From My Perspective...

My Path to Correctional Psychology Researcher, Mentor, and Consultant

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I began my correctional psychology career in 1992. I had completed my first year of graduate work in a master’s of science program in clinical psychology at Fort Hays State University, and I was required to complete a 400-hour clinical internship during the summer. Having grown up in a largely homogenous Nebraska community, I recognized that I would benefit from a clinical setting that afforded me an opportunity to work with a diverse clientele. As a graduate student of limited means, I was unable to travel anywhere exotic, but I remembered that my grandmother lived near several prisons, including the U.S. Penitentiary at Leavenworth (which I later learned was also known as “The Hot House”). So I contacted the Chief Psychologist and begged my way into the institution (begging became much easier once the chair learned that I was not asking for pay, merely the clinical experience). Thus, in early June, I parked in the Leavenworth parking lot and walked up the steps and through the large stone entryway with one looming question and thought: “What the hell am I doing here? I could die in here!”

Since that first day, in spite of my initial hesitation, I have never looked back. I do not recall what clinical skills I learned during that 10-week internship, but what I do recall was that I found the prison to be a laboratory for the study of human behavior. I was fascinated by the life stories and the cultural diversity, both in terms of the inmates and the written and unwritten cultural rules for inmates and correctional staff alike. For example, it was implicitly understood that the inmate cafeteria was largely self-segregated by race and/or prison gang status.

I left this internship with the desire to continue in this line of work, so after completing my master’s degree, I accepted a position as a Mental Health Professional in the Kansas Department of Corrections (KDOC). I maintained this position for 2 years, during which time I served as a frontline clinician, primarily in a segregation unit, providing myriad mental health services. One of the greatest benefits of working in corrections is that no 2 days are alike, so I did not have a “typical day.” However, I did have typical weeks. During any given week I would facilitate between 2 and 5 therapy groups (2-hour sessions), conduct segregation rounds and participate in segregation reviews, respond to clinical or behavioral crises provide weekly individual psychotherapy to a small caseload, and conduct psychological evaluations.

I would estimate that I had 25–30 hours of face-to-face clinical contact per week with inmates, and it was rarely boring. I gained a wealth of experience, enjoyed my coworkers (both mental health and correctional), and finalized a life-long commitment to serving a clinical population that is both diverse and underserved. The one aspect missing from my work, however, was research. Due in part to time constraints, but more to a lack of independent research skills, I found it difficult to initiate research in the prison. Thus, I opted to apply to PhD programs to enhance both my clinical and research skills.

When searching for PhD programs, I elected to change from a clinical psychology track to a counseling psychology track, and was fortunate to be admitted to the counseling program at Oklahoma State University (OSU). As I already had more than 2 years of correctional psychology experience, I purposely avoided correctional practica (organized clinical training experiences) in order to broaden my skills with non-offender clients and confirm my career goals (i.e., explore my options to make sure there wasn’t some other population or specialty that I wanted to pursue). So I opted for neuropsychology and community mental health practica. Although these practica provided significant clinical experience and enhanced my skills, I learned that I really did prefer corrections. I also immersed myself in correctional psychology research under the supervision of my mentor, Dr. Carrie Winterowd. Carrie was a very generous mentor who allowed me to develop my own line of research in corrections, even though it extended outside of her research interests. Together we conducted research on the use of group psychotherapy in corrections, and my dissertation was a group psychotherapy outcome study. Although most faculty, myself included, would not recommend a psychotherapy outcome study for a dissertation, I found the endeavor extremely informative. My study was flawed, but I learned a great deal about how to conduct outcome research (both do’s and don’ts). Based on my own experience, I am a firm believer that students should worry much less about the outcome of their dissertation (e.g., what type of results will I get, where can I publish it), and think much more intently about the knowledge and skills they need to develop for future work. That is, they should pursue a dissertation that will force them to acquire such knowledge and skills.

Earning a PhD in clinical, counseling, or school psychology requires the completion of a full-time, year-long predoctoral internship. My internship with the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) was to be the beginning of my career with the BOP; however, approximately 3 months before leaving Stillwater for Petersburg, Virginia, I began to have second thoughts—not about correctional psychology, as that was still my clinical passion, but more about where I would most enjoy correctional work, from behind the walls as a correctional psychologist, or as an academician conducting research on correctional psychology issues and training future generations of correctional psychologists. After completing my internship and a postdoctoral fellowship in forensic psychology, and much soul searching, I opted to pursue an academic career. I always believed that if academe didn’t work out, I could easily return to the prison, but if I got bored in the prison, it would be too late to be seriously considered for an academic position at a doctoral-granting institution. Subsequently, I accepted an Assistant Professor position in the Department of Psychology at Texas Tech University (TTU) beginning fall of 2000 and have remained here ever since.

At TTU, I conduct research, teach, and provide professional service inside and outside of the university. My greatest passion is mentoring graduate students who will pursue clinical careers in corrections or research careers in academia. My weeks have been generally consistent over the course of my 14 years, but that is by my design. I have reserved every Thursday for the last 14 years as a research day. On Thursdays, I will work from home or the office, depending on my mood and what needs to be accomplished that day, and I will write (generally a manuscript to be submitted for publication, but also book chapters and other monographs), conduct data analyses, develop research and grant proposals, or communicate with correctional agencies about doing research in their facilities.

The remainder of the week, I am in meetings, teaching, or doing other professional activities (e.g., reviewing a manuscript, attending dissertation proposal/defense meetings, etc.). I meet with my students one-to-one every other week, and on the off week of these meetings, we have lab meetings. This is when I get to focus on the training and development of my students, and I find this to be incredibly rewarding. I really enjoy the opportunity to guide students—their energy, creativity, and commitment to doing good in corrections never gets old. I have taught between 1 and 2 classes per semester over the course of my time at TTU, including Abnormal Psychology and Forensic Psychology at the undergraduate level, and intelligence testing, practicum and Psychology and Law at the graduate level. Academe is rich with energy and innovative opportunities (including outside of my specialty area), and I find the environment to be invigorating and stimulating. I am never bored when I’m at TTU. That said, I have supplemented my TTU work with a part-time private practice, which helps me remain grounded and not get lost in the “ivory tower.” This is beneficial when developing treatment programs and also when supervising students providing clinical services.

**Dr. Morgan** is the John G. Skelton, Jr. Regents Endowed Professor in Psychology at Texas Tech University. His research and scholarly activities include treatment and assessment of mentally disordered offenders, identifying malingering, and professional development and training issues. In addition to his teaching and research activities, he has a private practice where he provides forensic mental health services to state courts in Kansas, Missouri, Oklahoma, and Texas, and consults with correctional agencies on a variety of mental health issues.