From My Perspective . . .

Work Hard, but Live a Full Life

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Canadians love a good hockey fight, or at least that is what I remember from my childhood. When people ask me how I first became interested in studying violence, the memory that often comes to mind is the roar of the crowd and the image of two very large men facing off against each other in a packed NHL hockey arena. As fists flew, I puzzled over why violence “pays” in some contexts and carries incredible costs in others; how the same act that engendered cheers among the crowd would result in arrests if perpetrated just outside the arena doors. And so began my interest in trying to understand the origins, contexts, and consequences of violence and antisocial behavior.

Like all good psychologists, I can trace the roots of my current research interests to my childhood. But the factors that influenced my journey, from childhood curiosities through to tenure at a major university, can best be described as some combination of insatiable curiosity, persistence, and dumb luck. My academic journey has not been entirely linear. I traveled around the world and across disciplines in pursuit of answers. Along the way, there were lessons learned, some of which I will share with you now in the hopes that they will be helpful to those embarking on a similar journey.

First, start to worry when you have been idle too long. I have watched many students wait until the “perfect” moment arose to begin writing the paper that was never written, or spend years designing the ideal study that was never executed. Often, the perfect moment to begin a paper or project never arrives. Often, it is best to just take a deep breath and begin. Let yourself sit staring at a blank computer screen—without checking e-mail—until the words and ideas come. If that does not work, do it again. Even if you start down the wrong path, the act of simply moving forward on a paper or project will most likely yield benefits. One of my mentors during my PhD studies told me to think of my dissertation as just one of many research studies that I would start and finish throughout my career; that is, this study did not have to answer every question that was running through my mind, and I could rest assured that there would be other opportunities for discovery and groundbreaking science.

Second, strong professional and personal networks are a key element for finding a job and building a successful career. However, when it comes time to make major decisions (e.g., where to take your first job, what area to specialize in, whether to pursue an advanced degree), remember that it is you—not your advisor or mentor—who will need to get up each day and live with the decision. Surely you will disappoint some with the choices that you make along the way, but the more important consideration will be whether you remained true to your interests and those things that move your life forward. Trust your instincts. Early on in my career, I turned down what I thought should be my dream job and had to explain why I walked away from one of the “best” jobs at a prestigious university. The trick is often not finding the best job, but rather figuring out what the best job is for you at a given time.

Third, early in my career, a distinguished scholar—let’s call him “Ed”—told me that the way to make a mark on the field was to either be brilliant or to import (thinking back, he may have said steal) innovative approaches from other disciplines and apply them within your own field. When I realized that “brilliance” may not be in the cards, I quickly began to read and audit courses outside of psychology and to reach out to collaborators from economics, sociology, computer science, and environmental design. These efforts have paid off. In my first year as an Assistant Professor in California, I developed a partnership with Verizon and was able to put mobile phones in the hands of adolescents to track their experiences, behavior, and health in daily life. More recently, Google helped to support our team’s efforts to develop virtual tools for mapping children’s neighborhoods; it was our partnerships across sociology, computer science, and geography that allowed for the successful completion of the study. These projects would never have been possible if I had not ventured outside disciplinary boundaries—and outside of the academy—in search of training and collaborators.

Finally, remember to look up frequently from your keyboard. Life is short, and careers in academia, clinical practice, and research can be long. Maintaining a balance between the long hours that are often required in this field and your life outside of work can be challenging. In my experience, the best researchers and clinicians are those who live a full life. I have had the good fortune to be surrounded by brilliant people who also lead balanced and interesting lives. While the curriculum vitae of my esteemed mentors and colleagues are impressive (including Avshalom Caspi, Elizabeth Loftus, Terrie Moffitt, Edward Mulvey, Jodi Quas, Dick Reppucci, and Jennifer Skeem), the thing that I have been most impressed by has been their love of life and family, and their sense of adventure. So work hard, but in your efforts to better understand the human experience, do not miss out on your own.

Each day, I wake up grateful for the opportunity to engage in research, work with bright students, and help to translate what has been learned in the field of developmental and forensic psychology for practitioners and policy makers. The field is in need of bright young minds and new ideas—ideas that cut across disciplinary boundaries and approach age-old and deeply entrenched problems, inequalities, and barriers in new ways. It is an exciting time to be a social and psychological scientist. New data and approaches are rapidly coming online, discoveries regarding the interplay between biology and context are being made each day, and many of our longitudinal studies are now positioned to test how exposure to early life experiences leaves its mark on adult health and well-being. At the same time, new technologies are transforming the way in which we conduct research, engage with study members and clients, and map—physically and geographically—the human condition. So my advice to you is simple: Begin writing, follow your instincts, and prepare to make your mark on the field—while remembering to look up, of course.

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