

# Qualitative Research on Career Development of Psychological Consultants in China Social Psychological Counseling Institutions

Liwen Zhao, Weixuan Meng, Xin Fang, Xiangping Zhan, Jun Wang and Peng Wang\*

No. 1500, the University Road, The university technology garden in Changqing District, Jinan, School of Psychology, Shandong Normal University, 250358 China.

\*Corresponding author

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**Abstract.** The goal of our qualitative study was to research the career development of psychological consultants in China social psychological counseling institutions, promote the personal growth of psychological counselors, carry out the career plan and personal coping, and provide enlightenment for the career development plan of psychology majors. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 6 psychological consultants in social psychological counseling institutions. The results show that the career development of psychological consultants in social psychological counseling institutions is influenced by both personal factors and environmental factors; the career development can be divided into three stages with different development tasks. Finally, we discussed the influencing factors and career development tasks of psychological consultants in social psychological counseling institutions.

## Introduction

In recent years, psychological counseling, as a kind of rising service industry, has made great progress in China, but it still faces some problems in its professionalization process. Besides, through analyzing the literature, we found that there was little relative research on the career development of psychological consultants and the psychological consultants of social psychological counseling institutions. In order to better carry out the professional qualification certification of psychological consultants, there are many important issues need to be figured out, including the career development of psychological consultants and their influencing factors, which can help put forward effective measures for the development of psychological counseling.

In this research, taking psychological consultants as research objects, in the form of interview for data gathering, through qualitative research construct theoretical model, from the perspective of career discover the corresponding influencing factors, we discuss the characteristics of their career development and explore their career paths. Besides, this research aims to promote the personal growth, the career plan and personal coping of psychological consultants, providing enlightenment for students of psychology in the career development plan.

## The Development of Psychological Counseling and Psychological Consultant

According to *National Occupational Standards for Psychological Consultants*, psychological consultant is a person who are engaged in psychological counseling, “uses the professional knowledge of psychology and related disciplines, follows the principles of psychology, and applies the techniques and methods of psychological counseling to help the clients to solve psychological problems”. According to the survey, less than 1/10 of qualified psychological consultants are actually engaged in psychological counseling no matter how the professional level is<sup>[1]</sup>. However, there still exists large requirement of psychological consultants who can provide professional help<sup>[2]</sup>. In this professional environment, it is likely that psychological consultants in social psychological counseling institutions will change jobs, who have great career uncertainty, career obstacles and career hesitation.

## **The Development of Social Psychological Counseling Institutions**

The psychological counseling industry has been developed well in western countries, with mature technology and conditions in most of aspects, which has a relatively complete industry standard and management system. In recent years, psychological counseling, as a kind of rising service industry, has made great progress in China; but it still faces some problems in its professionalization process, such as: the lack of employees; the professional training model needs to be improved; the management of employees needs to be strengthened; the price of psychological counseling needs to be standardized<sup>[3]</sup>. According to relevant research findings, the total number of psychological consultants engaged in psychological counseling in Shanghai is far from enough<sup>[4]</sup>. With a shortage of psychological consultants in such development area of china, we can refer that the development of psychological counseling industry is in an inferior situation in other regions.

## **Research in Career Development**

The research in career has a long history. Super thought that career referred to the overall process of a personal professional experience<sup>[5]</sup>. Hall pointed out that career referred to the relevant experience and activities that accompany one's work or career throughout one's life<sup>[6]</sup>. There was another view that career referred to the floorboard of a person's lifelong career, society and interpersonal relationship, which is the process of a person's lifelong development<sup>[7]</sup>. In conclusion, the understanding of career is not just confined to a man's work experience, the change of career and the realization of ideal process, but also seen as a complete professional development process, including the acquisition of professional ability, the cultivation of occupational interest, career choice, and the withdrawal from professional labor in the end.

## **Qualitative Research in Psychological Consultants**

According to previous study, the domestic research on psychological consultants in social psychological counseling institutions mainly collects data by questionnaire. For example, use the method of quantitative research to investigate the present problems of psychological counseling industry and the career development of psychological consultants. The career development is viewed as multifaceted, unstable, cyclical, and transitional over the life course; so it is necessary to research the career development of psychological consultants<sup>[8]</sup>.

## **Method**

This study applied qualitative research, in the form of interview to discuss the career development of psychological consultants in social psychological counseling institutions. The interview focused on their career experience to discover the influencing factors and discuss the characteristics of career development. In qualitative research, the researcher himself is the research tool. The personal factors about researcher influence the validity of the research, such as gender, age, ability, professional background, personality and research experience<sup>[9]</sup>. Before the research, the researchers in this research had received systematic training about interview.

## **Participants**

The participants in this research are the psychological consultants of social psychological counseling institutions whose job seniority is more than ten years, two females and four males included.

## **Data Collection**

Qualitative data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with the participants who volunteered for the research. Before the interview, the researchers prepared a recording pen, a computer, the recording paper, the interview guide, the General Condition Questionnaire and the

Informed Consent Forms. Based on the current literature, an interview outline was constructed and validated by the researchers, which included: the career choice of psychological consultants in social psychological counseling institutions and career development of them. For example, the participants were asked the following questions: “Why do you choose your job”, “What is the main goal in your job”, “What make you feel satisfied from your job” and “What are the main stress in your job”. The participants were asked to complete the General Condition Questionnaire after interview.

## Analysis

The narrative data was qualitatively analyzed based on the principles of interpretative phenomenological analysis<sup>[10]</sup>, which were usually used in qualitative research. Six participants signed the Informed Consent Form at the beginning of interview. (The process also respected their anonymity.) All interview sessions were transcribed into text on average of 19,288 words roughly, with each interview lasting an average of 83 minutes. From the view of career motivation, crisis response and career plan, the career development of psychological consultants in social psychological counseling institutions were divided into different stages.

## Results

For clarity and succinctness, we present our major findings according to two aspects: the influencing factors and the career development of psychological consultants in social psychological counseling institutions.

### Category 1 Individual Factors

By analyzing the career development experiences of six psychological consultants in social psychological counseling institutions, we found that the main factors of their career development are divided into the following two aspects: individual factors including interest, personality, professional values, coping styles, economic level and professional development; environmental factors including key events, significant others, personal growth, social support and development.

**Subcategory 1a: Interest.** All of six participants showed interest in both psychology and psychological consultant. Kevin found that mental health education and psychological counseling were her lifelong favorites with the in-depth research of psychological counseling technology and the improvement of professional skills. Therefore, she resolutely decided to become a psychological consultant, insisting on it for 18 years.

**Subcategory 1b: Personality.** Alice described her personality as “I am naturally considerate and get along well with others, having strong affinity and good expression ability”. Judging from her personality, she is suitable to be a psychological consultant.

**Subcategory 1c: Professional Values.** In this study, the career plan of six psychological consultants could be summarized as the application and promotion of psychology, the publicity of psychological counseling, public welfare activities and so on, which reflected that career plan was influenced by professional values.

**Subcategory 1d: Coping Styles.** Although Belinda had suspended her work on psychological counseling for a period of time after encountering occupational burnout, she did not give up. Instead, she began to improve her self-observation to cope with the crisis in her career development, insisting on psychological counseling.

**Subcategory 1e: Economic Level.** Mario, Dale and Alice emphasized that they had no financial pressure in the career development of psychological consultants, mainly because they had another job to earn a living. Kevin and Kim got the financial support from their families and partners.

**Subcategory 1f: Professional Development.** In this research, other psychological consultants emphasized the importance of systematic training except Mario. After encountering job burnout, Alice realized the importance of learning, which is an effective way to avoid job burnout.

## Category 2 Environmental Factors

**Subcategory 2a: Key Events.** Kevin said, “I ever got a phone call from a man cutting his wrist. I called the emergency number and saved his life. I felt the meaning of my existence by this event”.

**Subcategory 2b: Significant Others.** The relationship of significant others gives psychological consultants both mental and theoretical support<sup>[11]</sup>. When Dale experienced difficulties in career development, he recalled his mother's encouragement, “it was easy for me to study existing research results, just like parrot”.

**Subcategory 2c: Personal Growth.** Kim said, “I am particularly interested in the individual's psychology. I think it may have something to do with my own growth, the relationship with the family of origin included. When I saw the people around me including parents, I really tried to figure out how they got along with each other”.

**Subcategory 2d: Social Support.** The support of parents and peers can enhance the confidence in the career development<sup>[12]</sup>. In this research, Mario, Kevin and Kim gained support from their spouses; Belinda and Alice gained support from their families.

**Subcategory 2e: Social Development Level.** This influencing factor came from the viewpoint of Dale. He thought that the social and economic development level influenced the development of psychological counseling industry by influencing the public's concept of psychological counseling.

### The Career Development of Psychological Consultants in Social Psychological Counseling Institutions

Throughout the career development of the six psychological consultants in social psychological counseling institutions in this research, their career development corresponds directly with the development of self-confirmation. Namely, be confused and explore the career at the primary career stage; improve skills with systematic training and hold on when encountering the career setbacks at the mid-career stage; reach a stable state with mature skill, personality, and institutions at the later career stage. The career development has also become a part of the personal growth of psychological consultant, with the task of personal growth involving the career development. Thus, the career development of psychological consultants in social psychological counseling institutions could be divided into three stages. (1) The tasks at the primary career stage: explore, confuse, learn, prepare and try. (2) The tasks at the mid-career stage: build, promote, stabilize, insist, risk, fatigue. (3) The tasks at the later career stage: keep, synthesize, manage, delve, guide.

## Discussion

By analyzing the career development experiences of six psychological consultants in social psychological counseling institutions, the integrated model of their career development is obtained. Based on this model, we put forward proposals for psychological consultants at different career development stages. At the primary career stage, psychological consultants should explore the career development direction and make a career plan timely<sup>[12]</sup>. It pretty helpful for them to receive the careful guidance of psychological supervisor and make many like-minded friends to support each other<sup>[13]</sup>. At the mid-career stage, psychological consultants continuously combine personal experience, supervision and systematic training to improve their professional level. By these training, they ought to enhance professional cognition and treat occupational burnout rationally<sup>[36]</sup>. Moreover, it is necessary for consultants to clarify the professional characteristics, the possible risk sources, and the occupational burnout nature<sup>[14]</sup>. At the later career stage, psychological consultants should persistently improve their professional skills and quality to form a personal style of consulting, with the balance of work, family and life<sup>[15]</sup>. In addition, they provide support and guidance to newcomers.

## **Limitation**

Due to the subjective consciousness and individual differences of the participant or the quality of researchers, the suggestions were presented only based on the findings of this research, which needed to be discussed deeply. The data presented were “seem simple” in the end, although the method of interpretative phenomenological analysis was adopted in this research which was time-consuming and laborious. Besides, the methods of gathering and analyzing data were far from ideal, which needed to be improved.

## **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interests with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Li-wen ZHAO, Wei-xuan MENG, Xin FANG, Xiang-ping ZHAN and Jun WANG are co-first authors. Peng WANG is corresponding author.

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