From My Perspective...

**Specializing in Civil Litigation: An Often Overlooked Career Choice**

**Lisa Drago Piechowski, PhD, ABPP**

One of my favorite ways to relax on a weekend morning is with a cup of coffee and the New York Times Sunday Crossword. You see, I’ve always loved solving puzzles. It’s the process of discovering pieces of information that then become hunches and finally arrange themselves into a pattern to form a solution. It is especially gratifying when the problem at first seems incomprehensible, and then gradually, with much trial and error, begins to make sense. It’s solving the most challenging problem that is the most rewarding.

I have been a forensic psychologist for more than 20 years now. Like solving puzzles, forensic psychol­ogy involves collecting disparate pieces of data in an attempt to discern a meaningful pattern. It is a field that I continue to find exciting and intellectually challeng­ing. However, the road I took to reach this point was far from direct.

When I went off to college, I had no clear sense of what I wanted to do. I had thoughts of going to law school, but I didn’t enjoy the political science courses I had been advised to take. I had three different majors over the course of my undergraduate career. After graduation, I went to work as a special education teacher. Although I enjoyed many aspects of this work, I knew it wasn’t the right fit for me. I was still interested in law, but I was also very interested in understanding how people thought and behaved. I spent several years exploring different options. I earned a master’s degree in counseling and worked as a family therapist and then in a college counseling center. I was beginning to feel that I was on the right track, but I realized my career options would be limited without a doctoral degree. As a result, I made the decision to return to school to become a psychologist. I applied to a PhD pro­gram at the University of Massachusetts and received my letter of acceptance on my 33rd birthday. I knew immedi­ately I had made the right choice.

After earning the PhD, I spent the early years of my career as a clinical psychologist working in various pri­vate practices. One of my supervisors during graduate school had been a forensic psychologist, and I devel­oped an interest in exploring this area. I began to pursue training in forensic psychology through continuing edu­cation courses and reading. I was subsequently offered the opportunity to work as a consultant for a disability insurance company that was looking for assistance with mental health disability claims.

As I became immersed in this work, I discovered that very little had been written about forensic evalua­tion of disability. In order to fill that gap, I began think­ing about how to apply the principles and practices of forensic psychology that I had been learning about to this specific type of work. I was influenced by Grisso’s conceptual model of legal competencies which con­sists of five components (functional, causal, inter­active, judgmental, and dispositional) and began to think about how this model could be applied to dis­ability evaluations. I started writing about these ideas and ultimately published a book on best practices in forensic disability evaluation (Piechowski, 2011). From disability, my interests expanded to include other types of employment-related cases, such as fitness for duty evaluations and cases involving the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), as well as more general civil liti­gation. Although I now do some criminal and family cases, I am among a minority of forensic psychologists who specialize in civil litigation.

I became board certified in forensic psychology by the American Board of Forensic Psychology in 2004. Since then, I have been actively involved in this orga­nization, serving on the board of directors and as a member of the examination faculty. I have also been active in the American Psychological Association and have served as chair of the Committee on Professional Practice and Standards and the Committee on Legal Issues. I present continuing education courses in dis­ability and employment evaluations for the American Academy of Forensic Psychology. These activities have given me the opportunity to know and work with some of the brightest and most knowledgeable forensic psy­chologists in the country.

Today I have a varied practice that includes civil, family, and criminal cases. I teach courses in forensic psychology, psychological assessment, and ethics for a doctoral program in clinical psychology. I write and do research. On a given day I might drive to a detention facility to evaluate a defendant’s competency to stand trial, appear in court as an expert witness in a personal injury case, consult with an attorney about upcom­ing litigation, or meet with a student to discuss her research. I spend a great deal of time at my desk writing reports, reviewing records, and returning phone calls. Since I have a private practice, I also spend time doing less-than-glamorous tasks such as sending out invoices and picking up office supplies.

Much of my practice involves conducting evalu­ations of persons involved in some type of civil litiga­tion. This process entails consulting with the attorney or other referral source about the specific issues in the case, deciding on a strategy for the evaluation, select­ing appropriate psychological tests, obtaining pertinent records to review, and then meeting with the examinee to conduct the evaluation. Afterward, I score and inter­pret the tests, review all the material I have collected, and organize the data to address the questions I am try­ing to answer. Typically, I produce a written report sum­marizing the data and my opinions. If the case is going to trial, I meet with the attorney to discuss the scope of my testimony. To prepare for testimony, I review all of the material I have collected so that I am very familiar with my findings and can explain how I arrived at my opinions. Once in court, I describe my findings during direct examination (the easy part) and then respond to challenges by the opposing attorney during cross exam­ination (the not so easy part).

I cannot imagine a career that would suit me bet­ter than forensic psychology. My work is never boring. No two days are the same and each case brings a fresh challenge. As with crossword puzzles, my work involves collecting pieces of data, forming hypotheses, and draw­ing inferences. And, as I said before, it’s solving the most challenging problem that is the most rewarding.

*Dr. Piechowski is an Associate Professor of clinical psy­chology at the American School of Professional Psychology at Argosy University Northern Virginia and maintains a private forensic psychology practice in Silver Spring, Maryland. She is the author of the book* Best Practices in Forensic Mental Health Assessment: Evaluation of Workplace Disability*. Dr. Piechowski was the 2016 president of the American Board of Forensic Psychology.*