



An immodest proposal

Eighteenth Century writer Jonathan Swift is known to most people today as the author of a 'children's fantasy story', *Gulliver's Travels*. Gulliver was actually a satirical novel addressed to intelligent adults, and the third and fourth of Gulliver's imaginary voyages (mostly omitted from children's versions) contain some of the most savage indictments of humanity ever written. In 1729, Swift published an equally savage essay called *A Modest Proposal*, in which he suggested that the problem of poverty could be solved by using the unwanted children of the poor as food. In making the proposal (which he ironically called 'modest', meaning 'reasonable', or 'uncontroversial'), he drew attention to his contemporaries' cruel indifference to massive social inequality. Of course most counsellors are not particularly interested in literature (although they should be, since creative writers deal constantly, and insightfully, with many of the issues that preoccupy our profession), but I have chosen to begin with Swift in order to explain my own title. I am fully aware of how grandiose and unrealistic my 'proposal' sounds. But I hope that, by advancing it here, I may draw attention (as Swift did two hundred years ago) to a problem which stubbornly remains in the 'too hard basket'.

In previous columns, I've drawn attention to some of the strengths and weaknesses of training within the major helping professions in this country. To summarise bluntly:

Psychology provides no training in counselling skills at undergraduate level. It selects students for Honours and postgraduate programs solely on academic criteria (there are a few praiseworthy exceptions), without consideration of a student's interpersonal skills, capacity for empathy, emotional maturity, or life experience. In the scientist-practitioner model, science is primary and practitioner skills are of secondary importance (despite which many psychologists graduate with a paper-thin veneer of 'science' and an intense dislike for statistical methods). When training in counselling is provided, at postgraduate level, as part of the pathway to registration it teaches an instrumental, technique-oriented approach which pays only lip service to the creation of a therapeutic relationship. Those psychology graduates who become good counsellors are overwhelmingly the ones who seek training in counselling and psychotherapy after they begin to work as psychologists.

Despite all of this, psychology has established itself as a high status occupation, with good salaries and career prospects for graduates. The profession has also worked hard to create the belief that only psychologists (because they practise an evidence-based approach) can offer counselling that is both effective and ethical. The reality is that psychologists are no better at counselling than anyone else, despite their grounding in cognitive science, and many of them fail their clients from the outset because they do not recognise that lasting change takes place not simply because evidence-based techniques are employed, but because clients feel heard and understood — something that depends heavily on the self-awareness and relational skills of the helper. In brain terms, psychology's is a 'left hemisphere approach' to human change (Crago, 2012), insufficient in itself.

Social work is traditionally attractive to students who wish to help others, rectify injustices, or give something back to the community. Social work programs offer a limited introduction to counselling skills in the form of individual casework and group work units. However, counselling is only one element within social work training, which focuses on social policy, social justice and social determinants of poverty, disadvantage and dysfunction. Just as many psychology graduates will work as organisational psychologists, forensic psychologists or educational psychologists (roles in which ongoing counselling may play little or no part) so social work graduates will perform a variety of roles in social policy development, case

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management, community advocacy and service coordination (in some of which counselling skills may be useful, but not central). In this country, social work programs have often discouraged students from seeing themselves primarily as one-to-one counsellors or therapists, because many social work educators believe that therapeutic work risks 'blaming the victims' for wider social dysfunctions. Though not achieving the prestige of psychology, social work is nevertheless a well-established profession with career ladders and a range of employment possibilities. Yet once again, those social work graduates who go on to become good counsellors usually do so because they have accessed training in counselling, or in specific therapeutic approaches, subsequent to their original professional training.

Counsellors should be selected rigorously on the basis of their aptitude for a relational approach to helping. Training programs that take the PACFA guidelines seriously will select students with good social skills, empathy, transparency and openness to constructive criticism. Although intelligence remains important, counselling programs will also recognise that maturity (as measured in both chronological age and reflected-upon life experience) are significant 'pluses' in a would-be helper of others. Here is another thing that distinguishes counselling training from psychology or social work training — the latter professions admit large numbers of school leavers compared with mature-age entrants; other things being equal, counselling programs should favour the latter over the former. Competent counselling training programs include sequenced, structured skills practice and provide for extensive feedback to individual students on their strengths and weaknesses, as well as offering placements in which substantial counselling of real clients must be undertaken. For properly trained counsellors, emotional support, as well as challenge, continues throughout the

helping relationship. However, there are few positions specifically for counsellors, and those that do exist mostly offer pay that is pathetically inadequate for the level of skill and responsibility required. Career prospects for counsellors are almost non-existent, and counsellors are seen by many employers as less qualified, less professional, and less reliable than social workers or psychologists.

Here we have the paradox. Provided stringent selection procedures have been followed, and adequate standards required throughout the program (meaning that students who cannot demonstrate a level of competence appropriate to a beginning counsellor are not permitted to proceed to a clinical placement), counselling graduates ought to be better counsellors than graduates of the other two professions. They ought to be better able to make use of their learning opportunities as practitioners because of their well-developed self-awareness. They should make better use of professional supervision, because it has been built into their training as well as their placements. They should be more adept at responding flexibly to widely differing client personalities and needs than a graduate trained in a 'one size fits all' model of helping. But despite all this, counsellors continue to miss out.

It is unrealistic to expect that the psychology or social work professions will, in the near future (or ever) admit that a counsellor might be better equipped for a counselling role than one of their own graduates. As stand-alone counselling gradually gains credibility in the academic and employment spheres, a trickle of psychology and social work graduates have begun to enrol in Graduate Diploma or Masters degrees in Counselling, recognising that their existing training has been inadequate for their current clinical responsibilities. But this does not go nearly far enough to rectify the situation. So here is my 'immodest proposal'.

What if post-graduate programs in counselling were to replace postgraduate counselling training components within psychology? What if, in fact, a two year post graduate program taught by counsellor educators became a key plank in the preparation of psychology graduates for membership of the College of Counselling Psychologists? This would leave academic psychologists to teach what they know best — the 'cognitive science' of psychology, leading to research degrees and careers as researchers and academics. The scientific basis of the training of new psychologists, which that profession so highly values, would be left untouched. But the counselling components would be taught by practising counsellors who are also university faculty or adjunct faculty, whose expertise is in people and relationships, not scientific research and publication.

Even more arrogantly, I would argue that counselling staff (not psychology staff) should be empowered to conduct a selection process for would-be counselling psychologists — a process in which emotional maturity, self-awareness, interpersonal skills and empathy would be recognised as vital, and in which candidates who lacked these qualities would not be admitted. While this might mean that many applicants would fail to gain admission to a counselling psychology program, it would also mean that those who did would be far better equipped to practice competently, compassionately and ethically than is currently the case. The reputation of psychologists would rise, not fall, as a result.

The situation with social work is somewhat different. As I pointed out above, social work training does include at least an introduction to one-to-one and group counselling, where undergraduate psychology does not. Moreover, a higher proportion of social work students will possess at least some of the personal and relational capacities that

a counsellor needs. Yet, as with psychology, many will have been drawn to a 'helping' role for the wrong reasons, and without personal awareness of the personal and family issues that drive their desire to 'help people' or 'achieve social justice'. What if social workers who wished to specialise in casework or group work were required to undertake a postgraduate training in counselling, following completion of their social work qualification? This might take the form of a specialist Master's level program within Social Work schools, like the Master's degree currently offered jointly by the University of New South Wales and Relationships Australia; or it might take the form of enrolment in a generalist counsellor education program (unfortunately, many who enrol in specialised postgraduate programs in family therapy, art therapy and even individual psychotherapy have not mastered basic counselling skills and understandings, even though they already possess degrees in a recognised helping profession).

As I've already hinted, all of this would depend heavily upon our own counselling programs measuring up. We cannot possibly propose ourselves as an alternative further education pathway for psychology and social work graduates unless we are selecting our students rigorously, monitoring their skills development, and insisting on clear attainment of academic standards in reflective assignment writing, as well as clear attainment of clinical competence in placement settings.

It is by raising, not lowering, our standards that we can begin to be seen as a 'third alternative' to the two longer-established helping professions, and begin to work co-operatively with them and their graduates to ensure that clients across the board are better served than they are now. In this upgrading of our training, the quality of the actual staff — the educators — will be crucial, and that will be the subject of my next column.

References

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Hugh Crago was senior lecturer in counselling at the University of Western Sydney from 2004 to 2011. He is a graduate of Antioch/New England Graduate School (USA), which taught the 'relational art' of counselling within a Master of Counselling Psychology program recognised by the American Psychological Association. Hugh is a psychotherapist, couple counsellor and group therapist in Blackheath, NSW.
snoogle@mpx.com.au