

Speech to Graduates by Dr Kirstin Barchia, April 2009

Vice-Chancellor, members of the university, fellow graduates and guests,

Of all of the graduates present here today I was probably the most reluctant student of psychology. When my sister suggested back in my HSC year that I study psychology I laughed and was determined not to be one of those airy fairy psychologists. The reason for my reluctance was that I had very misguided perceptions of what psychology actually was.

Throughout my years of study I have come to realise that many others in the community have a complete misunderstanding of psychology also. Whenever a student introduces themselves in social settings, there are common questions that follow. For students studying psychology the most common question that follows is “can you read my mind?”

On behalf of all of the students here today, I would like to say once and for all no we cannot read your mind. We cannot see deep into the secret places you want no one to know about and no, you do not need to be afraid of what you say or do in front of us. Psychology is not the study of how to be a psychic, all knowing individual with super mind reading powers.

In my discussions with other students I have heard many different responses to the awkward social pause after disclosing that one is a student of psychology. As an undergraduate I used to politely tell people that I had no idea how to read their mind but I could tell them how magic eye pictures work.

Gradually over time, friends and relatives that stuck around long enough to realise I was not developing super mind reading powers started to understand psychology was not a threat. The next point of clarification, however, came during my honours year when I had to explain what a psychology thesis was. Many people, students included, are surprised that undergraduate students of psychology study four years of statistics, and design and conduct their own studies to test scientific hypotheses. Most graduates here today probably found statistics a laborious even fear evoking aspect of their degree that brought them much stress. Those who know me, however, know that over the years I have come to enjoy, yes enjoy, the statistical aspect of research.

So why is statistics and scientific research so important in psychology? Without scientific enquiry psychology would be no more than opinion. Without scientific research, for example, how do we know that your individual experience represents the experiences of others similar to you? Some of the research projects I have been involved in under Associate Professor Kay Bussey for example, have examined the efficacy of interviewing techniques of young children who have witnessed a transgression. Such research under controlled conditions is important to determine the reliability of children's testimony in court which is often required for the successful prosecution of child abuse. More recently my PhD research examined psychological processes involved in bullying in high schools in order to inform effective intervention programs.

During my honours year in psychology I came to develop a greater appreciation for the study of psychology, but I still adamantly did not want to become a psychologist. My perception at the time was that whilst the scientific study of psychology was important, viewing individuals as subjects in research was a dangerous place to stay. I wanted to work with “real people” with real problems. Not removed from them in a university or “professional” office some place, but I wanted to work with people in need in their “world”.

So after finishing my undergraduate degree I initiated the establishment of a not for profit organisation that employs youth workers in high schools. It was working with young people in the community that made me realise the need for professionally trained psychologists and my need for further training.

So I returned to Macquarie University to undertake the combined clinical psychology masters with PhD. Completing these two degrees simultaneously was a constant reminder to me to remember the individual and real needs in the community whilst working with large numbers of collated survey responses.

Having completed this degree there is a very real temptation now to sit in an office and wait for people to come and make appointments if they require help. This way of working feels safe and financially more secure than working in the community. However I know from working with young people in schools that the idea of walking a few steps to talk to the school counsellor was too hard let alone calling a complete stranger to make an appointment to discuss their difficulties.

Looking into the future, to be honest, I am not sure how to make a living and work in the community alongside people in need. I am not sure how I may combine this with carrying out quality research and disseminating the results in a format accessible to the community. And do all of this whilst caring for my own family and friends. But I will strive to not lose sight of real people and real needs whilst using research to decide which diagnoses and interventions may or may not be helpful.

As graduates here today we are no strangers to juggling far too many balls at once. One of the most important survival tools I have learnt throughout my eight years of university study is the need for balance and the need to be surrounded by people who can support and encourage you. On behalf of all the graduates here today I would like to thank the family, friends, psychologists and other academic staff that have supported us and assisted us in achieving academic success. Although there are many people in my life who have supported me throughout my study I would particularly like to thank my husband, who has believed in me and encouraged me all the way. For all of the others you know who you are I am truly blessed to have too many names to thank in the short time I have been given to speak today.

Thank you.

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