From My Perspective...

Practicing Forensic Psychology: It Never Gets Boring

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Like so many of the special things that have come my way in life, my involvement in forensic psychology was largely the product of good luck and sheer coincidence. Having bounced between a few different potential undergraduate majors, I wandered into psychology and eventually managed to complete enough core courses to obtain a bachelor’s degree. It soon became evident, however, that this credential would enable me to do little more than return home and continue working in my father’s commercial art studio—albeit with an allegedly keener insight into the human condition.

The only way forward in my recently adopted field was graduate school. Sifting through a tall stack of catalogues—in those pre-Internet days—I found a program that encouraged applicants to obtain a PhD in clinical psychology and a law degree at the same time. The school had enough marketing savvy *not* to include any before-and-after pictures (like those photographs of Abraham Lincoln taken at the beginning and then near the end of the Civil War) that would show just what might happen to students foolhardy enough to pursue two professions at once. Bursting with the thwarted ambition of a young man who among other things would never be any good at commercial art, I found the allure of becoming a doctor and a lawyer at the same time simply too exciting to ignore.

Upon interviewing for this joint program, I soon learned that *I* was *not* too exciting to ignore, though. I had taken the dreaded Law School Admissions Test and gained admission to the law school, but the psychology department was looking, shall we say, to go in a different direction—specifically, away from me. I had really truly become hooked on the idea of combining law and psychology, however, so I paid $100 to defer my law school matriculation for one year (such things were possible three decades ago) and reapplied to the joint program a few months later. This time, I got in.

The first year of the joint program was the first year of graduate work in psychology, plus a bit of law school. The second year of the program was the first year of law school, plus a bit of graduate school. From that point on, it was really a question of seeing how much I could take. We had classes during the regular school year, in the summer, and in the evenings. During the fourth summer, I took my year-end law school examinations and my graduate school comprehensive examinations, defended my PhD dissertation, and then moved 700 miles away to complete my final year of law school as a visiting student while applying for internships. When it was all over, I felt that I was ready to retire and start collecting social security benefits. After all, I had proven my point—whatever that was. Perhaps after I slept for a couple of years, I might remember.

In fact, once I was actually able to start working as a forensic psychologist, my attitude quickly changed to “I’m never going to retire.” Each new day brought something new and exciting. The legal system was—and still is—insatiable in its desire for input from mental health professionals. I have yet to discover any area of the law in which an understanding of human behavior does not potentially assist attorneys in their endeavors. Before long, it becomes obvious to forensic psychologists that they are directly involved in vital, high-stakes work, and situations about which most people only get to see second-hand—and incompletely—when they watch *Law & Order* or *CSI.*

On a typical day, I might try to move forward with the ever-present task of writing a book, chapter, or article on some topic in forensic psychology—or even an essay like this one. The best strategy is to start as early in the morning as possible, because before long, the deluge of phone calls, e-mail messages, and text messages is bound to begin. I consult with lawyers on a near-daily basis. Attorneys live a life defined by an endless series of deadlines, and keeping their various experts in line in order to meet those deadlines is a constant concern. I get questions such as, Have you reviewed the records we sent? Have you examined my client? Have you written your report yet? Are you available to testify on a certain date? Can you meet to discuss your testimony? When I began this work, such inquiries typically came between 9:00 in the morning and 5:00 in the afternoon. Now, thanks to the Internet, I can expect to be contacted at any time of day—weekends included.

On that same day, I’m likely to be conducting a forensic psychological examination. These can occur almost anywhere. For example, a criminal defendant may be residing in a local jail awaiting trial, or may be housed in a state or federal prison pending an appeal. Are the detained defendants competent to stand trial? Are they likely to have been criminally responsible for whatever illegal activities in which they allegedly engaged? If they don’t qualify for an outright “insanity defense,” might they still have been subject to some sort of “diminished capacity” that rendered them incapable of valid reasoning, overly sensitive to provocation, or particularly vulnerable to negative influences? Were they intoxicated at the time of their alleged offenses, and if so, was that intoxication voluntary? How would any or all of these conditions and statuses interact with the requirements of the law in a particular state, province, or foreign country?

The examination in question might address civil instead of criminal issues. Is someone seeking to impose a guardianship or conservatorship on these examinees, thus seeking to deprive them of their independent rights to manage their own personal affairs or financial resources? Do examinees display the capacity to vote, marry, consent to medical care, or run a family-owned business? Is the basis for their alleged incapacity some sort of chronic intellectual disability, or a serious mental illness that became apparent in young adulthood? Are examinees qualified to accept a conditional offer of employment, or are they fit to continue working in jobs they already have?

In addition to writing, consulting with counsel, and conducting examinations, I have ongoing commitments to supervise an ever-changing mixture of law students, graduate students, psychology interns, medical students, and psychiatric residents. What do these persons need to learn at the intersection of mental health and the law in order to fulfill their own professional obligations properly? Are their writing projects progressing according to plan? Are the examinations they are conducting or the cases in which they are assisting being managed effectively? Supervision can occur one-on-one or in seminar settings. These days, it can be supplemented by all manner of electronic communications.

More broadly but no less gratifyingly, I get to teach formal classes in law school and medical school settings. Topics for this coursework have included interdisciplinary publication, psychological testing, and effective advocacy in cases with a mental health component. Sometimes these teaching opportunities involve being a guest lecturer in classes being taught by other lawyer, psychologist, or physician colleagues. For example, for many years I have enjoyed participating as a faculty member in the twice-yearly Harvard Law School Trial Advocacy Workshops, and as an Honorary Professor of Law—and now as an Honorary Professor of Psychology as well—for Aberystwyth University (*Prifysgol Aberystwyth—*formerly the “University of Wales”) in both the spring and fall semesters. These and other teaching activities are supplemented by the opportunity to present training workshops and academic lectures at professional conferences across the country and around the world, and to chair committees for such organizations as the American Psychological Association and the American Bar Association.

The bottom line is this: It never gets boring. I should hasten to point out that this list of activities is not unusual for someone who pursues forensic psychology as a career. However lofty some of these assignments might seem to you now—when I was a psychology undergraduate, I wouldn’t have known what half of them even meant—I can assure you that when my colleagues in the field read this essay they will think, “Well of course he does; that’s the job!” I hope that what I convey to you is not a sense of smugness or self-satisfaction, but rather the excitement and sheer joy of becoming involved—however accidentally—in such a rewarding professional career. This is hard work, but you may decide it’s the work for you.

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