BRIEF REPORTS

A Longitudinal Study of the Career Satisfaction of Clinical Psychologists

Steven Walfish, Jennine L. Moritz, and David E. Stenmark
University of South Florida

A sample from a previous study of recent graduates of doctoral programs in clinical psychology were surveyed regarding their satisfaction with training and career choice eight years later. With a return rate of 94%, high levels of satisfaction were found; 89.4% of the sample indicating that they would become psychologists if that had it to do all over again. Results suggest that making training more relevant to the work of the practicing psychologist and exposure to different role models during training may be related to career satisfaction.

The level of satisfaction with a career choice in clinical psychology in samples of very experienced clinical psychologists has been the focus of several studies (Kelly, Goldberg, Fiske, & Kilowski, 1978; Norcross & Prochaska, 1982). In each of these studies respondents indicated a high level of dissatisfaction with their career choice.

To extend the work of these early researchers, Walfish, Polifka, and Stenmark (1985) examined career satisfaction in a random sample of recent graduates (1.5 years of professional experience). The levels of satisfaction were much higher for this group, with 85% of the sample indicating that they would once again choose psychology as a career.

The purpose of the present investigation is to follow up with the graduates in Walfish et al.'s (1985) study eight years after the initial polling. In addition, this area of research will be extended by examining several dimensions of career satisfaction, rather than simply asking the global question of making the same career choice once again.

Method

Subjects

The subjects in this study were 87 graduates of clinical psychology training programs who were participants in the earlier study (Walfish et al., 1985). Of these, 46% were women and 54% were men. The most common work responsibility was that of clinical practice (71%), followed by academic research (15%). Private practice was the most common work setting (45%), followed by hospital (19%) and university (15%). Almost half (48%) of the sample worked more than 40 hours per week and 41% earned more than $56,000 per year.

Procedure

In the earlier study, Walfish et al. (1985) asked respondents to indicate whether they were willing to participate in later follow-up investigations. Of the 120 respondents, 93 (78%) indicated a willingness to do so. Of the surveys sent to these 93 respondents, a total of 87 were returned, yielding a return rate of 94%. The respondents were graduates of 23 universities and represented all geographic regions of the country.

Subjects were asked to rate their satisfaction with several dimensions of their graduate training and their careers as professional psychologists on a six-point Likert scale (1 = very satisfied, 6 = very dissatisfied). In addition, subjects were asked to indicate whether, if they had to make their career choice over again, they would choose psychology as a career. If this answer was no, they were asked to indicate what alternatives they would have liked to pursue. In addition, they were asked a similar question concerning their particular training program—for example, whether, if they had it to do over again, they would choose to attend the same training program.

Result

In the initial study (Walfish et al., 1985) 87% of the sample indicated that they would make a similar career choice if they had to do it all over again. These results remained remarkably consistent after eight years, with 89.4% of the respondents indicating that they would still choose psychology as a career. There was a slight decrease in the percentage of respondents who...
would choose to attend the same doctoral training program, from 72% in the initial study to 66% in the present polling. Alternative career preferences for those who would not choose psychology again covered eight different professions, with the most being in either business or medicine.

The mean ratings of the sample regarding their satisfaction with their graduate training and dimensions of career satisfaction are presented in Table 1. In general, the subjects were satisfied with their graduate training, with mean ratings falling between the satisfied and moderately satisfied anchors. Each dimension of career satisfaction received high mean ratings, with all but two falling between the very satisfied and satisfied anchors. These two dimensions, income and relationships with colleagues, fell between the satisfied and moderately satisfied anchors.

Multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAs) and subsequent t tests were used to examine differences between respondents who would and who would not choose psychology again as a career, on aspects of graduate training and dimensions of career satisfaction. The mean ratings for each of these groups on these variables are also presented in Table 1. These data suggest that the group who would choose psychology again as a career was significantly more satisfied with the role models that they were exposed to in training, $F(1, 82) = 7.50, p < .01$, relevancy of training, $F(1, 82) = 5.64, p < .05$, level of intellectual stimulation, $F(1, 82) = 10.20, p < .01$, and level of success $F(1, 82) = 13.06, p < .01$, than the group who would not choose psychology again as a career.

Unlike the initial study (Walfish et al., 1985), the present study found several significant differences between male and female respondents. Results of MANOVAs and subsequent t tests suggested that women were more satisfied with flexibility in hours than were men, $F(1, 82) = 8.31, p < .01$. For clinicians and researchers only, women were more satisfied than men with the flexibility of their hours, $F(1, 68) = 9.92, p < .01$, and level of income, $F(1, 68) = 5.05, p < .05$.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Total sample</th>
<th>Would choose</th>
<th>Would not choose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Training</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall quality</td>
<td>2.15</td>
<td>2.10</td>
<td>2.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical preparation</td>
<td>2.64</td>
<td>2.62</td>
<td>3.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of role models</td>
<td>2.84</td>
<td>2.69</td>
<td>4.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevancy of training</td>
<td>2.55</td>
<td>2.45</td>
<td>3.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current job satisfaction</td>
<td>1.91</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>1.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual stimulation</td>
<td>1.68</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td>2.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility of hours</td>
<td>1.82</td>
<td>1.82</td>
<td>1.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>2.26</td>
<td>2.21</td>
<td>2.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships with colleagues</td>
<td>2.35</td>
<td>2.27</td>
<td>2.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional independence</td>
<td>1.66</td>
<td>1.65</td>
<td>1.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of success</td>
<td>1.98</td>
<td>1.90</td>
<td>2.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work flexibility</td>
<td>1.83</td>
<td>1.71</td>
<td>2.78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. 1 = Very satisfied, 6 = Very dissatisfied.

Discussion

Previous studies with older, experienced clinicians have suggested a high level of career dissatisfaction with clinical psychology. In contrast to these results, Walfish et al.'s 1985 study with recent graduates found a high level of satisfaction with that career choice. It appears, from the results of the present investigation, that more than eight years later this level of satisfaction remains stable for this group as a whole. Almost 9 of 10 respondents would choose psychology once again as a career.

Reasons for the differences between the results of the present study and previous investigations can only be speculated. First, half of the present sample were in private practice; Walfish and Coover (1989) have suggested that the highest level of career satisfaction in clinical psychology is found in this work setting. However, no significant differences were found in the present sample on the variables measured between private practitioners and academicians. Second, there may be something unique about this particular cohort of subjects or something special about being a professional in the 1980s that would produce these results. It would be valuable to continue to follow this particular cohort to see whether these results remain stable over time. In addition, it would also be important to follow another group of graduates to determine whether the development of a professional career through the 1990s yields similar results. It could also be argued that only graduates of high-quality schools that produce highly satisfied graduates were included for study. However, the schools chosen in our initial study were randomly selected from a list of programs approved by the American Psychological Association (APA).

The appearance of sex differences on the career satisfaction variable of flexibility in hours is interesting. Women were significantly more satisfied with this variable than were men. This may be because women need time flexibility to balance the other demands typically made upon them in society, such as child rearing, that may not fall on the typical male psychologist.

Two variables were isolated that significantly distinguished between those respondents who would and those who would not choose the same career path again. These were related to graduate training, with the relevancy of training to present position and the role models exposed to during training being important. With the decrease in academic positions available, exposure to practicing psychologists, especially those in private practice, may be an important element of graduate training. Private practice was the employment choice for one half of this sample, and other studies of clinical and counseling psychologists have found this to be the emerging preference (Prochaska, Nash, & Norcross, 1986; Tipton & White, 1988). However, for such exposure to occur, resistance to private practice issues in APA-approved training programs must first be overcome (Cantor & Moldawsky, 1985; Lowe & Ritzler, 1980).

References


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