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Specialisation within the Specialisation? Thoughts on the Content of Contemporary Forensic Psychology Programs

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Abstract

This paper provides details of, and the rationale for, a Doctorate of Forensic Psychology recently developed at Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia. The course prioritises training in psycho-legal issues with children and young people. In discussing this program, the presenters identify two issues that guided the development of the program. The first concerns the need to delineate forensic content from that in clinical programs, while still maintaining appropriate focus on the skills needed to work effectively in forensic settings. The second addresses the need for courses to acknowledge the marked diversity among forensic clientele and to develop competencies that lead to effective work practices with these sub-groups. In constructing the Deakin forensic program, it was noted that forensic psychologists required an increasing degree of expertise in the procedural and substantive aspects of the legal system. The authors propose that as forensic psychology gains momentum as a discrete area of expertise, there is an increasing need for practitioners to have a sound understanding of the legal institutions and practices they work under, as well as being able to apply specialist knowledge to particular sub-groups. This paper discusses these issues, and outlines how the authors sought to address them in their course curriculum.

Keywords: Forensic Psychology; Programs; Forensic Courses; Doctorate

INTRODUCTION

The Doctorate of Forensic Psychology is a relatively new course at Deakin University that prioritises training in psycho-legal issues with children and young people. Established in 1999, this 3-year course is administered solely within the School of Psychology and currently accepts five new students per year on a full-time basis only. As with most other forensic masters and doctoral programs throughout Australia, entry to the course is restricted to those students who have completed a four-year sequence of study in psychology that meets state registration requirements and eligibility for Associate Membership of the Australian

Psychological Society. Entry to the course is highly competitive and is based on academic record, referee's reports, a face-to-face interview and relevant work experience.

The development of the doctoral program in forensic psychology at Deakin University was a logical progression given the existence of resources already available within the School of Psychology and the university. The School of Psychology has been providing a Master of Clinical Psychology and a Doctor of Psychology (Clinical) since 1997, and forensic psychology (particularly as it relates to

children and their families) has been a prominent area of interest and expertise among several of the school's key staff members. In fact, the first-year units that formed part of the Doctorate of Psychology (Clinical) were equally suitable for both clinical and forensic students in terms of content and case examples. Further, Deakin University has a School of Law and an Institute of Police Studies with staff members who are readily available to provide lectures in the program. Therefore, the construction of Deakin's forensic doctoral program essentially involved the supplementation of existing core clinical units with specialty forensic units in the second and third years and the establishment of specialty placements in local forensic agencies.

The current paper is divided into two parts. First, the aims, philosophy and structure of Deakin's Doctorate of Psychology (Forensic) will briefly be described (including details of the placement and thesis program). Second, some of the key issues that guided the development of the program will be discussed. These issues include; (i) the need to delineate forensic content from that in clinical programs, while still maintaining appropriate focus on the skills needed to work effectively in forensic settings and (ii) the need for doctoral courses to acknowledge the marked diversity among forensic clientele and so develop models and skills designed to work effectively with particular forensic sub-groups.

AIMS AND PHILOSOPHY OF THE COURSE

Overall, the course aims to produce graduates who have:

- 1) general knowledge and skills required by psychological practitioners
- 2) knowledge of, and competence in, the theory and practice of psychological assessment (with particular emphasis on issues pertaining to forensic populations)
- 3) knowledge and awareness of the ethical principles of psychological practice
- 4) specialist knowledge of the law/ legal system, and psychology's role in it
- 5) advanced understanding of the specific forensic issues raised by children and adolescents
- 6) knowledge and practical experience in the assessment and treatment of offenders and victims (particularly young offenders/victims and their families) within a range of forensic settings
- 7) strong abilities to design and conduct major research projects
- 8) experience working in the kinds of multi-disciplinary professional teams that are increasingly common in forensic settings

It should be noted that the above-mentioned aims were developed to meet the requirements of the Psychologist Registration Board as well as accreditation by the Australian Psychological Society and the College of Forensic Psychologists (APS accreditation was granted in 2000). In other words, the course was designed to enable graduates to develop the requisite academic, practical and research skills to enter the profession as a forensic psychologist (particularly in the area of children and their families within a legal context), either in private practice or as an employee of one of the many government or non-government agencies that employ forensic psychologists in this country. These aims are facilitated by the strong links between the university's School of Psychology and academics and practitioners of psychology working in other parts of the University and in the community. For example, several full-time practicing forensic psychologists are involved in the teaching, supervision of practical work, and in joint supervision of research theses.

The philosophy underlying the course is consistent with the ethos of the scientist/practitioner model. On completion of the course, students are expected to be familiar with existent tensions between the disciplines of psychology and law and the way these emerge and are reconciled in applied settings, and the processing sites where psychological input is utilised. In addition, students are expected to have gained the knowledge and practical skills needed to play a meaningful role as forensic practitioners in the criminal justice system. This role necessarily involves the ability to evaluate and define a client problem (prior to the commencement of therapy), to formulate intervention goals and specific strategies, and to implement and evaluate

the strategies adopted. This approach necessarily places an emphasis on research skills (to determine the effectiveness of prescribed interventions with different client groups) as well as more practical (hands-on) skills involved in the assessment and treatment of clients.

The Doctorate of Psychology (Forensic) at Deakin University requires 24 credit points. Table 1 displays the specific units that make up the course. Each unit listed in this table is allocated one credit point.

STRUCTURE OF THE COURSE

Table 1.
Units and Outline of Doctoral Course Structure

<i>Year 1</i>					
Sem 1	HPS977 Interview and Intervention Strategies	HPS979 Psychological Assessment	HPS978 Biol. & Neuro-psychological Perspectives on Disorder	HPS914 Studies in Psychopathology	
Sem 2	HPS948 Forensic Placement 1 and Case Analysis Seminar 1 (25 days)	HPS907 Applied Methodology	HPS976 Professional Issues in Psychology	HPS921 Thesis	
<i>Year 2</i>					
Sem 1	HPS932 Forensic Placement 2 (50 days)	HPS933 Assessment and Treatment of Forensic Clients	HPS934 Psychology and the Law	HPS921 Thesis	
Sem 2	HPS935 Forensic Placement 3 (50 days)	HPS936 Psychosocial Issues in Forensic Psychology and Case Analysis Seminar 2	HPS921 Thesis	HPS921 Thesis	
<i>Year 3</i>					
Sem 1	HPS943 Child and Family Forensic Placement 1 and Case Conference Seminar A (50 days)		HPS944 Children and the Law	HPS931 Thesis	HPS931 Thesis
Sem 2	HPS945 Child and Family Forensic Placement 2 and Case Conference Seminar B (50 days)		HPS931 Thesis	HPS931 Thesis	HPS931 Thesis

As can be seen in Table 1, the course involves three inter-related strands: theory (advanced coursework), research, and practice with approximately one-third of the course being devoted to each of these aspects. Although the course is primarily a research degree, it differs from a Ph.D in that its orientation addresses clinical practice rather than purely membership of the

academy. Those coursework units offered in the first semester (Year 1) provide information on the biological and neuropsychological aspects of diagnosis, and psychological assessment, intervention and psychopathology. These skills are considered necessary for students to have sufficient theoretical expertise to complete their first placement and to commence work on their thesis.

Aside from academic requirements, units at this level place a heavy emphasis on observational learning (using video and one-way screens) and the practice and application of clinical skills. The first placement is observational and involves 25 days rotation amongst various forensic agencies and institutions, the courts, community correctional settings, and a hospital setting. Concurrent with this placement, students complete units on the mechanics of professional practice and advanced research methods and statistical analysis.

As students enter their second year of placements, their coursework assumes a purely forensic orientation. Here students complete a unit outlining the assessment and intervention of a wide range of forensic clients and another unit entitled 'Psychology and the Law'. This latter subject provides an introduction to civil and criminal law, as well as the various processing stages where forensic psychologists play a role. The third specialty unit focuses on the role that socio-cultural factors play in the lives of young offenders and victims. At present, the coursework is offered solely through the School of Psychology, with the assistance of guest lecturers from agencies such as the Children's Court Clinic, the Department of Justice, and private practitioners. Staff from the Law Faculty and the Police Studies program at Deakin University also provide some of the lectures.

The empirical research thesis is completed in Semesters 2-6. This length of time was considered necessary given the nature and size of the project (about 50 000 words) which is slightly smaller in scope than that expected of a typical Ph.D thesis. The primary areas of research among students in the program to date have been eyewitness memory and suggestibility, the aetiology of offending behaviour, the design and evaluation of offender treatment programs, and the effects of trauma and maltreatment on children and adolescents. In addition to the empirical thesis, however, students are required to submit a 20 000 to 30 000 word practical thesis for external examination alongside their empirical thesis. This practical thesis consists of an essay for the Professional issues unit along with four placement reports that are linked by an introduction, commentary and rationale. The aim of this practical thesis is to ensure that the students have the ability to critically analyse and evaluate complex issues that arise in professional practice and can demonstrate a critical understanding of the theoretical models underpinning their work.

Placements 2 and 3 (conducted in Year 2 of the course) provide students with face-to-face contact with a wide range of client problems, age ranges (including children, adolescents and the elderly) and forensic settings (e.g., civil, criminal, community and institutional settings). Placement agencies previously involved in the program include Caraniche Forensic Psychology Services, Family Court Counselling, Gatehouse Centre for the Assessment and Treatment of Child Abuse, Juvenile Justice Remand Centre, MAPPS Program (Male Adolescent Program for Positive Sexuality), Oakvale Forensic Psychology Service, and the Thomas Embling Hospital (Acute Unit). While one of the 2nd-year placements must involve adult clients, the fourth and fifth placements are conducted at specialist agencies whose major focus is the treatment of child and family problems within a psycho-legal framework. In these placements, students are expected to carry their own caseload under supervision. Contracts are drawn up that clearly specify the skills to be taught and the responsibilities of the student and placement supervisor. The placements and thesis components are marked on a pass/fail basis and are supervised jointly by a university and field-based supervisor. These placements coincide with the final coursework unit entitled Children and the Law which provides specialist training in the assessment and treatment of children and adolescents within forensic settings.

Following this brief outline of the program's structure and content, we will now discuss some of the issues that have emerged during the two years that the doctorate has been in operation. The first of these concerns the distinction between pure 'clinical' skills and specialist forensic competencies.

THE CLINICAL – FORENSIC OVERLAP

Specialist courses are based on the premise that they impart unique theoretical knowledge and practical skills. The issue that emerges when constructing and administering a graduate program in forensic psychology however, is the extent to which the knowledge base of forensic practitioners overlaps with that of clinical psychologists. As the more established specialist stream in psychological practice, clinical psychology provides a strong basis for the emergence of many other specialities. Determining the ways that content in a new forensic program should overlap with, or diverge from, that in clinical courses is a crucial decision

that plays a significant role in the market's view of a program's graduates. It is also a decision that is made difficult by the ongoing uncertainty about what in fact constitutes the essential elements and epistemological boundaries of clinical specialities (see Sandford & Pritchard, 1994; Lovibond, 1994 for useful outlines of such debates).

As the key staff involved in the construction of the Doctorate of Psychology (Forensic) at Deakin University, we have become aware over the past two years that practitioners occasionally query the competencies of forensic graduates on the basis of the differences between clinical and forensic programs. In a small number of cases, these queries manifest in a resistance to forensic specialties in general. We argue that these doubts or uncertainties may result in part from a lack of familiarity with the course content of forensic doctorates (i.e., the significant overlap between forensic and clinical courses) and the competencies shared by graduates of both clinical and forensic courses. For example, like graduates of clinical programs, forensic doctoral graduates are generally well versed in the principles of the scientist-practitioner model; they have experience and expertise with psychological testing, client assessment, report writing, research design, and counseling. In fact, as mentioned above, students in Deakin's clinical and forensic doctorates complete the same coursework units in their first year of study. However, forensic students are generally distinct from clinical students in that they also bring an in-depth understanding of the legal system to their practice. This knowledge has many advantages, and extends to substantive law, legal procedure, terminology, institutions and wider jurisprudential issues. Given this background, if senior practitioners in criminal or civil arenas have any reservations about the knowledge base and competencies of forensic graduates, we feel we speak for all forensic course co-ordinators when we request that these specific areas be clearly identified. Only then can these uncertainties or reservations be allayed.

So what impact does the addition of forensic specialty courses have on students' work prospects? Is there a risk that the market will be saturated? The Department of Education, Employment and Training and Youth Affairs (DEETYA) in its recent reports entitled Australia's Workforce in the Year 2001 and Australia's Workforce 2005 identified psychology as the fastest growing professional group in its comprehensive review of changes in patterns of work in Australia. The reports estimated that job opportunities for psychologists

would rise from 3891 in 1986 to 8461 in 2001 and 13,400 (minimum) in 2005. These forecasts are extremely questionable because the main basis for them is the number of students enrolled in first year psychology courses. They are not based on an analysis of what the community or the market needs or can absorb. Checking the predictions against the actuality shows these doubts to be well founded: the profession of psychology is not growing that fast. Nevertheless, there does appear to be an increasing demand for psychologists, and forensic psychologists in particular are becoming increasingly sought after for three reasons. First, there seems to be an increasing acknowledgement among potential employers of the need for the specialist knowledge/skills that forensic graduates provide. Second, as the funding of universities has become more competitive and cut-throat, senior university staff have become increasingly aware of the importance of addressing the needs of the marketplace when designing course curriculum. Third, as forensic courses become more established there is increasing movement of forensic graduates to more senior (policy-making) positions. In this dynamic climate, the challenge for course-coordinators is to maintain the quality of graduates, and to ensure that students complete forensic programs with the ability to work with the range of clients that is encountered in practical settings. This latter point leads us to its final issue of discussion; that of specialisation.

SPECIALISATION WITHIN THE SPECIALISATION

As already discussed, the Deakin forensic doctorate has a specialist focus on children and adolescents. This direction was primarily adopted because of the interests and experience of teaching staff. However, it was also felt that, as forensic psychology gains professional acceptance as a discrete speciality, it will become increasingly important for practitioners to have in-depth knowledge of particular client groups. As one of the fastest growing areas of psychology, the forensic stream has the potential to be applied in domains that were previously solely occupied by clinical and/or generalist psychologists. When this occurs, the market will expect forensic psychologists to bring quantifiable skills and expertise to the legal system. With this in mind, and given that it is not possible to impart highly specialist knowledge in all aspects of forensic psychology in a three year course, the Deakin program aims to produce graduates who have expertise in many aspects of forensic practice, but specialist knowledge of the many unique

psycho-legal issues that children and adolescents bring to the system.

We consider the focus on children and adolescents to be particularly important given the legal system's neglect in general of children and young people as a client group. This problem has been increasingly recognized in recent research (e.g., see Grisso 1996, 1997, 1998). Issues such as competence to stand trial, consent to medical treatment (and other procedures), the age (and notion) of criminal responsibility, children's suggestibility in interview situations, children as providers of testimony in civil and criminal matters, the widespread adoption of 'best interests' criteria in civil law involving young people, and a cross-jurisdictional reversion to punitive sentencing approaches with serious young offenders all raise developmental issues that are inextricably linked with psycho-legal concerns. What is required in this volatile period is practitioners who can identify and address these substantive issues in a way that meets the legal system's procedures and objectives.

Currently Deakin University offers the only forensic program in Australia that provides specialist training with this client group despite the fact that a significant proportion of forensic psychologists work directly with child and adolescent populations. We propose that as forensic psychology gains momentum as a discrete area of expertise, and establishes a discrete identity from clinical streams, there will be an increasing need for practitioners to have both a sound understanding of the legal system, as well as the ability to apply this knowledge to particular client sub-groups.

CONCLUSION

In constructing and implementing the Doctorate of Psychology (Deakin), we have been mindful of the need for candidates to be exposed to clinical and forensic content, while also maintaining a balance between research skills and clinical competencies. This paper has described our objectives for the program, and the process of putting these objectives into place. Our discussion noted the challenge for forensic graduates to demonstrate the unique skills they bring, while also challenging senior clinical practitioners to identify any critical skills they feel that forensic graduates do not typically possess. Only then, can programs address these.

University courses must be responsive to the needs of today's dynamic and demanding employment

market. This is particularly true for forensic courses that are, in effect, introducing graduates with new competencies to the professional market. After three intakes, and leading into our first stream of graduates in 2001, Deakin's doctoral program has already evolved somewhat from its inception. As the needs of the market are more clearly identified, it is likely that aspects of the doctorate will continue to evolve. What we feel confident about, however, is that forensic psychologists bring important skills to the legal system, and that those with specialist training with particular client groups will be in increasing demand in years to come.

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