From My Perspective...

The Rewards of Teaching, Research, and Practice

Kayleen Islam-Zwart, PhD

When I started my academic training, most people did not opt to become forensic psychologists, though this is now a more frequent career path. I wish I could say I planned and carefully chose what I was going to do when I was an undergraduate, but I am not sure I even knew then what it meant to be a forensic psychologist. While completing my bachelor’s of science in psychology, I quickly became aware of the need to pursue graduate education and was fortunate to connect with Dr. Daniel Houlihan, who took me under his research wing. His specialty was child psychology, and I vividly remember him not-so-subtly pushing me into that field, commenting that there was nothing quite like having to sit in a room with an adult sex offender and feel like there was no hope. Despite his urging, I knew I intended to pursue a doctorate in clinical psychology and work with adults, but that was where my insight ended.

Probably by chance, but what I like to consider a premonition, I decided to complete a minor in corrections while finishing my undergraduate degree. I was then accepted into the PhD program at Idaho State University, where I became one of the first doctoral students involved in a practicum and research under the supervision and mentorship of Dr. Peter Vik at Idaho’s only prison for women. It was at this point I knew the path I wanted to follow.

Many hours of my doctoral training were spent at the prison, evaluating women’s reactions to initial incarceration, their cognitive impairment, and their parole eligibility; providing individual therapy; and conducting relapse prevention groups for women with substance misuse histories. In that prison, I gathered data for my dissertation and a subsequent publication looking at the adjustment reaction of female prison inmates as a function of their history of sexual victimization (Islam-Zwart & Vik, 2004). Results revealed a complex and somewhat surprising picture about the impact early trauma could have on adaptation to prison for women. Specifically, women with a history of sexual victimization exclusively as adults showed the greatest initial adjustment difficulties in prison, but the fastest adaptation compared to women with no victimization history or victimizations as children and adults. Women with a lifelong history of sexual victimization reported the least discomfort, insomnia, and anger upon incarceration, and that pattern tended to persist. At that time, little attention was paid to the experience of women in prison, and it was invigorating to feel like I could contribute to the profession in a meaningful way.

Following this extensive training with female offenders, I completed my degree through an internship placement with the Bureau of Prisons at a men’s institution in the Midwest. There, I engaged in many of the same clinical activities with the male offenders, and I had additional responsibilities of conducting federal competency, insanity, and risk evaluations. This was an important year for me, as I discovered what a rarity it was to have worked with female offenders and just how different prisons could be. It was also an important year for building professional confidence. I will never forget when one client, a man who had been in prison for many years as a function of his part in multiple armed robberies, told me he had been concerned about me at first because I was soft-spoken and reserved. After seeing me walk around the prison grounds, however, he was no longer concerned. He indicated that I held my head high, looked others in the eye, and walked with such confidence that the other prisoners just parted when I came through. Although I do not think my presence had quite the grand impact his comments suggested, I have often shared this story with my students interested in working with offenders to communicate the importance of self-confidence and the impression cast to others.

As my year of clinical internship was coming to a close, the process of finding a job moved to the forefront. I interviewed for a variety of academic and clinical positions, and decided to accept a position as assistant professor of psychology at Eastern Washington University (EWU). EWU had never had a professor with a forensic focus, and I was excited to share my experiences with students. In my first year as a professor, I developed a course called Psychology and the Legal System that exposed students to the background information important for both forensic and correctional psychologists. I still teach this course, and I always start by telling students that I hope many of them will pursue a forensic path, but also that my course might help them know when that type of career is *not* right for them. One of the things I appreciate about my professorship is that I have been able to pursue my interests in forensic and correctional psychology in a variety of capacities.

A day in the life of a professor is varied and enriching. My primary responsibility at this regional and teaching-focused university is to offer approximately six different courses over the academic year. I have been able to continue my focus on incarcerated women by developing a course called The Care and Custody of Female Offenders and continuing to conduct research to help better understand the experiences of women in jail and prison. Much of my day is spent teaching and interacting one-on-one with students to talk about degree completion, graduate school, and careers.

My students have gained valuable practical experiences. They have assisted with providing relapse prevention groups for male offenders at a nearby state prison. We have also conducted a number of research studies looking at malingering as well as adjustment to incarceration. My teaching and research are supplemented by a clinical practice in which I evaluate individuals for eligibility for state and federal disability benefits due to mental or cognitive impairment.

The rewards of the job are many. One of my favorite things is to watch students complete their bachelor’s and master’s degrees and go on to doctoral programs and careers. Another of the most inspiring is the opportunity to present at national and international conferences. Each year, I accompany a small group of students to a professional conference, and this is where I witness the practice of psychology come alive for students. I have the opportunity to work with students while they are sampling the field and trying to find their own paths. Finally, I believe, more than other positions, the professor is a lifelong learner, be it through course development, continuing education, peer reviews of journal articles, or interaction with students and other professionals. I have no doubt that the academic climate and the need to repeatedly update and renew my understanding of the ever-changing and expanding field of psychology enhances my clinical skills. The clinical practice in turn encourages me to investigate uncharted, or minimally charted, areas and brings those classroom teachings to reality.

Dr. Islam-Zwart is currently Professor of Psychology and Director of the Psychology at Bellevue College program for Eastern Washington University. She recently presented at the International Congress on Law and Mental Health as part of a symposium looking at Victimization and Women Offenders.In her free time, she enjoys camping with her husband and two daughters.