From My Perspective...

Bridges and Gaps: Building Connections and Training the Next Generation to Meet the Mental Health Needs of Diverse Populations

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The intersection of personal and professional identities has been very true of my journey within the field of forensic psychology. *Quincy M.E.* was a television show broadcast from 1977 to 1984—right around the time I was an undergraduate stu­dent at Queen’s University, majoring in psychology and volunteering in prisons—not that unusual when you consider the university was surrounded by five prisons. I initiated an inmate visita­tion program in one of the minimum security prisons and learned from some of the Elders (my professors at Queen’s University) in the field. I then entered a MA program in forensic psychology at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in 1983. *Quincy* was still on television— quite popular—and many people didn’t understand what it meant to be a forensic psychologist; people would ask how I was going to “counsel” dead people. I later obtained my PhD from Adelphi University. Fast for­ward nearly 30 years later, and the ironic thing is that I am the Director of Forensic Studies at the University of Denver’s Graduate School of Professional Psychology, in which one of our current field placements and a career for some of our graduates is as a death investigator for the M.E.’s office!

The above captures some of my professional iden­tity. My personal narrative is that I am a South Asian immigrant whose parents valued education, commu­nity service, and relationships near and far. As such, I am aware of the impact of my work, both direct and indirect, on the welfare of others. I strive to lead by example and teach my students to recognize both the value and humility of what we do. Psychology is not a career choice for many South Asian families—law or psychiatry would have been a more traditional choice. I come from a family of lawyers and judges; my mother was the first female person of color to be a citizenship judge and magistrate in Canada; my great-grandfather was the Chief Justice of the High Court in Mumbai. Their choice of work had an enormous impact on the commu­nities in which they lived and on my own career choice. I have spent my career finding creative entry points to meet the mental health needs of our communities—this has been my passion and my inspiration for continuing to do this work.

A sense of belonging has not always been a “given” for me, so I understand the challenges that face many immigrants in our society today. I have lived as an immigrant in three countries, residing in very diverse communities, amongst and working with underserved populations. I was born in the United Kingdom, began school in India, and spent my childhood in Canada, before moving to the United States as an adult for gradu­ate school. My parents never forgot the generosity of the Canadian community, spending countless volunteer hours serving the public, promoting social justice, and taking a stand against injustice. This immigration jour­ney and model of service has affected my choice of work and my involvement in social justice. I know the feeling of being unheard, invalidated, discriminated against, and being disenfranchised—experiences many of our clients have had with the behavioral, mental health, and criminal justice systems, which are not quite meeting their needs.

For nearly 30 years, I have worked in various men­tal health capacities, providing forensic psychological evaluations relating to matters of trauma, immigra­tion and asylum, competency, social security disability, parental custody and access, child abuse and neglect, and domestic violence. Today, I supervise doctoral level students on court-ordered psychological evaluations through our in-house clinics, and I teach forensic courses to masters- and doctoral-level students.

I stress to them that the mental health care system across this nation is in crisis. Individuals with severe mental health difficulties are being seen in emergency rooms, jails, and shelters, but many in need of mental health treatment never get any because of the lack of resources and stigma attached to mental illness. We need to train a workforce who understands the diverse needs of this (often) legally involved mentally ill (or dis­ordered) population. We have an obligation to help alle­viate the pain and suffering in our communities.

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