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What are the Benefits of Longer Training in Psychology?

A Comment on Helmes and Wilmoth (2002)

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Abstract

Helmes and Wilmoth (2002) assert that the Australian model of educating psychologists is inadequate. They advocate adoption of the North American model. Their advocacy ignores the fact that the effectiveness of advanced professional training in psychology has not been demonstrated, and the fact that psychology practitioners from all parts of the world value supervised work with clients above formal courses as a positive influence on professional development. If we wish to increase the competence and effectiveness of psychologists, it is more appropriate that we restructure our entry-level education so that it emphasises real-world problem solving and hands-on work with clients than that we increase the duration of entry-level education.

What are the Benefits of Longer Training in Psychology?

A Comment on Helmes and Wilmoth (2002)

Helmes and Wilmoth (2002, p. 52) believe that “the common model for entry-level practice in psychology in Australia of 4 years of training with 2 years of supervised work experience is inadequate.” They appear to base their conclusion on the fact that more preparation is required in Canada and the United States than is required in Australia. They also express some concern that psychologists who disagree with them “may react negatively to any comparison with North America as a matter of principle” (p. 54). Well, we disagree with Helmes and Wilmoth, but not because we devalue things North American. Indeed, one of us (MJD) was born in North America and obtained his honours and masters qualifications from Canadian universities. He returned to North America after completing an Australian PhD in order to pursue post-doctoral clinical training at an American university. Not only do we value advanced training in psychology, we value the kind of advanced training that is only available in North America.

So why do we disagree with Helmes and Wilmoth? We disagree because they have failed to provide or review any evidence that the North American training model produces more effective psychologists than the Australian training model. As far as we know, there is no evidence that Canadian or American psychologists are more effective than Australian ones. Nor is it true, as suggested by Helmes and Wilmoth (2002, p. 54), that there is “limited available research” on the effectiveness of additional training. The problem is not the low number of studies—there is, in fact, a substantial research literature on this topic (e.g., Stein & Lambert, 1995)—but the limited support that these studies provide for advocates of longer training.

If Helmes and Wilmoth had considered the available evidence, what would they have found? They would have discovered that research has failed to provide reliable evidence for the effectiveness of additional professional training (Sherman, 1999). For example, Atkins and Christensen (2001, p. 128) reviewed research on paraprofessional effectiveness and the impact of training on client outcome. They concluded that “paraprofessionals have repeatedly demonstrated successful therapeutic change in clients, even when they have received no specific training in therapeutic procedures.” Although there is some evidence that “professional therapists may have an advantage ... in client retention, longer lasting effects, or greater impact on clients’ total functioning, ... the data up to this point have not shown an impact of experience and training in general.” It is clearly incorrect to assume that more training in professional psychology equates to better performance as a professional psychologist. As Beutler and Kendell (1995, p. 180) point out, “time is not isomorphic with quality of training and experience.” Why not? Because temporal training criteria ignore the much more important issues of what is trained and how it is trained.

In the absence of clear evidence for the overall effectiveness of training, we think that the reason for advocating longer formal education in psychology must be something other than a concern for the effectiveness of psychologists. The most important motive in Helmes and Wilmoth’s (2002, p. 54) paper is their concern that the “lack of advanced training is having a negative impact on the overall professional status of psychology in Australia.” They share the view of Lancaster and Smith (2002, p. 49), who recently observed that “longer training requirements ... increase the status of the profession and distinguish psychology from some health professions.” Indeed, based on our own experiences as masters and doctoral level psychologists, we would

have to agree that professional status is enhanced by a doctoral qualification and that it is more congenial to occupy a higher than a lower status position. What we would question is whether the possibility of enhanced professional status is sufficient reason to extend professional education by two or more years, and whether extending professional education is the most effective and efficient way of enhancing the status of psychologists. If we are very open-minded, we might even question whether the professional status of psychologists deserves to be enhanced.

If we consider what conditions determine the status of any given profession, we discover that the length of professional training must be one of the least important influences. For most professions in Australia, including dentistry, education, law, and psychology (among many others), the entry-level qualification is a four-year degree. For medicine, the entry-level qualification may be a four-year graduate entry degree (e.g., University of Sydney) or a six-year undergraduate degree (e.g., University of Western Australia). Because members of each of these professions may all hold only a four-year qualification in their discipline, any differences in professional status cannot be attributed to the minimum university-based study period required to join the given professions.

It is well beyond the scope of this article to review the conditions that affect social and professional status, but one thing that may contribute to professional status is professional competence. If there is a positive relationship between competence and status, then one way to achieve a deserved enhancement in the professional status of psychologists would be to enhance our professional competency. In the context of clinical psychology, enhancing competence is more likely to be achieved by restructuring what is taught, and how teaching is done, during the first four years of education than by increasing the duration of professional education. Where education

in psychology differs most profoundly from education in medicine, dentistry, and other clinical professions is in its eschewal of problem-focussed, skills-based work with real-world clients presenting for help with real-world problems. Unlike psychology, other clinical professions have drawn a distinction between a professional education and an education in the basic sciences that underpin the profession. So long as professional psychology continues to confound these educational objectives and to confound the duration of education with the quality of education, we may not deserve to have our professional status enhanced.

Finally, we know that psychologists, including North American psychologists, value their experience in therapy with clients above all other sources of knowledge in having a positive influence on their development as psychotherapists (Orlinsky, Botermans, & Ronnestad, 2001). We also know that psychologists regard taking courses or seminars as less important than obtaining supervision, getting personal therapy, having a life, and discussing cases with colleagues in shaping their professional development (Orlinsky et al., 2001). But despite our collective belief that these are the most important influences on our professional development, none of these essential ingredients for professional development is a required component of our entry-level education in psychology. If we are going to change the educational requirements for psychologists, we don't need more of the same; we need to provide our students with the kind of hands-on professional development experiences that contribute to professional efficacy.

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