

# **Do psychologists tend to care about others? Yes, but what else can we understand about them?**

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## Abstract

We might assume psychologists prioritise helping others and understanding others in their work and personal life. Can we be sure there is a real trend in this? The current qualitative study examined psychotherapists, counsellors and psychology majors using their degree in their work, in different stages of their career. We recorded interviews in order to understand if there is a pattern in their speech about values, career choices, and how they navigate difficult tasks in their work. We also interviewed psychology majors with other career choices. The results are confirming a care for others, not for all the participants, but a general responsibility for their career choices and work with people.

### Keywords:

interview, psychologist, personal values, identify

## 1. Introduction

Psychologists tend to study others, which is useful, regardless, the study of psychologists is limited to a few studies, mostly done before the new types of psychology, cognitive, dialectical or integrative (Roe, 2002; Hogan, 2006). We need more understanding of what makes a psychologist, well, a psychologist, what motivates their work ethic, their intent to help others and understand human functioning at different levels of their processes.

The state of the art in identifying what makes a therapist well suited to understand, explain and educate others, is quite well supported: the knowledge, the experience, the models they follow, critical thinking skills matter at the technical level. At the holistic level, their personality, relational abilities, beliefs and values help form a pattern of interactions with the client that benefits the client (Corbella et al., 2024).

Personal values, as part of the being, transcending the technicalities, help in decision making, maintaining habits and discipline, even in hard times (Bardi & Schwartz, 2003). The values do not only inform the decision process but help evaluate what could be useful, prioritize actions and insist on doing the right behaviour (Sagiv, et al., 2017).

Research has shown that indifferent of the psychology field one studies and works in, their personal values, meaning what they consider to be most important in the world, not only in their personal

lives, guide the identity of the person, as well as the work they do (Sagiv, et al., 2017).

## 2. Theoretical foundation

Personal values are guiding principles that orient the actions, decisions and what people consider to be a priority in their everyday life (Sagiv, & Schwartz, 2022). The values are ordered from the most important to the least, usually with one, two or three values that are the most important, which are used to decide on lifestyle, career, family patterns or aims in life (Sagiv, & Schwartz, 2022; Packard, 2009).

The professional identity and professional choice is a matter of fulfilment, especially in a vocational occupation, like psychology. The career development and maintenance is a way to self-actualise and go in the direction of one's aspirations. If chosen based on the important values, it can help with a meaningful and satisfying lifestyle (Starynska, et al., 2023).

The reason this research is useful is identifying trend is what values are fulfilled by working this profession, told by the person in their personalized way or perceiving the work they do. The aims of the present study are to (1) identify personal values of the psychologist, (2) identify possible nuances on those values, (3) explore if there is a difference between first year practitioners and those with 3+ years of practice, (4) verify if values are mentioned in the strategy to maintain discipline and persevere in career



and (5) to identify trends or pattern for which we did not ask a question, but are relevant in the findings.

### 3. Research methodology

Study design is a phenomenology type (Tenny et al., 2017), with purposive sampling, used in order to find the people that met the criteria. We searched for the people that advertised themselves on social media as being psychologists, so it could be categorized as a convenience sample, in this regard. We reached out to known and unknown psychologist via social media and they were selected if they had a psychology license, had at least one year of practice after finishing work and were willing to respond.

#### 3.1. Data collection

Designing the Interview guide included designing the questions, the instructions for the formal discussion and how to contact the participants. The list of the questions was designed to start from the direct question about personal values and then just imply it, to observe if there are differences in the mentions used in the text of the answers (Potter & Hepburn, 2005).

As part of the procedure we presented the questions before the interview, the participants were asked if they wanted to change any questions, no responder wanted to change questions, they all agreed with the questions and they all responded in an audio format or by writing the answers on the digital file we emailed them with the questions. Those who opted for responding in written form, mentioned they were too shy or lacked the confidence to answer in audio. All audio sessions were recorded and kept in an archive, most of the interviews were published for the public, as we did not pay the participants, but they could use the promotion of being listed in the magazine in order to have their stories told and new potential client hear or read their answers (Dunwoodie et al., 2023).

They all chated before the interview and most of them were nervous about the answers, even though they had time to prepare before and knew the questions, which was an interesting trend to observe in practitioner so prone to not judge and observe objectively the behaviour of themselves and others. This could lead to the question of whether psychologist do set the therapy standards of no judgment only for their clients and do not generalise those to themselves?

All participants had the same questions asked, had time to think about their values and answers before the interview, minimum a week passed between the time the questions were presented to them and they

recorded or responded to the interview. Some of them had never thought about those values before the interview and needed time to identify them, which was another find we did not predicted, given that in therapy most of interventions, especially for depression include personal value work in order to find what could spark the comeback from the symptoms Veale (2008).

All responses were complete responses, no skipped questions, if they tried to avoid some questions, we simply mentioned they agreed to the whole set and asked if there is a reason for the avoidance. After that, they clarified if they simply did not understand the question or were nervous their answers were not as expected. We validated responses and remind participants there is nothing expected of them, they just had to say it as it is, not try to reach a fictional standard, as there was not.

That being given, all data was analysed and useful, with results coming from a sample of 46 responders. The audio interviews were transcribed and the answers were analysed in the original language, with result translated in English in order to assure the readability of the findings. For each question we used the method most appropriate in order to assess the possible trends and patterns. Text analysis was used in general, data being collected in text form, measuring the presence of words in the text, their frequency and how they were used in the responses.

#### 3.2. Participants characteristics

All those involved in the interview process did speak the Romanian language, had formal psychology education, with a minimum of a bachelors degree in psychology, aged between 22 and 53 years old, mostly being between 22 and 31 years old, the majority graduated from Babes-Bolyai University, one graduated from Titu Maiorescu University. In this sample, two people identify as male, the rest as female, all caucasian, all live in Romania, only one of those interviewed has children of their own, all of them work with adults, some with children also, if asked to provide those services. One person works as a product manager (but has had counseling sessions with clients), the rest are working in psychotherapy, clinical psychology or in institutions where they have counseling with people in need of mental health help, another one works as a trainer as they are working on developing skills for the therapy settings.

## 4. Results

For each of these aims (1) identify personal values of the psychologist, (2) identify possible nuances on those value, (3) explore if there is a difference between first year practicionaires and those with 3+ years of practice, (4) verify if values are mentioned in the strategy to maintain discipline and persevere in career and (5) to identify trends or pattern for which we did not ask a question, but are relevant in the findings, we will present the individual findings.

As expected, all of them value lifetime learning, it could be interesting to find if they were valuing it before or only after they were inspired by the university lecturers. Some of them (mentioned before the questions of the interview) felt like they did not have something valuable to say and compared themselves with the well known psychologists and this should raise several concerns, as why people so educated and with such human understanding would feel like they of all people, might not have an interesting and useful perspetive on life. as part of the proffesional education is self awareness, we would assume they lacked the worry about this type of interview.

### 4.1. Identify personal values of the psychologist

The frequency of the personal values was measured for each major value they could mention:

- Mental health: 1
- Caring for others, wanting to help others: 32
- Respect: 3
- Well-being: 4
- Education: 7

Some mentioned caring for others dew to respect for them, other due to caring for their wellbeing, others due to valuing mental health in general. A very interesting find, some did not value caring for others, just common humanity and respect for all living things, which made us question why they did do the profession. They describe motivation as being to better themselves or educate themselves. A quarter of them did not mention caring for others, to be at the service or others as main personal value, as mentioned above, they values more their education, their personal development and them being a human they like or a healed person.

A sub-question of the values is: are the personal values or their derivates mentioned in present project, life-time learning or other professions? Using text analysis, we discovered that most mentioned they

would not do anything else, but did not mention the values being an explicit reason, just they the work they do is a valuable part fo their identify or lifestyle.

### 4.2. Identify possible nuances on those value

When mentioning the value or helping others, they described the reason being to respect the person, to help their mental health, to help their wellbeing, to help their happiness, to reduce harm or to help them because they cared.

Those who stated that the other career options fulfil other values, for example creative industries where they can fulfil their aspiration for esthetics and freedom of expression, were the ones that helped becasue they empathised with the clients.

Another example of responses is the choice to do a similar job, but having the same value implicately expresses, as being a kindergarden teacher, a school teacher, a coach, a consultant to educate others, to make an impact on their life.

### 4.3 Explore if there is a difference between first year practicionaires and those with 3+ years of practice

Using the method of comparing the values mentioned, we observed that no, there were no notable differences between the groups, so there might no be a direction of further research.

They all mentioned: mental health, respect, the wellbeing of others, relationships in aproximatively equal proportions and with no accent on only one of those in function of their years of practice.

### 4.4 Verify if values are mentioned in the strategy to maintain discipline and persevere in career

Only three participants mentioned values as a conscious factor in prioritising and organising activities, other two asked about what is expected to say to the question, the rest of 41 mentioned solely their organizational strategies.

### 4.5 To identify trends or pattern for which we did not ask a question, but are relevant in the findings, we will present the individual findings

When asked about the phrase from the forming year of school and the answers varied, not two being the same, some mentioned proffesors words or expressions, others textbook sentences or their own conclusions.

They were all balancing life-work programs and trying to find time for personal interesent with family,

friends or hobbies. A few participants mentioned creative hobbies as a means of coping with work stress, like knitting, painting, drawing, writing.

## 5. Discussions

Acknowledgement of limitations is necessary, so in the data collection process we accessed most of the psychologists who finished school in the same university city, with only two exceptions, from other cities, so the way they responded could be interpreted partly as a result of their professors' values and the way they were trained to work with clients.

All being caucasians, we need more research that includes intentionally all ethnicities, for this study people of minority ethnicities were contacted also, but refused to participate in the study. Also, more male participants are needed in order to eliminate the gender bias, as currently we can generalise the results for female psychologist, not for male psychologists.

A part of the value choices could be explained by their personal preferences, another part as their formation, as they mentioned formal education as changing their priorities, then realising they wanted to consider helping others more after studying psychology.

Psychologists tend to want to be working only in this type of field, where understanding and helping others are the main parts of the workload. These results are congruent with the work identity studies, that support the career as being a way to be true to oneself, including own aspirations and view of self (Schubert et al., 2023).

In addition to having similar ways to maintain discipline, value priorities, the individual responses were so different from one another, the way to structure and make a coherent story about why they chose to work as a psychologist was not similar in two of the responders. Kullasepp (2011) obtained a similar result, with every psychologist wanting to design their career in a personalised way, unique to them.

## 6. Conclusions

Highlights of these findings are many. The first one is that not all psychologists value caring or helping others, in a form of dedicating their work to improving others' life and wellbeing. The second one is about the nuances, where not all value explanations are the same, some wanting to help others out of respect for them, other out of their need to see people around them being well, some because they value mental health, not specifically in human beings, but all creatures. The

expectations from the aspiration to serve others people wellbeing are psychologists who work in this field in order to fulfil their principle or being a good human, constant education or just because they value mental health as a concept.

The trend of wanting just this profession, not another is an interesting one, as most of them do not see themselves as doing something else other than psychology fields. The projects described at the other questions also indicate that

Practical implications for these findings are that by knowing the answers, the readers of the magazine can understand better their therapist, the clients can read the interviews and see the therapist or psychologist as a more approachable person, as a human being, even if the answers maintain the professional perspective on the thoughts of the participants, their personal values and preferences are exposed. Could this type of presentation make potential clients see therapists as more human like, furthermore improving the number of decisions made in the direction of seeking help and guidance from them?

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank all the psychologists who set aside their shyness and responded even if they were anxious about talking about their inner world.

## Authors note:

**Doris Pop** is a psychologist, certified trainer, cognitive-behavioural therapist and clinical psychologist and a cognitive-behavioural coach. As this is a qualitative research project, yet the interviews can be read in the [www.revistadepsiho.ro](http://www.revistadepsiho.ro) and on the youtube channel revista de psiho, in Romanian language, if someone is interested in them, they can ask for the English translation and I can provide it. The results are presented in English, but the study was conducted in Romanian.

I have formulated the research with me, as a form of politeness, if you consider it to be better suited for the use of a single person, as I am the only researcher in the team this time, I agree it could be changed.

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## Appendixes

### A. The list of questions used in all interviews

1. Please present yourself, in a short description (as you wish to be perceived).
2. What values do your career projects fulfil (the questions was formulated like this because it was meant to cover all their possible projects, not just client work)
3. How do you maintain your discipline in the daily work?
4. Describe a project that you are proud of.
5. What have you learned from a difficult or unpleasant project, that you can share with us?
6. What are you working on right now, that is important to you?
7. Are you frequently researching new research in your field? What motivates you?
8. If you have any other career, what would it be?
9. Tell us a phrase that stuck with you from university years and it helped you later.

### B. The links for social media where part of the interviews are published:

1. <https://revistadepsiho.ro/>
2. <https://www.youtube.com/@revistadepsiho>