

PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF PSYCHOLOGIST PROFESSION

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Abstract

It is acknowledged in the research literature the impact the public perception of psychologist profession plays on the help seeking behavior and adequate use of psychological services of the lay person and last, but not least, in establishing the positive rapport or therapeutic relationship between counselor and client. In the context of psychological services development in Albania, the public perception is not yet explored. The present study attempts to measure public perception in one pilot area by developing a survey questionnaire specifically designed for the purposes of the study “The public perception questionnaire of Psychologist Profession” (PPQPP). Preliminary formats of survey have been previously conducted to a sample of university students in Elbasan city. The PPQPP was conducted in a later phase, with a sample from the adult population in the city of Elbasan to measure perceptions of a more miscellaneous population in terms of demographic data like education, socio-economic status, level of education and contact to psychological services. Findings and limitations of the present study, implications for future research and concerns about the professional identity of the psychologist are discussed.

Keywords: *public perception, psychologist profession, professional identity, help seeking behavior*

Introduction

The profession of psychologist has developed in *less than one country*¹ in Europe (Roe, 2011) and the approximate number of practicing psychologists is 30.000². Psychologist is a regulated profession in Europe in the European Directive 2005/36/EC. The procedures of regulation by law vary from one country to another, but yet are unified in certain standards that deal with education and qualification. There are organized actions to pass a law for the regulation of psychologist

¹ Author's italics

² Data from European Federation of Psychologists Associations www.efpa.org

profession in Albania from professionals both from academia and professional associations and bodies. According to WHO research in Europe, 1 in 10 people is likely to seek psychological professional help some time in their lives³. The first university study program in psychology started in 1996 in the University of Tirana and in 2000 the first generation of graduates in psychology. It is already a 15 years history of psychological thinking in Albania. The profession contributes in many health and educational fields. Yet there is any unified national psychological association. This might explain why the profession is not yet discussed in terms of professional identity and of its regulation by law. The practice of psychology looks from outside as quite a liberal exercise of a profession. As a result of any formal registration, it is difficult to estimate number of psychologists per 100 000 inhabitants. In foreign research, we run into some estimation, that the number of psychologists per 100 000 population in Albania is 0,1⁴. The psychologists profession is very little explored by research and so does the public image of psychology and psychologists. It is thought that such type of studies are of important contribution in all stages of the professional development of the psychologist profession in one country. The theoretical framework in the study of public opinion makes reference to the theories of social psychology on impression formation, stereotypes and attitudes. The discussion of the public image or attitude of psychologists needs firstly an explanation of the concept of public perception or attitude. Public opinion is the aggregate of individual attitudes and beliefs. Can also be defined as the complex collection of opinions of many different people and the sum of their views. Mostly discussed in the discipline of social psychology since the beginning of the XX century, an *attitude* is made of affective, behavioral and cognitive components. The usual method for demonstrating that attitude have affective and cognitive components is to provide participants with items that are presumed to be affective or cognitive (Haddock & Maio, 2004, pg. 57). Asch (1955,1946) argued that collective perceptions are aggregation of the individual attitudes held by each member of population, a sum of each individual impression. The means of questionnaires, rating scales and self reports are suggested means to arrive at a scientific, objective view of a person (Asch, 1946). One cannot observe attitudes or social perception or concepts directly, but infer them from individuals' self reports and behavior that is why attitudes are considered as hypothetical construct (Schwarz, 2001, pg. 438). Qualities perceived to be associated with particular groups or categories of people (in this case the psychologists) include stereotypes, which are usually described along the three components the same as attitudes. Perceptions of group members vary along two dimensions: competence (confident, independent, competitive, intelligent) which is predicted by their social status; and warmth (tolerant, warm, good natured, sincere) predicted by their low social competitiveness with perceivers. This is the model of stereotype content of Susan T. Fiske et al, (Uleman & Saribay, 2011, pg. 342). Groups

³ Nady von Broeck, Germain Lietaer, Psychology and psychotherapy in health care: A review of legal regulations in 17 european countries, *European Psychologist*, 2008, Vol. 13, No.1, 53-63,pg.53

⁴ WHO & Ministry of Health, Albania (2006) WHO – AIM Report on Mental Health System in Albania,pg.12

may be associated with negative stereotypes (low competence and low warmth) and positive stereotypes (high competence, high warmth) or with ambivalent stereotypes (high competence, low warmth). Affective component of attitudes is characterized by the presence of positive or negative emotions. So it includes feelings (Haddock & Maio, 2004, pg. 36). The cognitive element of attitudes is the knowledge the individual possesses about a psychologist and what they do. The behavioral component refers to past behavior associated with the attitude object. Such explorations in social psychology served as reference to developing a questionnaire to explore public attitude towards psychologists. Careful consideration was given in addressing all three components by formulating items organized around the main categories of affective attitude, knowledge about and contact with psychologists.

Aim of study

Why is it relevant to study the public perception of psychologist profession? Social perception plays an important role in utilization of psychological services and in public's help seeking behavior in case of mental health problems. The nature of perceptions determine the quality of therapeutic relationship between counselor and client, upon which is largely based the success or failure of any therapeutic endeavor. Knowing public attitudes is important to predict public's future behaviors and may guide and influence the perceiver's interaction with the target (Snyder & Tanke, 1977, pg. 658). Secondly, any young group of professionals like psychologists are in Albania in the mental health professions field, aim at promoting their profession and developing a professional identity. A similar enterprise would need to be based on data about how the public is perceiving psychology and psychologists. Thirdly, psychology science has as its own mission advocating for the wellbeing of people. People's opinion toward psychologists profession serves to better advocate for adequate mental health services and mental health professionals in establishing and improving standards of better mental health. Lastly, it contributes in professional identity development. This is defined as one's professional self concept based on attributes, beliefs, values, motives and experiences (Ibarra, 1999, Schein, 1978) and understanding about their roles within the context of work (Adams et al, 2006; Lingard et al, 2002). The information about how other people see and perceive the members of an ingroup is an integral in construing one's identity. It is important to know how the public feels about psychology (and psychologists) and what the public know about psychology (and what psychologists do) (Dennis, 2002, pg.371). A poor public image may not only affect the wellbeing of psychology and psychologists, but also impact upon the profession's capacity to serve and assist the wider community (Hartwig & Dalin, pg. 68). This explains why researchers continue to survey relevant aspects of psychology's public image.

Research questions

The research aimed to get a general information and understanding of public view of psychology and was motivated by the questions of how the public perceives psychologists. What mediums influence the perceptions? Similar studies mostly done in America, Australia and other non European countries where psychology is a new entry in mental health professional field, share in general a favorable public attitude (Wood, Jones & Benjamin Ludy T, 1986; Webb & Spear, 1986) and see psychology as scientific (Emeagwali, 2013).

Method

The research questions are explored by adopting a survey research. Surveys as method of collecting data, involve a questionnaire to measure the attitudes of people. Sample was chosen based on non probability sampling procedures, rather on purposive and judgment sampling. The study is a pilot one, testing an instrument designed for this questionnaire, in a pilot area, the city of Elbasan.

Materials

A survey questionnaire was designed specifically for this study “The public perception questionnaire of Psychologist Profession” (PPQPP). Public image of psychologists is a two dimensional issue (Ludy, 1986), reflecting both the popularity and understanding about psychologists and psychology. The (PPQPP) was designed to include the above mentioned dimensions. Several items explored the first in terms of so called favorability and others the present knowledge on psychology and about psychologists. (PPQPP) was reviewed twice till its final version. In the first phase, psychology undergraduates were asked to make descriptions of psychologists. We extracted common adjectives and clustered them into categories depicting traits and behaviors. Then a preliminary questionnaire was formed, which was applied to a group of undergraduates (N =70). They were asked about easiness of completion of (PPQPP), of structure and each item formulation. A second review took place within a focus group of psychology department staff . All feedback and reviews were integrated in the final version. (PPQPP) was designed into three parts. The first one contains demographic data. Demographic data included gender, age, level of education and state of (un)employment. Socio economic level and ethnicity were not included. The second part contains the items of the questionnaire, 50 in total. For each item, the respondents had three options “Agree”, “Don’t agree”, “I don’t know”. The third part of 11 closed ended questions inform on the previous or actual contact with psychologists. This final section aims to gather data on reasons for contact with psychologists, time length of consultation, respondents’ perceived benefit from consultation of psychologists and final question on their mostly influential medium in creating their opinion about psychologists.

Participants

They were adults aged 18 and over. A total of 143 questionnaires were collected. Completion of questionnaires took place in one day. The interviewers (14 in total) were located in significant institutions and places. The respondents were told a standard presentation by each interviewer and confidentiality explained. Time estimation to fill the (PPQPP) ran between 8 to 10 minutes.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the sample

Variables	Values	N	%
Gender	F	91	64.1
	M	51	35.9
Level of education	Primary	3	2.1
	Secondary	7	4.9
	Middle	25	17.6
	Student	10	7.0
	University	54	38.0
	Master	39	27.5
	Doctorate	4	2.8
Age groups	18-24	20	14.2
	25-29	31	22.0
	30-39	37	26.2
	40-49	30	21.3
	50-59	19	13.5
	> 60	4	2.8
Employment	No	43	30.1
	Yes	100	69.9

Interviewers were given a field note observation sheet where to record information on the refusal rate between respondents, the reason for refusal, respondents' comments on different items, on the easiness in the completion of questionnaire and nonverbal behaviors related to specific moments of (PPQPP). These data was also analysed to help understanding the overall results and their interpretation.

Procedure

Clearly definite statistics about town population made it not possible to control population in specific variables that led to adapting sampling procedures from probability to judgment sampling ones. The single variable mostly controlled in the sample was gender. Data from City Hall Office, Elbasan, (personal communication) made reference to a gender ratio F:M of

60%:40% for total population. This was carefully watched over during all the process of questionnaire administration. Many surveys are not based on a probability samples, but rather by finding a suitable collection of respondents to complete the survey⁵. To compensate for the above mentioned limitations a careful design of the questionnaire distribution was planned. The locations were purposively and strategically chosen. Respondents were approached in town centre location, university location, offices and residence location. These locations were carefully chosen in order to have accurate and relevant data in line with demographic statistics and purpose of the study. Completion of (PPQPP) took place within a single day, along while a close contact was kept by phone to interviewers in order to control the sample in terms of approximate distribution of most important variables and how respondents were reacting to the survey questionnaire.

Data analysis

Data was analyzed using SPSS program version 10.0 for windows.

Findings

Rate of refusals was low. Majority agreed to complete the questionnaire. A total of 143 questionnaires were analyzed. Herewith the sample responses to four of the categories that include affective attitude (see table.2); knowledge about psychologists (see table.3); desirability of contact with psychologists (see table.4) and perceived competence of psychologists (see table.5).

Table 2. Distribution of responses for Category Affective Attitude/Favorability

Items	Agree N	%	Don't agree N	%	Don't know N	%
Psychologists are warm people	101	72.1	7	5.0	32	22.9
Psychologists are good mannered	108	77.1	6	4.3	26	18.6
Psychologists share no religious prejudice	71	50.7	18	12.9	51	36.4
Psychologists do not prejudice homosexual people	71	50.4	20	14.2	50	35.5

⁵Retrieved on May, 15th,2014 from Wikipedia http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Survey_sampling

Psychologists are distant	5	3.6	93	66.4	42	30
Psychologists are affected by psychological disturbances	73	53.3	17	12.4	47	34.3
Psychologists are sincere	75	53.2	17	12.1	49	34.8
I trust psychologists	26	18.6	89	63.6	25	17.9
Once you consulted a psychologist, you are never affected by psychological disturbances	11	7.8	88	62.4	42	29.8
Psychologists are curious	64	45.7	30	21.4	46	32.9
Psychologists are studious	56	40.6	19	13.8	63	45.7
Psychologists are patient	121	85.2	7	4.9	14	9.9
Psychologists are rich	22	15.8	56	40.3	61	43.9
Psychologists are intelligent	101	72.1	6	4.3	33	23.6

Table 3. Distribution of responses for the Category Knowledge of the psychologist profession

Items	Agree N	%	Don't agree N	%	Don't know N	%
Psychologists graduate in psychology	123	91.1	4	3.0	8	5.9
Psychologists do therapy after master studies	83	60.1	31	22.5	24	17.4
Psychologists undergo therapy prior to practice	27	19.4	40	28.8	72	51.8
Psychologists get licensed	88	62.4	15	10.6	38	27.0

Psychologists prescribe medications	12	8.8	80	58.8	44	32.4
Psychologists have high fees	29	21.0	21	15.2	88	63.8
Psychologists predict future	16	11.9	110	81.5	9	6.7
Psychologists do research and experiments	51	36.4	22	15.7	67	47.9
There is no difference between a psychologist and a psychiatrist	19	13.4	107	75.4	16	11.3
Majority of psychologists are female	54	38.0	39	27.5	49	34.5
Psychology is an exact science	14	10.0	93	66.4	33	23.6
Psychologists have finished studies in medicine	9	6.5	94	68.1	35	25.4
Psychology is more art than science	60	42.9	37	26.4	43	30.7

Table 4. Distribution of responses for Category Desirability of contact with psychologists

Items	Agree N	%	Don't agree N	%	Don't know N	%
I would meet a psychologist if I had some trouble	109	77.3	14	9.9	18	12.8
Psychologists should work in hospitals and health centers	111	80.4	16	11.6	11	8.0
I think I would rather talk with a psychologist than a friend over some problem	79	57.2	37	26.8	22	15.9
Highly educated people go to consult a psychologist	23	16.5	106	76.3	10	7.2
The poor do not consult psychologists	32	23.0	77	55.4	30	21.6

If my family member would have a mental health problem, I would advise him/her to see a psychologist	122	86.5	11	7.8	8	5.7
It would be no problem to me to share my troubles with a psychologist	108	76.6	17	12.1	16	11.3
In a mental trouble situation, a psychologist would help me better than a psychiatrist	79	56.4	22	15.7	39	27.9

Table 5. Distribution of responses of Category Competence of psychologists

Items	Agree	Don't agree	Don't know			
Psychologists are capable in their work	83	59.7	11	7.9	45	32.4
Psychologists would rather harm than help	8	5.8	115	82.7	16	11.5
Psychologists help to better understand yourself	102	73.9	16	11.6	20	14.5
Psychologists are apt in mind analysing	92	66.2	20	14.4	27	19.4
Psychologists can't be of help to ethnicities	17	12.5	107	78.1	13	9.5
Psychologists are good at finding solutions to people's problems	75	54.7	17	12.4	45	32.8
Psychologists might advice wrongly their patients	16	11.7	89	65.0	32	23.4
Psychologists are qualified at diagnosing mental health problems	73	52.9	37	26.8	28	20.3

Data analysis of the third part of (PPQPP) that includes sample contact with psychologists reveals that 12.9% (N=18) had contacted psychologists and 87.1% (N=121) had not contacted a psychologist

Table 6. Distribution of demographic characteristics of those that have contacted psychologists

gender	F	58.8 %
	M	41.2%
Age group	18 – 24	16.7%
	25 – 29	22.2%
	30 – 39	22.2%
	50 – 59	27.8 %
	Over 60	5.6%
Education level	Elementary	11.1%
	Secondary	33.3%
	Middle	5.6%
	Student	27.8%
	University degree	16.7%
	Master	5.6%

Table 7. Time length of contact with psychologists

Values	N	%
Once	4	25.0
A month	10	62.5
Over a year	2	12.5

Table 8. Nature of complaints for contacting psychologists

Types	%
Anxiety related problems	5.6
Depression	4.2
Family problems and issues	3.5
High levels of stress	2.8
Memory and attention problems	2.1
Chronic tiredness/fatigue	2.1
Anger management problems	1.4
Unspecified problems	1.4
“I prefer not talk about it”	
Sleep disturbances	0.7
Work conflicts	0.7
Eating disturbances	0.7
Hearing voices	0.7
Seeing things	0.7

Table 9. Distribution of responses of Mediums having influenced the perceptions of psychologists

Type of medium	%
TV (talk shows, debates, interviews)	62,2
Books with psychological themes	39.9
Internet (blogs, forums, facebook, youtube)	39.1
Psychology magazines	16.8
Newspapers	16
Films	12.6
Telenovelas or Tv series	12.6
Radio	4.2

Discussion

Results from the perceptions of Category of favorability toward psychologists display positive attitude toward psychologists. They are seen as gentle and good mannered, involved in academic activity and studies. 18.6% trust psychologists. Such rate of trust might be interpreted as a lack of a more specific knowledge, that of the process of psychological treatment, “*what happens in the office with a psychologist?*” The public is in contact with psychologists via the media in talk shows but are not yet enough informed of how counseling works. It is recommended that further qualitative inquiry would provide depth of data exploration. Results from the perceptions of Category Knowledge of psychologist profession show that public have realistic perceptions in terms of type of education to be a psychologist (68% perceives that psychologists are not former students of medicine science), psychologists don’t prescribe medications, do not predict the future and that what psychologists do differ from what psychiatrists do. But it is not known of how enough qualification it takes to be treating mental health problems, after graduation/master/doctorate? It is perceived that psychologists get licensed when in fact they do not. Public lacks knowledge about an average fee for psychological service, is undecided in perceptions whether psychologists do research and experiments and the psychologist profession is not seen as more prone to female gender. Public sees psychology as a soft science and more of an art and intuition. For the perceptions of Category of Desirability and Comfort of contact with psychologists, it is shown that public perceives psychologist as a professional whose presence ought to be in hospital and health centers within their access. 57.2% would rather choose a psychologist than a friend to talk over a problem. Psychologists would be among their first choices in time of mental distress and would recommend psychological service to a family member and in time of crisis and would rather choose a psychologist than a psychiatrist. Psychological service is not perceived as privilege of rich people. For the perceptions of category of Competence of psychologists, public perceive psychologists as capable. 82.7 % perceive them as helpful. They do not see cultural ethnics as obstacle to psychologists to offer help to other socio cultural groups

different from their own. Results from the data analysis display that 12.9 % have contacted psychologists for consultation. This category of users of psychological services, is mostly female and gender gap is not distinct. They belong to the age group of 25 to 59 mostly, where people of age of 50 – 59 has the more frequency of contacts. The users of psychological services belong to the middle level of education mostly (33% of them) followed by those with university degree. 62.5 have been in consultation for over a month. It could be speculated that consultation is some type of problem oriented counseling. 12.5 % have been in treatment for over a year. The most frequent psychological complaints result to be anxiety, depression, family troubles and distress. The most influential mediums result to be TV, books and internet. Since the 50s, media has been one of the most important medium in forming public opinion. In modern society, the media plays a pervasive influence on the development of attitudes. We implicitly trust what is portrayed by the media (McNamara, 1993) as we attribute to it expertise and integrity. There are psychologists who see media as eliciting negative stereotypes for therapists on the big and small screen (Sleek, 1998). The public may see these behaviors on the screen as normal behaviors of therapists. The media depictions and images affects public opinions (Sleek,1998). The public's perception of psychologists is determined far more by how we appear in the media (Carll, 2001) than by the experiences of the relatively small percentage of people who have had direct contact with or have utilized the services of psychologists. Women tend to have more positive attitudes than men do, regarding seeking professional help (Vogel, Wester & Larson, 2007, pg. 413). Most of the literature on help seeking has consistently shown that individuals who are in their 20s and who have a college education have more positive attitudes toward seeking professional help (Vogel, Wester & Larson, 2007, pg. 415). People with higher level of education has more contact with psychologists. This might be linked with a higher level of seeking professional help in this group of people. People with higher levels of education were more favorable to seeking professional help (McNamara, 1993). In 2009, WHO Office in Tirana, conducted a research on national attitude to mental health. Among the results the main sources of information on mental health were TV shows and programs and radio 60%; the news on TV 51%; books 17%; and magazines 15% (pg.38). In this study, the perceived incidence of mental health problems in Albania were stress 41%; depression 33%; substance abuse 8%; anxiety 3%; family problems or difficulties in family 1%; others 2% (pg.40). As far as supportive agents are considered in the study of WHO, psychologists are ranked the third, as the most important factor after a family member and close friends (pg. 50,51). Further research will shed more light on psychology public image and public's attitudes toward psychologists. It is recommended that larger sample research be designed in the future and including more of qualitative research method to explore in depth public's specific opinions about psychology and psychologists.

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