

FINAL REPORT TO THE AER FOUNDATION
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT GRANT – ANGELA HAIN

Doctoral Thesis: The Influence of Social-Cognitive, Personality and Comorbidity Factors on the Drinking Behaviour of Young People in Australia

Project Supervisor: Dr. Rivka Witenberg, The Australian Catholic University

The doctoral thesis project was completed on the 24th of July 2009 and submitted to the Australian, Catholic University for examination. This report provides an overview of the project as required by the Alcohol Education and Rehabilitation Foundation.

Project Supervisor's comments

The doctoral training program undertaken by Angela Hain involved the completion of nine coursework, five clinical placements, and five thesis units. Specialising in the area of clinical psychology, the coursework subjects aimed to enhance her understanding of psychological assessment, case formulation and treatment interventions for individuals with mild to severe mental health issues. Subjects undertaken, and successfully completed, were:

- Clinical Assessment,
- Psychopathology,
- Research Methods in Psychology,
- Approaches to Counselling and Therapy,
- Interventions for Children, Youth and Families,
- Adult Clinical Assessment,
- Clinical Interventions,
- Clinical Health Psychology and
- Applied Professional Skills.

Grounded in the scientist-practitioner model, the clinical placements aimed to increase Angela Hain's ability to independently deliver evidence-based psychological assessments and treatments in mental health settings. In undertaking this study, Angela successfully completed 1500 hours of psychological practice involving clinical interviewing, administration of assessment batteries, report writing and therapeutic intervention. Individual sessions of cognitive behavioural therapy were delivered to clients with anxiety, depressive and substance related issues; under the direct supervision of a registered psychologist. During the final year of candidature, Angela also gained increased knowledge of psychological theories related to group interventions and direct experience facilitating therapeutic groups with eating, psychotic and personality disorder clients in more challenging psychiatric and forensic settings. Clinical supervision with qualified practicing psychologists and case conferences with other psychology interns were integral components of the clinical training. These were attended regularly by Angela throughout her candidature.

The completion of the five doctoral thesis units also enhanced Angel Hain's understanding of research methods in the area of clinical psychology and the topic of alcohol misuse.

In undertaking these subjects, Angela was required to independently develop a research proposal based on a critical review of scientific literature and psychological practice on alcohol misuse.

Following approval, she was required to recruit and administer the standardised research protocol to the population of interest and prepare the data for statistical analysis. This involved the development of a research database, coding and data entry, and advanced statistical analysis of quantitative results. The completion of these subjects allowed for the preparation of the final 50 000 word doctoral thesis comprising of a literature review, detail of research processes, findings and recommendations. The fulfilment these academic requirements of the doctoral course led to the grantee's eligibility for registration as a psychologist with the Psychologists Board of Victoria.

Minor problems were encountered with data collection with regard to the recruitment of YSAS participants. The recruitment took longer than anticipated and consequently a smaller number of YSAS participants were involved in the study than at first was anticipated. That is, only fifty youth substance abuse clients were recruited to participate in the research. It was essential that Angela also met other time commitments to finalise the thesis and as her supervisor I advised her against continuing to pursue a larger sample for two reasons. Firstly, because the number of participants was sufficient to conduct some meaningful analyses to better understand this particular group of young people and secondly, because of the exploratory nature of the study.

Angela Hain's comments

The completion of a three year doctoral training program allowed me to advance the clinical knowledge and research skills I had gained during my undergraduate psychology degrees. Specifically, the additional training provided me with the opportunity to apply my knowledge of psychological theory directly into clinical practice. This occurred during my practicum units where I practiced as a provisional psychologist in a range of community, outpatient and inpatient settings. In undertaking these roles, I gained valuable experience in the psychological assessment, diagnostic formulation and comprehensive treatment of mental health clients. Cases were formulated from a bio-psychosocial framework, focusing on the combined role of biology, the person and the environment in the development of pathology. Accordingly, treatment involved cognitive-behavioural psychological treatments which were administered alongside medical and practical interventions delivered by a multidisciplinary treatment team.

Through this experience, I acquired personal confidence in developing and delivering individualised treatment plans for differing age groups of clients with a variety of mental health issues. In addition to conducting individual therapeutic work, the training also provided me with the opportunity to facilitate group therapeutic interventions. To further enhance my understanding of these treatment approaches and provide feedback on my skills, I was required to undertake clinical supervision from numerous registered psychologists who were trained in a range of specialised psychological therapies. During my supervision sessions, I was exposed to valuable ideas and resources which not only shaped my clinical understanding on the professional and legal roles of a psychologist, but greatly enhanced my self-awareness as a clinician.

My supervision sessions also gave me a space to reflect critically on theories of abnormal psychology and allowed me to develop my own personal style of psychological practice. This increased awareness of evidence based assessment and treatment was drawn upon in the development and preparation of the ideas outlined in my doctoral thesis.

In addition to shaping my professional interests and the focus of my thesis, the academic demands of my candidature also greatly enhanced my research and analytical skills. Specifically, carrying out a large scale psychological study required me to extend on my research design, recruitment, data collection and statistical analysis skills by reviewing literature and consulting with my research supervisor for expert advice. Whilst my planning of the project was comprehensive, numerous unforeseeable obstacles arose during the project. Having to overcome these, with the assistance of my research supervisor, was another beneficial learning experience which greatly enhanced my critical thinking, practical problem solving, negotiation, project and time management skills. In addition to these capacities, a number of personal qualities had to be drawn upon to complete the doctoral project. These included ongoing initiative, motivation, determination, responsibility and flexibility. I believe the ongoing use of these qualities and the experience has increased my confidence in my ability to undertake independent research and write lengthy academic reports. I believe this will benefit any additional scientific publications I may pursue from the current project and any potential research posts I may seek for future employment.

Completion of the research project, coursework and doctoral placements, also advanced my professional maturity through increased communication and collaboration with interdisciplinary teams of clinicians and researchers in the addictions and mental health fields. Professionally, the completion of the remaining practicum and thesis units, as funded by the AER professional development grant, has led to my eligibility for registration with psychologists registration boards in Australia and the Australian Psychological Society's Clinical College. This recognition will provide me with the opportunity to practice independently and gain further experience as a clinical psychologist during my career.

The project

The first aim of the project was to examine the role of personality, cognitive and psychological distress factors in maintaining problematic drinking in young Australians. In order to provide a measure of the variables, a questionnaire booklet was compiled consisting of statistically sound standardised self-report questionnaires. These were completed by study participants and results were analysed by the grantee.

When participant responses were examined, initial results revealed that whilst the majority of the young Australians surveyed were aware of the NHMRC guidelines for low risk drinking, they had an unsafe approach to alcohol use. Accordingly, they had experienced an array of personal consequences related to their alcohol misuse. Whilst milder consequence types such as guilt and regret, failed responsibilities and a loss of control over drinking were the focus of the current research, over a third of the university group and over three quarters of treatment group also reported they or someone they knew had recently been injured due to their alcohol use. These findings supported the need for further intervention to assist in minimising the potential of alcohol related harms to individual drinkers and their secondary effects on the broader Australian community.

The research findings also supported bio-psychosocial formulations, with personality, cognitive and psychological distress identified as important maintenance factors for excessive alcohol use. When examined cumulatively, cognitive and affective factors were found to be the most influential in governing the alcohol use of the specific groups surveyed. Accordingly, it was decided these factors would be focused on in the data analysis and write up of the final report.

The general findings of the study supported prior arguments that problem alcohol use was a largely reasoned response, influenced by environmental factors and internal beliefs. Permissive peer and parental normative attitudes towards alcohol misuse were found to increase young adults' risk of drinking more frequently and heavily. These factors worked alongside a personal belief system centred on the attainment of personal rewards through drinking and low self belief in one's personal ability to refuse alcohol across a variety of situations. Surprisingly, the experience of negative emotional consequences, including depressive symptoms, social difficulties, aggression, violence and addiction, did not deter the young adults surveyed from engaging in excessive alcohol use in the face of their desired outcomes. This finding suggested those surveyed misunderstood the seriousness of psychological difficulties and their relationship with harmful alcohol use. This finding called for enhanced education of mental health and dual diagnosis issues related to alcohol misuse.

Concerning the role of psychological states, the findings of the research indicated that many of the young Australians surveyed were currently experiencing symptoms characteristic of the more severe alcohol use disorders. Therefore, they were placed at risk of clinical disorder progression if they continued to engage in these drinking practices. Despite this finding, those young adults surveyed regarded themselves as emotionally well; reporting low rates of depression, anxiety and stress. Consequently, whilst prior research had suggested that drinking reactively to remove adverse emotional experiences was a reason for alcohol misuse, it was not a major motivational factor for this group of young adults. Despite this finding, an association between negative emotional states and increased alcohol use was noted. Those young adults who reported more severe negative affect had significantly higher harmful alcohol use scores than those low in negative affective states (depression, anxiety and stress). This finding supported the need for further research on dual diagnosis issues.

The second aim of the project was to compare a community sample of drinkers with a treatment sample of drinkers from the Youth Substance Abuse Service (YSAS). This was completed during the data collection and data analysis phases of the doctoral project, and detailed findings are reported in the thesis. A brief summary has been compiled by grantee Angela Hain and provided below:

Two samples of young adults were recruited to participate in the project; a group of university students and a group of clients accessing outpatient treatment services from the YSAS. The university group consisted of 398 undergraduate university students, 161 males and 237 females aged 18 - 25, from Melbourne and Brisbane. The treatment sample consisted of 50 individuals, 32 males and 18 females aged 18-21 from the metropolitan Melbourne region. All participants answered the standardised measures relating to personality, cognitive and psychological factors, and commented on atypical alcohol use. When the rates of harmful alcohol use were compared among the two groups the severity of harmful alcohol use was higher in the treatment seeking than the university group.

While these findings suggested that treatment drinkers were appropriately accessing clinical services for their problem alcohol use, they also revealed a significant proportion of university drinkers would benefit from further intervention centred on alcohol reduction, as recommended by the World Health Organisation. When the proposed maintenance factors for alcohol misuse were examined and results compared, findings revealed that overall the treatment group scored higher on most of the cognitive and affective risk factors than university drinker group. These findings provided support for the association between the strength of these factors and problem alcohol use.

The final aim of the project was to produce a Doctoral thesis for submission in support of the award of a Doctor of Psychology and registration as a Psychologist. The written doctoral thesis was completed on the 24th of July 2009 and submitted to the Australian Catholic University for examination. Completion of this requirement, and all additional degree requirements, entitles the grantee for full registration as a psychologist with the Psychologists Registration Board of Victoria.