From My Perspective...

Assessing Competency and Promoting Online Learning

Patricia A. Zapf, PhD

I first became interested in the study of forensic psychology as an undergraduate at the University of Alberta in Edmonton. While I was an undergrad, my brother, who is 2 years younger than me, was hit from behind playing junior hockey and was rendered a quadriplegic. Despite the fact that he could not move, other than shrug his shoulders and flex his biceps, within the next few years my brother completed more than 100 skydives with the assistance of a tandem partner. This got me thinking about sensation seeking and why some individuals seem driven to seek excitement more than others. I began reading about this topic, which then led me to the broader literature on criminal behavior, as research had indicated a link between sensation seeking and criminal behavior. My reading in this area had me intrigued—could it be that some people satisfied their desire for sensation seeking by committing antisocial or criminal acts while others, such as my brother, met these needs through thrill-seeking athletic endeavors? This prompted me to complete my honors thesis on the relationship between crime and personality, in an attempt to determine whether adolescents with certain personality characteristics were more likely to commit certain types of crimes. For example, did adolescents with a high need for excitement commit more impulsive types of crimes than those without a high need for excitement? Fascinated by this, I began delving deeper into the literature on crime and psychology and became convinced that I wanted to go on to graduate study in the area of forensic psychology.

At that time, there were two clinical doctoral programs in Canada that had an emphasis in forensic psychology. Naïve to the process of graduate school applications, I applied to only those two programs and no others. Looking back, I realize just how inexperienced I was and how much I could have benefited from a mentor to guide me through this process. (Side note: Years later, I wrote an article on “10 Ways to Increase your Chances of Getting Into Graduate School” to assist those as naïve to the process as I was— the article can be found here: http://www.clinical forensicpsychology.org/10-ways-to-increase-your-chances-of-getting-into-graduate-school/). Luckily, I was accepted to both programs and made the decision to attend the program at Simon Fraser University with Ronald Roesch as my mentor.

I received my PhD in clinical (forensic) psychology from Simon Fraser University in British Columbia in 1999 and was one of the first two graduates to complete this specialized training. It consisted of four courses in forensic psychology; a research project; a clinical practicum; and a set of oral comprehensive exams, all in forensic psychology; as well as the regular requirements of the PhD program in clinical psychology. During the course of my graduate studies, I worked as an institutional psychologist for the Correctional Service of Canada in both maximum- and medium-security institutions conducting risk assessments for the Parole Board of Canada. I also worked as an intake interviewer at a Provincial Pretrial Facility, interviewing each inmate upon intake to screen for mental health and special placement needs.

In addition to obtaining clinical experience in interesting forensic settings, I also fell in love with research. I helped develop a competency assessment instrument called the Fitness Interview Test–Revised (FIT-R) and then examined the reliability and validity of that instrument as part of my master’s thesis. I continued to conduct research on competency to stand trial at an inpatient forensic psychiatric facility, interviewing actively psychotic individuals to determine their competence-related abilities, and became involved in training others in how to use competency-assessment instruments as part of the evaluation process. My dissertation examined the construct of competence in an attempt to understand the underlying factor structure as a means of assisting evaluators and the courts in better understanding this phenomenon.

To conclude my clinical training, I moved to the United States in 1998 to complete a 1-year internship at the Florida Mental Health Institute at the University of South Florida in Tampa. During this internship, I had the opportunity to work in various clinical settings as well as the state correctional system, and to conduct research on public policy and mental health law. Working in the United States expanded my understanding of competency and American case law on this issue, and it helped to foster my interest in international approaches to this important doctrine.

I have always loved to think, read, and travel, and so I decided early on to become an academic, as I was sure that this was the best way to get paid for what I loved to do. I took my first academic position (immediately upon completion of my internship) at the University of Alabama where I was an assistant professor in the Clinical Psychology and Law program. I accepted some wonderful students to work with me, and we conducted interesting research on competence-related issues. We presented papers at conferences across the United States and internationally, and we highlighted the importance of high-quality evaluations that would assist the court in determining how to deal with this vulnerable population of defendants. After 3 great years at the University of Alabama, I was recruited to John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York City to assist in developing a doctoral program in forensic psychology.

I moved to NYC and John Jay College in 2002 and immediately began building the foundation for the doctoral program in clinical (forensic) psychology. This was a new program, so we developed a curriculum, coursework, and supplemental training experiences; developed relationships with clinical placement sites; wrote policy and procedures manuals; developed forms and other reporting documents; and eventually admitted our first class of doctoral students for the fall of 2004. I served as the Director of Clinical Training for the doctoral program from before its inception until 2006, when my work–life balance tipped a little too heavily toward “work” and I decided to step back from administrative activities. In the fall of 2005, I had traveled to Africa to climb Mt. Kilimanjaro and to go on safari in the Serengeti. This was an incredible experience that gave me the opportunity to live for 21 days without access to phone, computer, or e-mail. The “down” time gave me the chance to figure out what I wanted from life and what I didn’t... what made me happy and what made me miserable. I loved thinking and writing, and I loved working with students; I didn’t love the bureaucracy involved in the administrative side of academia. I had just spent 4 years developing the foundation and framework for a new doctoral program in a challenging bureaucratic environment, and I was only 7 years into my career, but I did not see myself as continuing on the path toward upper-level administration.

After many discussions and brainstorming sessions, my husband and I decided to move to Florida where we could be closer to my brother and his family and where my husband could easily be transferred. Fortuitously, I was given the opportunity to maintain my faculty appointment in NYC while working remotely from Florida. I have now been telecommuting to John Jay College from Florida for 8 years. I teach undergraduate courses online and doctoral courses through a hybrid approach, combining in-person and online meetings; I travel to NYC monthly and for important in-person meetings and phone or Skype in for other meetings. I hold office hours by Skype and work with my doctoral students in the same way as I did when I lived in NYC—by sending digital versions back and forth via e-mail or by saving to a shared cloud. In many ways, technology has made geography irrelevant; it is now possible to work with people all over the world from wherever you might happen to be.

In recent years, I have become more and more involved with developing online coursework and online professional training using sound pedagogical techniques. I travel across the United States and internationally training legal and mental health professionals, and testifying as an expert on criminal competencies and best practices in competency evaluation. The lack of high-quality professional training opportunities in areas relevant to forensic psychology prompted me to start an online professional training website (www.concept-ce.com), and my former doctoral students, now friends and colleagues, serve as the Board of Advisors for this endeavor. I am retained by both prosecution and defense to conduct competency evaluations in high-profile cases, such as the case of Jose Padilla (the American citizen and so-called “dirty bomber” who was designated as an enemy combatant to the United States), and to testify as an “expert’s expert” on competency and related issues. Much of this testimony involves highlighting deficiencies in the work of other professionals who have done less-than-adequate evaluations, reinforcing the need for high-quality, ongoing professional training throughout the course of one’s career. I very much aspire to the ideal of lifelong learning and view graduate school as setting the foundation upon which to build for the rest of one’s career.

At this point, I am 15 years into my career, and I love what I do. I believe that the most important ingredient to getting what you want is determination. Work hard, get good grades, and take part in as many experiences as possible while in school. This is the time to experience it all, as this will help you to figure out what you like and, more importantly, what you don’t. Take nothing for granted, and try to maintain a good balance between your personal and professional life. When the balance tips too much in one direction, step back and adjust accordingly. Most of all, take time to do the things that make you happy.

**Dr. Zapf** is a Professor in the Department of Psychology at John Jay College and the Director of Education and Training for CONCEPT. She was made a Fellow of the American Psychological Association for outstanding contributions to the field of psychology and law, and she was recently elected President of the American Psychology-Law Society (AP-LS). She loves adventure vacations and has traveled to more than 23 countries to eat and drink wine and to compete in athletic endeavors, such as the Ironman triathlon.