From My Perspective...

**From Prison Psychologist to Academe and Back—and Back Again**

**Daryl G. Kroner, PhD**

I began my correctional psychol­ogy career in 1986. I had completed my MA in clinical psychology at North Carolina State University and accepted a psychologist posi­tion at Grande Cache Correctional Centre at the base of the Rocky Mountains. This place was stun­ningly beautiful, which fed into my backpacking, fishing, and photography hobbies.

I was excited about applying the clinical skills that I had learned and looked forward to gaining new knowl­edge through doing research. The first time entering the main gates, who I met, and how the first morning went is all something I remember with much detail. The prison was recently built and the furniture inside was new. Within a few months, I was amazed at the cultural diver­sity and the range of mental health symptoms that were present with the offenders. In addition to trying to under­stand this population’s clinical needs, I began collecting self-report, staff ratings, and institutional outcome data.

This research endeavor met with practical realities. Yes, there was the need to get system approvals, there were those who chose not to participate, there were incomplete forms, and I had to convince some that it was a good idea to do research.

But I learned a valuable lesson as the result of an incident involving an offender in disciplinary segrega­tion. When I first saw him, he was psychologically inca­pacitated, curled up in a fetal position. Retrospectively, after more familiarity with *DSM*, I realized that this offender was experiencing a brief reactive psychosis. At the time, though, I strongly recommended that he be removed from disciplinary segregation because of his very low level of mental health functioning. He was placed in an alternate housing unit at the institution, one that was more open and where there was more interaction with others. Within days he began exhibit­ing the very aggressive behavior that initially had him placed in segregation. This offender was subsequently sent to another institution. Removing this offender from disciplinary segregation was the right decision, but the staff had perceived that I had inappropriately let him out of segregation. Because of this, the research proj­ect received almost no cooperation and was placed on hold for a number of months. Eventually this project was completed, but with a much longer timeframe. The strength of interconnectedness in institutional life was a lesson that has stuck with me.

Another practical lesson has to do with the nature of offender data. During the 1980s, it was common to use psychological measures that were not developed on offender samples. The conducting of basic psychomet­ric research with offenders found different scale means, factor structures (often simpler), poorer construct and predictive validities. Repeatedly being humbled by offender data led to a more cautious clinical interpre­tation of testing results. So, instead of relying on non-offender norms, a goal became to gather offender norms with previously standardized scales.

During the late 1990s, I completed my PhD at Carleton University. It was great to be there with the likes of Don Andrews, Adelle Forth, Bob Hoge, and Jim Bonta. After 22 years as a prison psychologist, I accepted an academic position at Southern Illinois University. One benefit of working in an academic setting is being able to finish projects that had their seeds in clinical practice. Whether looking at risk assessment or treatment change, it is satisfying to be able to bring projects to a close. This is something we can’t always do in prison settings because of the daily clinical demands. A second benefit is the interaction with students. Students bring a different per­spective on issues with considerable energy. For example, the importance of sub-threshold diagnoses would not have been highlighted if not for an inquisitive student.

My daily routine involves getting into the office just after 6:00 a.m., keeping my door shut until 10:00 a.m. (reading and research time), walking to the gym over the lunch hour, and then leaving the office around 5:00 p.m. Now, instead of seeing offenders, my days involve meet­ings with students, teaching classes, and doing research. Maybe students “catch” some of the gratifying experi­ences that I have had working with offenders.

*Dr. Kroner is a professor in the Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Southern Illinois University. Prior to this position, he was employed as a correctional psy­chologist for over 20 years. During this time, he worked at maximum, medium, and minimum facilities delivering inter­vention services to offenders. His current research interests include risk assessment, measurement of intervention out­comes, interventions among offenders with mental illness, and criminal desistance.*