THE CREATION OF THE PUBLIC IMAGE OF PSYCHOLOGISTS: AN
APPLIED PSYCHOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION

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This thesis is presented for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Murdoch University

2009
I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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ABSTRACT

The public image of psychologists has been thrown into sharp focus recently due to the increasing importance of mental health care in the community. Recent changes to the Medicare system in Australia that have increased psychologists’ involvement in the provision of mental health interventions, and debate in the profession regarding the training of future psychologists have intensified this focus. The current thesis is an applied psychological investigation presenting four separate but thematically connected studies investigating the issue of the public image of psychologists.

This thesis begins from the premise that the public perception of psychologists is formed by the interaction of many different sources of information and experience; it explores how intersecting perspectives, agendas, and sources of information work together in the formation of shared social understandings of what psychology is. Using a methodological approach based on social representations theory, the thesis addresses the issue of public perception of psychologists and psychology in a range of different sites, in order to produce a multifaceted, contextually sensitive understanding of the construct.

The first study investigated possible methodological approaches that can be used when examining public perception and recommended the qualitative approach as an adjunct to the previously employed quantitative studies. Previous quantitative studies have outlined the confusion that exists in understanding the roles of psychologists and psychiatrists, and the first study in this thesis confirmed this finding from a qualitative perspective.

The second study presented an analysis of the role of psychology’s major professional
association in Australia, the APS, on the public image of psychology. A number of prominent themes on the APS website including the difference between psychologists and psychiatrists, the accessibility of psychologists, and the effectiveness of psychological interventions were discussed and a range of extracts were analysed to show some of the ways in which the APS actively manages the public image of psychologists in order to promote and advance the profession. The third study provided a contrasting example of the APS tailoring their message to a very specific audience by analysing a series of written submissions to the Australian federal government to advocate on behalf of psychologists for the inclusion of psychological interventions on the Medicare rebate. The final study investigated General Practitioners’ (GPs’) perceptions of psychologists, particularly in light of the recent Medicare changes in Australia. The data suggested that GPs find the current system cumbersome, and that these major ‘gatekeepers’ of mental health care often lack a clear understanding of the specific skills and training of psychologists.

One of the major themes surrounding the public perception of psychologists revealed in this thesis was the interplay between the already existing confusion in the public mind about the role of psychologists, and the efforts of the APS to actively promote a broad role for psychologists as providers of both general counselling and specialist mental health services. These findings were used to argue for further investigation into the issue of public perception of psychology, and to engage with current debates within psychology in Australia about the importance of finding a balance between presenting a flexible public face of psychology (resulting in a broad referral base), and propagating a more tightly drawn public face of the profession (potentially restricting market share but
helping to sharpen the somewhat indistinct public image of the profession) (Littlefield, 2009).
# ABSTRACT


# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS


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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my supervisor Ngaire Donaghue who has provided expert guidance, advice, and support. In the first instance Ngaire you vouched for my ability to complete this project which was an integral part of having my application for candidature accepted. I can’t tell you how much your faith in me at that early stage contributed to the overall success of this project from my end. You had the happy knack of breaking down the size of the task, and allowing me to think I was close, even when I was a long way off - and for convincing me that I was really close, when I was sort of getting close. It is also good to know that there are significantly fewer rogue apostrophes’ wreaking havoc out there in the world of words’ thank’s to your tireless efforts’ (just teasing). Thank you also for your encouragement to publish some of these chapters along the way; I have enjoyed the experience enormously.

I would also like to thank the institution of Murdoch University which provided me with the chance to complete a PhD. You took a punt on me when I was accepted into the Clinical Masters program nearly 10 years ago and I would like to think I have repaid that debt in my subsequent clinical career. Similarly, you have taken a punt on my academic abilities, and I look forward to repaying that debt to you and the profession of psychology in the years ahead.

To all the librarians at the Townsille Hospital Library – particularly Bronia, Margaret and Evon – thank you for your unfailing assistance with sourcing journal articles, books
and other miscellaneous documents. You have made the task of writing this thesis significantly more achievable.

Thanks also to the participants who contributed their valuable time and ideas during my interviews. Your honesty and commitment to your vocation has contributed enormously to the integrity of my data.

Finally, I would like to thank my wife, Kate, who has provided unfailing love, support and the more than occasional bit of proofreading. You have accepted the weekend and evening hours I have devoted to this piece of work with your usual loving and optimistic outlook, and I look forward to reinvesting my energy into our beautiful family and the life we are creating.

For Kate