



Motivations for Career Path among Counselling Psychology Undergraduates of the Catholic University of Eastern Africa, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the motivations to study counselling psychology by students of the Catholic University of Eastern Africa, (CUEA) Kenya. A case study with 12 Undergraduates selected through snowball sampling. An interview guide was used to collect data which were analyzed thematically. It was found that personal awareness of mental health issues, family dynamics, role models in the profession, and response to socio-cultural needs are pivotal in student motivation to study Counselling Psychology. The findings imply that counseling psychology is not merely a career choice; but a vocation that integrates personal healing with a commitment to societal mental well-being. Following these findings, it is suggested that universities continue to provide practical activities to enhance this initial motivation and sustain it throughout the period of study at the university.

Keywords: counselling psychology, career path, choice, mental health, role models, motivation, career choice

1. Introduction

Motivation for choice of career has garnered the attention of psychologists for centuries considering that career choice is a critical determinant of well-being. There seems to be a connection between personal experiences such as trauma and counselling psychology career paths. Through examining personal narratives and experiences, the study delves into most of what has shaped their academic choices.

By exploring these motivations, the research seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how individual histories and the surrounding environment impact the decision-making process in the context of higher education in Kenya. Although this investigation used CUEA as a case study, it may also apply to other institutions with similar socio-cultural frameworks.

Previous research has observed the seeming influence of challenging life experiences on the choice of counselling as a career in Iran and other countries in the Western world. Using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to investigate the influences on the choice of counselling as a career, Bryce et al. (2023) explored how early trauma and cumulative harm influence career decisions in helping professions. From the comprehensive review of 28 studies published between 1990 and 2019, Bryce et al. reported that the choice of Counselling Psychology is often influenced by family-of-origin dysfunction and personality traits developed through adversity among other factors.

Family history of mental health issues influences students' choice of counselling psychology (Pisker, 2022; Bryce et al., 2023). These suggest that past trauma can serve as a driving force behind the desire to work with others in a healing capacity, supporting the assumption that trauma can influence the choice of Counselling Psychology. Related studies support the findings that family influences such as structure, roles, relationships, and values influence career choices (Palos & Drobot, 2010). According to their report, family financial capital, human capital and social capital provide a context favourable to academic development, and to the child's vocational aspirations and options. Concerning the Choice of counselling psychology, the financial and human capital may influence the student's choice if the parents model the profession of choice for their children.

Contrary to the assumption that trauma may be a primary factor, Trendak (2020) found that many students entered the field due to a strong interest in personal development, helping others, and a desire to understand human behaviour, rather than due to any personal history of trauma. This challenges the idea that traumatic experiences or specific personality traits are the key motivators, suggesting that other factors, such as intrinsic interest in psychology and empathy, can also be central in the decision-making process.

Intrinsic motivation is among the influences on the choice of counselling psychology (Ryan et al., 2011; Trendak, 2020; Patall et al., 2008) emphasizing that intrinsic motivation can lead to more effective and engaged counselling professionals. These studies provide evidence that personal development and a desire to help others are significant motivators for students choosing a career in counselling psychology.

In Kenya, a study by Njeri et al. (2017) on the influence of career interests on the choice of degree programmes among regular and self-sponsored students in public universities, Kenya revealed that career interests had a high influence on the choice of degree programmes of students. According to them, this is important because; 'a suitable career is the key to success..... once we choose an occupation, it is a lifelong practice' (p.73).

This exploratory study is guided by Maslow's hierarchy of needs and self-determination theory. Maslow's hierarchy of needs provides a foundational understanding of motivation, linking students' choices to pursue counselling to their progression through various levels of needs. Students may be drawn to the field due to intrinsic desires for social contribution or emotional fulfilment, especially once lower needs are met (Maslow, 1943). Self-Determination Theory, on the other hand, offers insight into the autonomy and self-regulation of students. If students feel free to choose this path without external pressure, their motivation will be more intrinsic, promoting sustained engagement and success in their studies (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan et al., 2011).

Further exploration of the motivations for career paths in counselling psychology, may reveal a multifaceted interplay of intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Intrinsic motivations, such as personal fulfilment, altruism, and a profound interest in understanding human behaviour, are paramount in shaping career choices. What motivates a student to study counseling psychology is what this study sought to find out as these factors may translate to their career effectiveness and fulfilment after graduation.

1.2. Purpose of Study

The purpose of this research is to uncover and elucidate the personal narratives and lived experiences that have influenced students' decisions to pursue the Counselling Psychology program at the Catholic University of Eastern Africa, Kenya. This exploration aims to discover the intrinsic and extrinsic factors that shape this academic and professional choice, contributing to a deeper understanding of the motivations driving individuals toward this specialized field of study.

1.3. Research Objectives

To access the personal experiences that underpin the choice of counselling psychology as a career path.

2. Methods

This is a case study, a qualitative method to investigate the motivations driving undergraduate students' choice of counselling psychology as a career path at the Catholic University of Eastern Africa. Twelve (12) first-year students, out of 59 were interviewed utilizing 4 open-ended questions. The first-year students were sampled because the study assumes that their motivations are not yet impacted by the university experiences in the course of study. The sample was chosen purposively through the snowball method because it was challenging to recruit the individuals listed after random sampling. This sampling technique still ensured a diverse and representative cohort, as participants were selected based on referrals from initial informants. The sample size is appropriate since according to Guest et al. (2006), data saturation can be achieved with 6 to 12 participants in qualitative studies employing semi-structured interviews. Data analysis evaluated the participants' narratives and noted the emerging themes relating to the objectives of the study. Ethical requirements such as informed consent and confidentiality were observed.

3. Findings

3.1 Demographic Information

The study asked the participants about their age, gender and family socio-economic status.

Table 1 - Codes for Interview Respondents

Respondent Identity	Date of Interview	Age	Gender	Family Socio-economic status
Participant 1(P1)	12/2/25	21	Female	Middle
Participant 2(P2)	12/2/25	20	Female	Middle
Participant 3(P3)	17/2/25	20	Female	Middle
Participant 4(P4)	17/2/25	19	Male	Middle
Participant 5(P5)	20/2/25	21	Male	Middle
Participant 6(P6)	20/2/25	20	Female	Middle
Participant 7(P7)	20/2/25	21	Female	Middle
Participant 8(P8)	25/2/25	25	Female	High

Participant 9(P9)	25/2/25	35	Female	Middle
Participant 10(P10)	27/2/25	43	Female	Middle
Participant 11(P11)	27/2/25	23	Male	High
Participant 12(P12)	27/2/25	19	Male	Middle

The following can be deduced from Table 1. There is a predominance of female participants, mostly from the middle-income status, a younger adult population, with more participants within the 20-30 (83%) age range. This demographic trend suggests that most of the participants come from families who have the basic necessities of life and are educated – middle class.

3.2 Interviews

The study sought to find out the motivations for the choice of counselling psychology as a career path. From the interviews, several themes emerged which throw light on why students choose Counselling psychology.

3.2.1. Self-awareness:

In life, self-awareness is crucial if the individual is to begin to heal from challenging experiences. This accounts for the preponderance of self-awareness. When the participants were asked the major motivations for the choice of counselling psychology, nearly all participants mentioned an intrinsic desire for self-understanding. For instance, P1 noted, “I wanted to understand myself more because before I joined counselling psychology, I was someone who didn’t know myself” (Interview, 12th February, 2024). This narrative underscores how the need for more self-awareness and subsequent personal counselling experiences were central to her decision.

Some participants considered counselling psychology as a path for not only professional development but also personal transformation. P3 described how learning about depression in her psychology classes was a means to understand herself better and resonated with her personal experiences: “I had started my psychology classes and we were learning about depression. I was so touched because it seemed a bit too close to home” (Interview, 17th February 2024). Such academic encounters serve as a bridge between personal experience and professional aspiration, igniting interest and deepening understanding.

Similarly, P6 noted that the “interesting things” she was learning in class not only prompted her to dig deeper into research but also reinforced her commitment to the field: “I want to continue... probably the interesting things that I’m learning prompt me to go deeper” (Interview, 20th February 2024). This sentiment shows how academic environments are crucial in nurturing ongoing motivation.

Experiencing early life challenges and the opportunity to experience counselling was also a motivator. P11 had a counselling experience that sparked the desire to study counselling psychology. The narrative indicated that “I had counselling when I was in high school... it was a nice experience because I was able to journey with the counsellor to help me through my problem, and helped me become more self-aware” (Interview, 27th February 2024). This early positive exposure not only provided immediate relief but also sowed the seeds for a long-term interest in the field.

3.2.2. Healing:

Experiences that adversely impact our mental well-being present the need for healing. When the participants were asked the major motivations for the choice of counselling psychology, nearly all participants mentioned the need for healing from some challenging experience, personal or observed in others. For instance, P2 recounted the impact of losing her grandmother during her formative years, which left her with an emotional burden that counselling helped alleviate. Similarly, for P9, the family trauma linked to a sibling’s substance abuse and the resulting emotional turmoil influenced the choice of this career path. These experiences point to a common thread: early exposure to loss or instability often drives the need to understand and heal.

Similarly, P11 narrated an encounter which played a crucial role in the decision to choose Counselling psychology as a career path:

I was a member of our school football team, this competition came up and we were to play a couple of games with some schools. We practiced daily and we were sure to win the final and bring back the trophy. I was the goalkeeper. The matches went on well until the finals. In this game, we scored a lone goal. But a few minutes before the end of the match, I started having a headache. I couldn’t concentrate, I suppose I panicked. Within a split second, the other team scored 2 goals. I was shocked. The school became horrible as my mates blamed me for weeks for our loss. I was later sent to the school counsellor. He helped me regain my shattered self and later life became normal again. From then, I knew that I would like to study counselling. (Interview, 27th February 2024)

The narrative from this participant shows that counselling psychology is generally perceived as a healing profession. It relates to the personal therapies and group sessions that are embedded in the programme. It makes sense that those who are ‘healed’ may go to ‘heal’ others.

3.2.3. *Family Dynamics:*

When the participants were asked about their background and what sparked their interest in Counselling psychology, the responses indicated the role that family experiences, parents and other family members have on this crucial decision. Challenging experiences within family dynamics often influenced the decision to study Counselling psychology. P5 offered a vivid account of growing up in a polygamous family where he felt neglected. The narrative indicated that: "Growing up in a polygamous family gave me a lot of challenges because I never received the love and attention I needed" (Interview, 20th February 2024), which reflects how personal challenges and unmet emotional needs can motivate one to seek the tools necessary for self-understanding and to help others facing similar difficulties. For P3, family values played a role in this decision.

My family has always valued open communication and emotional expression. Within our family, we were encouraged to share our feelings and seek support from each other. This open and supportive environment fostered a sense of empathy and understanding within me, which I believe are crucial qualities for an effective counsellor. (Interview, 17th February 2024)

The two narratives indicate that negative and positive influences from significant individuals such as parents, and family members, played a crucial role.

3.2.4. *Influence of Role Models:*

The role of influential relationships and mentors to peer support in shaping career decisions was identified. Some participants indicated specific role models who helped them visualize a future in counselling psychology. For instance, P1 noted that "a neighbour who overcame addiction with the help of a supportive counsellor, and a distant relative who struggled with depression and found help in therapy. These experiences profoundly impacted me and I decided I would study Counselling Psychology" (Interview, 12th February, 2024).

For P3, it was the self-image, confidence, understanding and warmth of the school Counsellor that sparked the interest in Counselling Psychology:

One of the reasons for my choice of counselling was because of my school counsellor. She was beautiful, smart, and gentle, and made me feel good about myself. Whenever I needed to go to the counsellor, I did not hesitate. She would listen and then guide you in whatever was the problem. I had difficulty with Maths. But she made me believe in myself and I greatly improved. (Interview, 17th February 2024)

The picture created here highlights the crucial role of mental health support in personal growth and well-being. P9 indicated that her uncle, a counselling psychologist, had a direct impact on her career decision. This kind of familial role modelling appears to be a recurring influence in multiple narratives.

3.2.5. *Response to Socio-cultural Needs:*

The influence of broader socio-cultural factors on the participants' career choices was observed. When they were asked what is motivating them to continue, the narratives revealed that community dynamics, cultural background, and societal attitudes toward mental health play a significant role in motivating students. P8 discussed how societal perceptions of her community influenced her decision. According to the narrative, "When you introduce yourself and say that you're coming from, people will look at you and put you in a certain perspective" (Interview, 25th February 2024). P11 also discussed discrimination due to her vitiligo, indicating that personal challenges related to appearance and social stigma can lead to a desire to understand oneself better through psychological study. Such experiences underscore how cultural and societal attitudes toward mental health and socioeconomic background can steer one's career path toward counselling as a means of empowerment and change.

There are also positive experiences of the community that sparked the interest in Counselling. Example P5 indicated that:

Growing up in, I was fortunate to witness the resilience of my community in the face of various challenges such as poverty, disease, and social injustices. I saw first-hand how emotional and social support can significantly impact individuals and families and this made the decision for me. (Interview, 20th February 2024)

An awareness of mental health issues within their communities and a desire to contribute to societal healing motivated some of the participants. For example: P4 observed: "I used to see people, especially the youth, struggling with depression, anxiety... sometimes leading to suicide" (Interview, 17th February 2024). This observation reflects an awareness of a significant societal need, which in turn motivates individuals to choose counselling psychology as a way of effecting positive change. In addition, P3 was influenced by the experience of a close friend in high school.

Yes, there were a few significant experiences that shaped my decision to pursue Counselling Psychology. One particular moment that stands out vividly occurred during my high school years. I witnessed a close friend struggle with intense anxiety and depression, feeling isolated and unsupported. Watching her navigate these challenges and the impact on her academic and social life, made me decide to study Counselling psychology. (Interview, 17th February, 2024)

Similarly, P10, shared how her work with individuals in a Religious formation house exposed her to a range of psychological and even spiritual challenges: "I saw a need... people were having issues that needed psychological attention... I said, I'm not an expert to deal with them. So I needed to know more on how to deal with them" (Interview, 27th February 2024). This experience highlights the impact of real-world professional challenges on her motivation and how professional settings and mentorship, even in non-traditional academic environments, can strongly inspire one's pursuit of counselling psychology.

There is a keen understanding of the broader societal impact of counselling psychology, particularly in addressing mental health issues. P7 and P12 articulated a strong professional drive not only to improve their self-understanding but also to serve communities in need: "I used to see people, especially the youth struggling with things like depression and anxiety, and I wanted to learn how to help these people" (Interview, 20th February 2024), and "I want to finish it and be proud of myself... understand my personality and how to relate better with the people around me" (Interview, 27th February 2024).

In addition, some of the students indicated having a strong desire to use the knowledge gained to support and empathize with others facing similar adversities as stated by P4: "Growing up in Kenya, I observed the stigma surrounding mental health issues and people suffer in silence due to fear of judgment and some can't afford counselling services. Becoming a counsellor, I would be promoting mental well-being for the less privileged" (Interview, 17th February 2024). The next narrative by P2 revealed a deeper connection to the 'common good' perspective:

My interest in understanding human behaviour and the complexities of the human mind has always intrigued me. I believe that everyone deserves access to quality mental health care, and I am passionate about contributing to a society where mental well-being is prioritized. I am drawn to Counselling Psychology because I believe it offers a unique opportunity to support individuals on their journey of personal growth and healing and to create a more compassionate and understanding society. (Interview, 12th February 2024)

The themes and illustrative quotations provided here offer a rich foundation for understanding the participants' current motivational factors.

4.0 Discussion of results

Motivations for choosing Counseling Psychology as a career are multifaceted and relate to Maslow's Motivation Theory (1943), which posits a hierarchy of needs, from physiological needs to self-actualization. Some of the participants were driven to study counselling psychology to better understand themselves. This finding aligns with Trendak (2020), indicating that personal struggles and a quest for personal growth were significant motivators. Although the quest for self-understanding and the desire to support others are crucial values for counselling psychology, some participants identified the need for self-healing which aligns with the findings from a meta-analysis study by Bryce et al. (2023) which indicated that 'family of origin dysfunction, parentification, individual characteristics, and traits developed through adversity, and experiential motivations were associated with the career choice in the helping professions'.

As earlier studies found out, students may be motivated by intrinsic needs for personal fulfilment, especially as they progress toward self-actualization (Ryan et al., 2011; Trendak, 2020; Patall et al., 2008). The desire to help others and make a significant societal impact aligns with Maslow's notion of self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). Most of the participants indicated the choice of Counseling Psychology and were seeking a career that resonates with their values of helping others. Although many participants come from middle-class backgrounds, the psycho-social challenges they observed, whether in their personal lives or within their communities, helped shape their understanding of the broader need for mental health support.

The narratives consistently expressed a wish to provide support to others, whether driven by witnessing familial suffering or community impoverishment. This motivation is crucial because 'counsellors work with clients to identify and challenge negative thought patterns, develop coping skills, and build resilience' (Hartwig, 2016). Contrary to other research on motivation for choice of career path in other professions, Fernandez et al. (2014) found that the most significant motivation for choosing a seafaring career was the promise of stable employment. Wang and Houston (2023) observed in their study in England among student Teachers that most participants were positively attracted to the teaching profession and in Croatia, Pavin (2023), found that most student teachers identified with the intrinsic value of teaching, the social value of teaching and perception of own teaching abilities were the most important motives for choosing a teaching career. Similarly, a career in Counselling Psychology is seen to offer a high degree of job satisfaction and flexibility (Laws & Kemp, 2006).

Role models whether in the family or the school environment, also played a significant role in shaping individuals' career choices and motivations, particularly in fields like counseling psychology. Research has shown that role models can influence individuals through various mechanisms, including acting as behavioural models, representing possibilities, and providing inspiration (Morgenroth et al., 2015; Paloş & Drobot, 2010). Influential relationships not only inspire students but also provide a framework through which they can envision their future roles as helpers and healers (Paloş & Drobot, 2010; Pisker, 2022). The evidence points to mentorship as a pivotal factor in both the decision to study counselling psychology and the ongoing commitment to the field.

External societal pressures and cultural contexts contribute to an individual's motivation to pursue counselling psychology. This aligns with Amunga's (2020) study and the position that cultural beliefs have both a negative and positive impact on mental health. Community stigma, economic conditions, and cultural expectations all influence how individuals perceive themselves and their role in addressing collective mental health challenges. The account of a church experience with a distressed individual introduces a spiritual aspect to the motivation behind choosing counselling psychology - a nuance not present in all narratives.

Following these findings, it is suggested that universities continue to provide practical learning experiences to enhance this initial motivation and sustain it throughout the period of study at the university. Curricula should also address cultural sensitivity and community needs, preparing students to work effectively in diverse settings where socioeconomic and cultural factors heavily influence mental health. Including coursework that focuses on cultural competence and diversity can prepare students to work effectively with diverse populations.

While this study provides valuable insights into motivations for choosing counselling psychology as a career path, the limitation of using only a qualitative survey design and snowball sampling method is a limitation that should be acknowledged.

5.0 Conclusion

The decision to study counselling psychology is not just about the experience of trauma, it stems from a complex interplay of personal, societal, and academic influences. Key motivators include - a desire for self-awareness and personal healing; the influence of mentors and role models and awareness of societal mental health needs within their communities.

This interplay reflects both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, ultimately leading participants to view counselling psychology not merely as a career but as a vocation. This conclusion comes from the combined experiences of personal transformation with a commitment to improving collective well-being. Studying Counselling Psychology can be a fulfilling and rewarding experience for individuals who are passionate about helping others and offers a unique opportunity for individuals to make a positive impact on people's lives.

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