

Unveiling the Psyche: A Qualitative Exploration of Self-concept among Mental Health Professionals in Delhi NCR

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The study aims to understand the self-concept of Mental Health practitioners currently providing services in Delhi-NCR. The study pursues an in-depth qualitative approach by interviewing about 10 practitioners using convenient sampling method. Self-concept is linked to a number of other "self" constructs, including self-esteem, self-image, self-efficacy, and self-awareness. Using thematic analysis, data is collected on the self-concept of the practitioner as well as some of its important tenets such as self-awareness, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-image. The basic underlying purpose behind conducting this research is to dive into the practitioner's psyche and how providing therapeutic services might have a mirror effect on the practitioner's understanding of self.

Keywords: self-concept, mental health practitioners, self-esteem, self-awareness, thematic analysis

According to William James, the term "self" can refer to either the person as the target of appraisal (i.e., one evaluates oneself introspectively) or the person as the source of agency (i.e., one attributes the source of regulation of perception, thought, & behaviour to one's body or mind). Carl Jung believed that the self develops gradually through a process of individuation that is not complete until late maturity. Alfred Adler defined the self as an individual's way of life, the way he or she seeks fulfillment. Horney believed that one's true self, as opposed to one's idealised self-image, is comprised of one's distinct capacities for growth and development.

"Define yourself", "Who are you?", "What makes you "you"?" are some of the essential questions we all come across. "I am a student", "I am a therapist", "I am a brother", "I am a good friend", "I am a homemaker" are some of the casual responses one might expect out of these questions. Perhaps you respond, "I am excellent at my job," "I am a talented musician," or "I am a successful athlete." Other possible responses include "I'm a kind-hearted person," "I'm intelligent and hardworking," or "I'm laid-back and easy-going." These responses stem from our internal sense of self. This sense develops early in life, but it is constantly evaluated and adjusted throughout the lifespan. This sense of self is known as self-concept in my discipline of psychology.

Self-concept is an all-encompassing idea we have about who we are physically, emotionally, socially, spiritually, and in terms of any other aspects that contribute to who we are (Neill, 2005). As we grow,

we form and regulate our self-concept based on what we know about ourselves. It is multidimensional and can be divided into these individual components. The influential self-efficacy researcher Roy (1999) defines self-concept as follows:

"The individual's belief about himself or herself, including the person's attributes and who and what the self is."

A similar definition comes from Rosenberg's 1979 book on the topic; he says self-concept is: "...the totality of an individual's thoughts and feelings having reference to himself as an object."

Self-concept is linked to a number of other "self" constructs, including self-esteem, self-image, self-efficacy, and self-awareness. These minor yet significant differences shall here and there be a part of my research study due to their dynamic nature.

Self-concept is linked to a number of other "self" constructs, including self-esteem, self-image, self-efficacy, and self-awareness. The differences between them are discussed in the following section.

Self-concept Theory

There are numerous theories regarding what self-concept is and how it develops (Cherry, 2018B; Gecas, 1982). Theorists generally agree on the following points:

- On the most general level, self-concept refers to our overall perception of who we are, which includes both cognitive and affective judgements about ourselves.
- Self-concept is multidimensional, encompassing our perceptions of ourselves in a variety of ways (e.g., social, religious, spiritual, physical, emotional).
- It is acquired rather than innate;
- It is influenced by biological and environmental factors, but it is also influenced by social interaction.
- During childhood and early adulthood, when self-concept is more easily changed or updated, it develops.
- There are numerous theories regarding what self-concept is and how it develops (Cherry, 2018B; Gecas, 1982).
- It is possible to change it later in life, but it is more difficult because people have established ideas about who they are; self-

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concept does not always align with reality. When this occurs, our self-concept is said to be "congruent." When it does not, our self-concept is said to be "incongruent."

Below described is the theory given by Saul McLeod. Self-concept is an all-encompassing idea we have about who we are—physically, emotionally, socially, spiritually, and in terms of any other aspects that contribute to who we are. As we grow, we form and regulate our self-concept based on what we know about ourselves. It is multidimensional and can be divided into these individual components.

Self-concept vs. Self-esteem

Self-concept is not the same as self-esteem, though self-esteem may be a component of self-concept. Self-concept is our perception of ourselves, our answer to the question "Who am I?" It is being aware of one's own tendencies, thoughts, preferences, and habits, as well as one's hobbies, skills, and areas of weakness. According to Carl Rogers, the founder of client-centered therapy, self-concept is an overarching construct that includes self-esteem (McLeod, 2008).

Self-concept vs. Self-image

Self-image is related to self-concept but is narrower in scope. A person's self-image is how they see themselves, and it does not have to match reality. A person's self-image is based on how they see themselves, whereas self-concept is a more comprehensive evaluation of the self, based primarily on how a person sees, values, thinks about, and feels about themselves. Carl Rogers proposed that self-image, along with self-esteem or self-worth and one's "ideal self," is a component of self-concept (McLeod, 2008).

Self-concept vs. Self-efficacy

Self-concept is a more nuanced idea than self-efficacy. While self-efficacy refers to an individual's assessment of their own abilities, self-concept is a broader term that includes both cognitive (thoughts about) and affective (feelings about) assessments of oneself (Bong & Clark, 1999).

Self-concept vs. Self-awareness

Self-awareness influences self-concept as well. It is a quality or trait characterised by conscious awareness of one's own thoughts, feelings, behaviours, and characteristics (Cherry, 2018A). A person must have some level of self-awareness in order to have a fully developed (& realistic) self-concept.

Current of the Study

The umbrella term of "Mental Health professionalism" usually includes psychiatrists, psychologists, counselors, clinicians, professors, and psychiatric social workers. These mental healthcare professionals work directly with people who have health problems and are bound to have an impact of their services on their sense of viewing themselves. There has been a significantly less amount of research done on mental health professionals but most of the research studies only talked about the experiences of burnout being faced by these professionals. The underlying assumption of these studies clearly signifies that the kind of services these professionals offer, only and only produces stress and burnout at the end. These studies essentially fail to capture that it might also be the other way and the professional might actually be himself or herself benefitting from the entire therapeutic or treatment process on his own. The entire process of treatment and counseling, in which the professional applies various theories, concepts and ideas of psychology and helps the

client become better and stronger psychologically, can actually be a healing process for the professional as well and help in mutual growth and development. The experience of witnessing a client get better and making him or her better equipped to manage himself always has a profound echo effect on the other side of the desk i.e the professional as well. The professional as a human being also creates that space overtime where he or she is reflecting upon their own life with the help of the support and guidance they provide to their client. This could be easily understood as to how a teacher learns so much while being in the process of teaching her students.

Future benefit of such research would help the practitioner as a guiding tool to understand that the therapeutic process is beautifully dynamic in nature and could not just benefit the client but the practitioner to be better, efficient and psychologically resourceful, first as an individual and then as a professional. This research would better equip the practitioner to be able to understand the echo effect of therapeutic conversation and its impact on their self-concept, ideas, thoughts and beliefs. This in turn is bound to boost self esteem and self confidence for the mental health practitioner which in turn would make them better professionals for future. "An empty cannot fill another cup."

It can be stated that there is a huge gap in the literature when it comes to explaining the positive aspects of therapeutic services experienced by the mental health practitioner, since most of the existing researches only talk about burnout and self-care techniques to combat compassion fatigue, exhaustion and burnout syndrome. The current study attempts to answer the following questions:

- How does providing mental health services impact the self-concept of a mental health professional over the course of time?
- Does providing therapeutic mental health services have an echo effect on the professional's life?
- How does providing counseling services impact the psyche and the emotional health of the professional?

The primary objectives of the current study are to qualitatively understand the nature of services the mental health professional provides, to reflect upon the journey of the practitioner in the field of mental health, and to use a thematic research approach to get a deeper understanding of the self-concept and its underlying tenets: self-esteem, self-awareness and self image of mental health practitioners in various kinds of setting.

Method

Study Design

A qualitative approach was employed for the research study. The narrative approach was used as a method of analysis. The primary mode of obtaining data was semi-structured interview with a combination of both open and closed-ended questions pertaining to the research objectives. The interview schedule was prepared prior and reviewed by the research supervisor and 3 peer researchers. The interviews were conducted in both online and offline mode as per researcher's convenience. Informed consent was provided in both a written and verbal manner. All the information regarding the study was clearly disseminated to the participants in a clear way

The sample was retrieved through the convenience sampling method. The data saturation method was employed to achieve the exact number. Thematic Analysis was used for data analysis procedures.

Participants

Participant Characteristics: 10 mental health counsellors,

therapists, and psychologists, practicing in the Delhi NCR region for over a span of 1 year and having a minimum post-graduation degree were included in the study.

Table 1

Socio-demographics of the Participants

Participants	Age	Sex	Qualifications	Location	Work Ex	Specialisation
P1	27	Female	BA Psychology, MA Clinical Psychology	Delhi NCR	2	Clinical Psychology, Certified in Humanistic Existential Therapy
P2	30	Female	BSc Psychology, MSc Child & Adolescent mental Health, MA Clinical Psychology, Diploma in Trauma focused psychotherapy	New Delhi	7	Child & Adolescent Counselling Psychologist, Trauma focused therapy
P3	27	Female	BA Applied Psychology, BEd, MA Counselling psychology	Delhi	1	Psychotherapist, Certified Mindfulness Coach, Humanistic Existential Counsellor
P4	48	Female	BA Psychology, MA Psychology	Noida	26	Developmental Psychologist, Counselling Psychologist, Parenting Counsellor, REBT Practitioner
P5	27	Male	BA Applied Psychology, MA Counselling psychology	Delhi NCR	3	Humanistic-Existential Psychotherapist, Counselling Psychologist
P6	34	Female	BA Applied Psychology, MA Clinical Psychology, Mphil Psycho Oncology, Diploma in Grief Counselling	Delhi NCR	12	Clinical Psycho-oncologist, Grief Therapist
P7	26	Female	BA Psychology, MA Clinical Psychology, Certified Cognitive Behaviour Therapist	Delhi NCR	3	Psychotherapist
P8	46	Female	BSc Psychology, MA Counselling Psychology, Certified NLP, CBT, REBT & Hypnotherapist	Delhi NCR	8	Counselling Psychologist
P9	29	Female	BA Psychology, MA Counselling Psychology, Trained in NLP	Delhi	8	Psychologist
P10	27	Female	BA Psychology, MA Clinical Psychology, MPhil (RCI licenced)	Delhi	2	RCI licenced clinical psychologist

Interview Protocol and Data Collection

The interview schedule was formed after rigorous peer, supervised review, along with expert validation to ensure credibility, pertaining strictly to the research questions and objectives. A rigorous selection of participants took place through the Linked in search platform. Research participants were contacted through email and made an appointment to meet and conduct interviews at their office/home. Data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews after detailed data collection mentioned in Table 1.

Results

Thematic analysis was chosen as appropriate because it is a commonly used method for describing, analyzing, and reporting themes and patterns in data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The flexibility of thematic analysis allows the data to be analysed under a number of qualitative frameworks, and in this instance, the framework was grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Theme: 1 Impact on Mental Health and Sense of Self

This theme captured how providing therapeutic services helped the participants develop and view a sense of their self. All participants expressed a significant positive impact on their sense of self while providing therapeutic service. Participants mentioned the

importance of self-care and constant supervision and therapy. An important sub-theme identified was the role of clinical supervision which was elaborated upon by quite a few participants. The elevated level of respect and responsibility was explained. Participants also elaborated on being more mindful of their own thoughts and actions which have led them to become a better version of themselves and gain a deeper understanding of who they are. For example, one participant said:

“When I see certain changes in the client, getting slightly better...that's my measure of the kind of work that they can do. This tends to have a really nice effect on my self concept, that I'm doing good work” (P5, 27 year old male psychotherapist).

Another crucial sub-theme identified was how providing mental health services has been a satisfying and emotionally fulfilling experience for the participants as said by one of the participants:

I think it does mentally give me a feelgood factor at the end of the day. So that enhances my mental and casually also that I did some good work today (P9, 29 Year old Psychologist).

Theme 2: Changes in Self-perception

This theme aimed to capture the participant's self-perception and how has it changed over the course of time during their practice. Participants expressed a significant change in the way they perceive themselves. They felt an incredible growth in their personal and

professional growth which enhanced their self-worth and made them feel extremely confident in their abilities. They reported feeling more grounded, and compassionate and maintaining healthy relationships. Mental peace was a common thing all of them mentioned. Participants mentioned feeling more evolved, more balanced and accepting of their own selves. For instance, a participant said:

“I think I've become more grounded in terms of being a person, I have become more compassionate. I have started practicing healthy empathy because initially, I was practicing unhealthy empathy, the concept of putting yourself someone in someone's shoes. But I think that concept I have realized, like, those things are different” (P1, 27 year old female psychologist).

Theme 3: Perception of Others

This theme aimed to understand how the perception of other people around the participant like family and friends has started to view them and perceive them. Participants described how people around them started to respect them even more once they began their therapeutic practice. People around them understand counselling and therapy as a noble and helping profession because of this their friends and relatives often approach them to seek advice. They don't feel judged and better understood while talking with the participants. People perceive them to be wise and strong in general. An example of a verbatim of a participant was:

“Yes They're more interested , more curious that what kind of people come to you and that makes me laugh but no change as such, I believe ...they are still like the same” (P1, 27-year-old female psychologist).

Theme 4: Self-esteem

This theme tries to understand the changes in the level of self-esteem and in what areas of the participant's lives have it has had an impact. Most of the participants describe how their self- esteem improved over the course of time. They mentioned feeling proud of the profession that they are in and how they have built confidence in their skill set. Skill enhancement can therefore be understood as a crucial sub-theme. Being independent and earning in the field has also boosted their self-esteem along with better interpersonal relationships. Emotional boundaries can be identified as another important sub-theme. The participants describe their ability to take a firm stand in their personal lives and say positive no. Money has been a good self-esteem booster. Gaining experience through meaningful work has also been a common factor for most of them. A participant said:

'It's become better.... when you're able to even sit across the clients.... when you meet them for the first time and you feel like I can't handle this particular case or I don't know how to take this conversation forward... then a few sessions later you realize wait I managed to get through to this person as well it definitely adds as a good boost to your self esteem. So yeah, there's been a positive upward change in my self-esteem” (P3, 27-year-old counselling psychologist).

So I think overall, your relationships become more meaningful, because you're able to identify things that you should not be doing (P1,27 year old female clinical psychologist).

Theme 5: Self-efficacy

This theme tries to understand the changes in the level of self-efficacy and in what areas of the participant's lives have it has had an

impact. Participants mentioned a positive impact on their self-efficacy especially when they see their clients doing well. They mentioned self-efficacy being highly impacted because of constant upgradation of their skills, practice and self-work. Introspection can be identified as the most important subtheme here. Learning from mistakes has also been a factor for the participants to improve their efficacy levels. Overtime, they started believing in their abilities to handle conflicts both in their personal and professional spheres of life. Another important factor that helped the participants improve their self efficacy level was self-care and taking breaks during their practice to rewind and recharge themselves for next sessions.

“When you see clients do well, or right, or when you feel that, you know, you've been able to help someone through a distressing moment, or you know, you've been able to add some meaning to somebody's life, eventually, it does kind of contribute to a higher self efficacy rate. And when there have been days that you know, you've been able to manage your time well” (P1, 27 year old female clinical psychologist).

You are evolving as a whole. As a person, you are evolving to you as you are you can feel the self efficacy, self esteem boosting in all areas (P8, 46 year old female psychologist).

Theme 6: Self-awareness

This theme tries to understand the changes in the level of self-awareness and in what areas of the participant's life. The participants mentioned significant improvement in their level of insight and awareness about their own thoughts, emotions and actions. They mentioned that the profession of mental health has given them strategies to deal with various life situations in a more rational and effective way. The vision of life can be understood as an important sub-theme. It broadened their vision to look at life and also increased their ability to take negative feedback. Another important thing that helped the participants improve their level of awareness was seeking therapy and being under constant supervision. Increased and in-depth emotional awareness can be identified as an important sub-theme. Practising positive self-talk has also contributed to higher self-awareness which helped them manage and channel emotions in a better way. The participants mentioned that their clients are the biggest teachers who help the participants introspects after every session. A participant mentioned:

“My awareness about my own self talk has increased a lot. So now I really become aware. And I stop if it is a negative self-talk” (P9, 29 years female psychologist).

I have become so self-aware that I'm able to channelize my own negative thoughts very easily. Sometimes it happens sometimes. It's like, I'm not, I'm not happy all the time. But it's just managing has become very, very easy for me (P7, 26 year old female psychologist).

Theme 7: New Aspects Discovered

This concluding theme aimed to capture various new aspects that the participants have been able to discover about themselves overtime. Participants mentioned how they were able to feel strong and be able to derive the meaning of their lives and find a sense of purpose in their work due to being in the practice. Sense of meaning in their lives can therefore be acknowledged as an important theme. A lot of the participants mentioned how self-discovery is a beautiful ongoing process for them where they are still exploring various aspects of their personality. Mental strength can also be identified as an important subtheme.

I know one thing about me is, I'm very strong, mentally (P7, 26 year old female psychologist).

I understand what my boundaries are. How I am maybe in spaces of, you know, assertion, how I am in spaces of knowing what my needs are, and then asking for what those needs, like, what the needs require from others (P2, 30-year-old counselling psychologist).

Many of them mentioned how they have started to see themselves in totality and become mentally strong. This has in turn helped them strengthen their self-concept to such a great extent. An important sub-theme that is understanding and maintaining personal and professional boundaries has also been an important point for the participants over time and how they have discovered the importance of patience and self-care during the course of their therapeutic practice.

Discussion

Conducting qualitative research to explore the self-concept of mental health professionals practicing in Delhi NCR is an important and valuable endeavor. Mental health professionals play a crucial role in the well-being of individuals and the broader community, and understanding their own self-concept can have significant implications for their practice. The current study aims to qualitatively understand the nature of services the mental health professional provides, to reflect upon the journey of the practitioner in the field of mental health and to use a thematic research approach to get a deeper understanding of the self-concept and its underlying tenets: self-esteem, self-awareness and self-image of mental health practitioners in various kinds of setting. The findings revealed that there has clearly been a positive effect on the self concept of these psychologists and mental health professionals overtime, because of being full time therapists. It can be concluded that all participants expressed a significant positive impact on their sense of self-while providing therapeutic service. Participants mentioned the importance of self-care and constant supervision and therapy. Participants also elaborated on being more mindful of their own thoughts and actions which have led them to become a better version of themselves and gain a deeper understanding of who they are.

Participants expressed a significant change in the way they perceive themselves. They felt an incredible growth in their personal and professional growth which enhanced their self-worth and made them feel extremely confident in their abilities. They reported feeling more grounded, and compassionate and maintaining healthy relationships. They spoke of their delight in their line of work and their growing confidence in their skill set. Thus, skill development can be viewed as a key subtheme. Their self-esteem has increased as a result of independence and professional success, and their interpersonal relationships have improved. Participants spoke of how seeing their clients succeed positively affects their sense of self-efficacy. They mentioned that constant skill, practice, and self-work had a negative impact on their self-efficacy. The most significant subtheme in this is introspection. The participants reported experiencing a significant increase in their level of awareness and insight into their own thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. They mentioned that the profession of mental health has given them strategies to deal with various life situations in a more rational and effective way.

It can be understood that given the diverse population of Delhi NCR, it's important to consider the intersectionality of identities (such as gender, caste, religion, etc.) and the cultural context in which

mental health professionals operate. Future research can delve deeper into how these factors influence their self-concept and practice. Examining the coping strategies that mental health professionals use to deal with the emotional toll of their work and how these strategies affect their self-concept and longevity in the field can be explored further. Another interesting investigation could be how mental health professionals in Delhi NCR perceive their professional identity and how it relates to their self-concept. Conduct longitudinal research to track changes in the self-concept of mental health professionals over time, particularly in response to evolving social, cultural, and professional trends, can be suggested for the future along with exploring how mental health policies, regulations, and advocacy efforts in Delhi NCR impact the self-concept of professionals. This can shed light on the role of external factors in shaping their identities. Given the growing importance of digital mental health services, research how the integration of technology into their practice influences the self-concept of mental health professionals can also provide an additional understanding.

These future research directions can provide a deeper understanding of the self-concept of mental health professionals in Delhi NCR and contribute to the ongoing improvement of mental health services in the region. Additionally, it's essential to maintain ethical standards and ensure participant confidentiality while conducting qualitative research in this sensitive area.

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Ethical Statement

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Christ (Deemed to be) University, Bengaluru.

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