *Self-acceptance and Autonomy*

Being more accepting of himself created a feeling of unique worth whereby Jim could distinguish between his growth potential and acceptance of unchangeable characteristics (Gallagher & Lopez, 2007). As indicated in the findings, this self-acceptance dynamic was, to a significant extent, triggered by confrontations during supervision. This confirms the findings of studies aimed at identifying the sources of positive influence on professional development, which consistently identified formal case supervision as one of the top three sources (Orlinsky et al., 1999; Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003). Thus, in Jim's case, supervision positively influenced the psychological well-being domain of self-acceptance and cultivated higher levels of autonomy. Once Jim felt more comfortable in his role as a student psychologist, he could take more risks and act more independently.

### **Environmental Mastery**

The academic environment has been identified as one of the contextual components that have a major impact on students' experiences (Dunn, McCarthy, Baker, Halonen, & Hill, 2007; Neufeldt et al., 1996). Ryff and Singer (2008) describe "the ability to choose or create contexts suitable to personal needs and values" (p. 1071) as a clear indication of a person's ability to control complex external activities. Jim's ability to identify growth-supporting contexts as part of the shaping of his environment in a desirable way is an example of environmental mastery, as posited by Ryff (1989) and Gallagher and Lopez (2007). Although Ryff and Singer (2008) acknowledge that the *dimension of environmental mastery* overlaps with other psychological constructs, such as a sense of control and self-efficacy, they propose that the distinction lies in finding or creating a context that suits one's needs and desires. Jim's journey was characterized by his feeling more in control, being able to figure things out, feeling competent, and having a sense of mastering.

### **Conclusion and Reflection**

Jim's journey proved that the process of becoming a

psychologist, and, more specifically, being a master's student, might be accompanied by beautiful views. His journey illustrates the positive end of the spectrum and directs attention to a possible psychofortogenic framework of development. As researchers and academics involved in the professional training of psychologists, becoming aware of Jim's experiences provided us with an increased sense of the critical incidents that have an effect on students' development, either positively or negatively. We realised that, even though professional training programmes are designed to provide students with critical content and practicum opportunities, they may also productively serve to generate and share information about what students experience in their early training. Jim's journey created a deeper awareness of how to optimize this experience and enhance psychological well-being among clinical master's students. To enhance the well-being of the profession of psychology in South Africa, there is an identified need for more research on trainee psychologists' personal journeys, and angles that branch out from the current study can be followed up by future research. In the end, thus, the study confronted us with our own "teaching Kilimanjaro" and the beautiful views it has to offer.

### **Referencing Format**

Nel, L., & Fouché, P. (2017). The positive experiences of becoming a psychologist: A master's student's journey. *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology*, 17 [Special Edition: *Positive Psychology*], 12pp. doi: 10.1080/20797222.2017.1299284

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