From My Perspective...

Research and Its Practical Applications: A Focus on Domestic Violence

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My career in psychology began in Blackwell’s Bookshop, a nineteenth-century building with creaking floorboards and meandering rooms teeming with miles of bookshelves. I purchased an edited textbook on psychology there in my teens, and was enthralled by the breadth of the field and excited by the prospects for research.

Studying psychology at Southampton University under Gordon Trasler—the prominent British psycho­logist whose research explored how one learns criminal patterns—sparked my interest in criminology. The multidisciplinary teaching in the Cambridge Institute of Criminology helped me look critically at the assumptions and methods of various approaches, and empirical research impressed me the most, thanks partly to David Farrington and his well-known longitudinal research on the development of criminality. Mentored by Allison Morris (and exposed to the painfully sexist subculture of Cambridge in the mid-1980s), I also developed an interest in women’s issues. After a year as a contract research assistant, I moved to Toronto for a PhD in psychology and a dissertation on domestic violence under the supervision of Chris Webster. I have always maintained my research interest in domestic violence and have applied this to developing a risk assessment measure and to consulting with law enforcement officers, as I will describe below.

In 1990, I had the great fortune of joining the Research Department at the Mental Health Centre Penetanguishene (now the Waypoint Research Institute). This team of dedicated and highly able researchers was committed to applying rigorous scientific methods to the needs of forensic psychiatric patients and the system responsible for them. At the time, the team enjoyed unparalleled administrative support for high-quality research and program evaluation. The department’s founder, Vern Quinsey, and my new colleagues Marnie Rice, Grant Harris, Catherine Cormier, Carol Lang, and Terry Chaplin, had already contributed influential empirical and methodological work to the field of forensic psychology. At Penetanguishene, I was able to put my research and clinical interests together in several substantial programs of applied research.

My first research program involved gathering questionnaire data from adolescents on psychological, physical, and sexual violence in their dating relationships, friendships, and other interactions with peers. I needed to obtain permission from school boards and individual schools, and procedures for parental and participant consent had to be agreed upon. This was a lengthy process that involved many meetings and presentations over several months. This project also required many hands, as we administered questionnaires to all eligible students at the same time in each school. Some of my fondest (as well as my most stressful) memories of this research came from last-minute preparations over boxes of questionnaires in crowded offices with the whole research team, as well as counselors from community agencies who helped provide anti-violence workshops to students after they had completed the questionnaires.

My next program involved coding police reports and criminal records of men who assaulted their domestic partners, in order to identify causal and risk factors for subsequent violence. This time, numerous ethical reviews, security clearances, and legal permissions were required, and multi-agency partnerships were formed, over a period of 5 years. The opportunity to collect such data being so costly in terms of time, effort, and other resources meant that variables had to be well defined, coding had to be accurate and reliable, and data management and analysis had to be well thought out, because mistakes could not easily be fixed “next time.” This effort was reflected in the excellent reliability among the researchers who coded the data, and in a well-validated risk assessment that is now used by policing services around the world, the Ontario Domestic Assault Risk Assessment (ODARA).

My current program focuses on forensic patients, the pathways that lead them to admission to a forensic psychiatric ward, and their progress while in psychiatric hospital. The research conducted in Penetanguishene has a reputation for substantially increasing our understanding of and ability to manage violence risk; now, we are also bringing attention to previously neglected aspects of forensic patients’ physical health, participation in various activities, and other in-hospital outcomes.

Although these programs have been my main focuses, the applied nature of my work means that I get to design, collaborate in, or assist students and clinicians with a variety of other studies. I also spend time developing and disseminating the applications of my research results, such as training police officers and consulting with government advisors on policy development.

Working in an applied setting allows me to focus on the quality and utility of my research rather than feeling under pressure to “publish or perish.” Knowing that my research might be applied to clinical or correctional practice in the future means that I have to pay a good deal of attention to the quality of my data and methods. The data I do use in my research require much time and other resources to obtain. Having access to sensitive data also increases the ethical demands, and conducting good research is fundamental to ethics. In an academic setting, I might have more access to undergraduate participant pools or the opportunity to supervise students in a lab, but I might not have had the freedom of time necessary to obtain the authorizations required to conduct the research that led to the ODARA. Much interesting research has been conducted on convenience samples, but the opportunity to work with unique sources of data and produce research of excellent quality and practical value is very rewarding, in my experience.

The applied nature of my work also brings me into contact with sometimes disturbing information or upsetting circumstances. The most extreme cases for me have been clinical records or police reports of attacks on children, by sex offenders or by the children’s own parents. This has also been true in my clinical work, and I find that working with data analysis allows me to contribute to the work on violence against women and children without being overwhelmed by (or becoming desensitized to) such horrific and sad events.

Conducting applied research often requires collaborations with other researchers and partnerships with various academic and nonacademic organizations. In this respect, I am exceedingly grateful for (and attached to) my fellow researchers at Waypoint. I chose to work in Penetanguishene not only because of the world-class research conducted here, but also because of the cohesiveness and good humor I observed among the team members when I visited for an interview. I believe that a good team has had more influence on my career success and satisfaction than has the specific area of research I have worked in. I recommend that students considering a career in applied research find or build a team that works together well, values each other’s contributions, and is committed to excellence in research.

**Dr. Hilton** is Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Toronto, Senior Research Scientist at the Waypoint Research Institute, and a registered psychologist. She has enjoyed opportunities to speak about her work internationally from Wellington to Rome, but loves coming home to her family and the community at Penetanguishene.