From My Perspective...

There’s More to It Than the Individual

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My research has diverged significantly from traditional forensic clinical psychology and moved toward a more interdisciplinary model that combines psychology with criminology and epidemiology—or seeing crime from a public health perspective. Each turning point was influenced by a personal interaction with a research participant or by results from prior research. The faces that go with my research questions keep me continually motivated to further understand the problem I am studying. Further, each research question often generates at least 10 additional lines of inquiry helping to continually build my research agenda. Here, I give you details of my path so far, which I am certain will continue to change as my research questions evolve.

As an undergraduate at the University of Florida, I was fortunate to work as a research assistant on the MacArthur Adjudicative Competency Study under the guidance of Dr. Jennifer Woolard. One of my responsibilities was to visit juvenile detention centers and conduct structured interviews with adolescents. It was then I learned that those caught in the justice system, especially in the juvenile justice system, are more than just their crimes. When I heard some of the horrifying situations and events these adolescents had experienced, I often thought, “If I had gone through this, I might be here as well.” This helped me understand that many of the adolescents in the juvenile justice system are not bad people, but people that have done bad things—often influenced by their own ill-fated backgrounds. Working on the adjudicative competence study piqued my interest in forensic psychology.

My last year as an undergraduate, I obtained a summer internship at the Institute of Law, Psychiatry and Public Policy (ILPPP) at the University of Virginia. I worked with Dr. Janet Warren and learned a great deal about collecting data and managing large data sets. I returned to work at the ILPPP for another year after graduating with a BS in psychology and BA in criminology from the University of Florida.

While at the ILPPP, I conducted complex data analyses using SAS and SPSS, coauthored manuscripts, and supervised undergraduate students. This work focused on risk factors, particularly personality pathology, for antisocial behavior among women in prison as well as factors related to forensic assessment outcomes, including competency to stand trial and criminal responsibility. Clinically, I participated in forensic assessment trainings, observed forensic evaluations, conducted collateral interviews, and assisted with reports. My time at the ILPPP was invaluable, provided a solid foundation for graduate school, and fostered my interest in learning sophisticated statistical methods and clinical assessment.

I then enrolled at the University of Virginia to pursue my PhD in clinical psychology. I could not have picked a program and mentor that better suited my personality and needs. Under the mentorship of Dr. Dick Reppucci, I worked on a project examining the longitudinal trajectories of offending girls. It was during the post-release interviews with these young women that my research interests moved from individual characteristics, such as personality pathology and exposure to violence, to neighborhood risk factors and, more importantly, how neighborhoods may be related to racial disparities in offending. My interviews with these young women would often occur in homes, cars, libraries, and the like. I noticed the stark differences between the neighborhoods of black girls versus white girls and knew that there must be an impact on rearrest. For my dissertation, I pursued this line of research and examined neighborhood disadvantage, exposure to violence, and reoffending (both by rearrest and self-report of offending) among black and white girls. I learned that to truly understand individual-level outcomes, research should account for neighborhood-level risk factors as well. The motto “No man is an island” has guided my research from that point forward.

During my predoctoral internship at Weill-Cornell Medical Center, New York Presbyterian Hospital, in New York City, I wanted to gain a better understanding of racial disparities in victimization. I was introduced to Dr. Kenneth Tardiff and Dr. Sandro Galea, both experts in public health. We, along with others, worked on a paper examining the impact of social determinants of homicide victimization in New York City in the 1990s. Far from traditional psychology, we looked at policing practices, drug market activity, socioeconomic factors, and incarceration rates and how they impacted homicide rates differently for black, white, and Hispanic victims. This was an introduction to a brand-new way of analyzing data and examining problems. For instance, our unit of analyses was not a person but police precincts, and the data were run using time series Bayesian models that accounted for spatial lags. This project expanded my view of research both in terms of how to assess neighborhood factors and how to conduct new analyses.

Now, as an Assistant Professor at John Jay College, I keep my feet in both areas of research and work to integrate individual and neighborhood factors for tackling social problems related to racial disparities in criminal behavior, victimization, and—more recently—substance use. I continue to work on the above-mentioned projects related to forensic assessment, girls who offend, and crime rates. I am also collaborating with my colleague and mentor, Dr. Cathy Spatz Widom, to see how neighborhoods impact outcomes for abused and neglected children. While being so diverse in terms of literatures and methodologies can be challenging, it is the idea of constantly learning these new approaches and areas that keeps me most excited about my papers and projects. Now, I collaborate with criminologists, epidemiologists, and psychologists and mentor both psychology and criminal justice doctoral students.

At this time, I believe I have found a point of balance with regard to my interests. It is far from where I started—studying personality characteristics and psychopathy as risk factors for violence. Indeed, I started as a psychologist and have now become a psychology-criminology hybrid. Having been open to new areas of research was career altering and continues to be exciting.

**Dr. Chauhan** is an Assistant Professor at John Jay College. Her research focuses on how neighborhood factors create and sustain racial/ethnic disparities in criminality, victimization, and substance use. She enjoys living and working in New York City.