

Archival Research in Forensic Psychology

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Conducting research with undergraduate students is always rewarding and challenging. Research that involves clinical patients increases both the rewards and the challenges. Research that involves clinical patients who have a history of criminal behavior and/or violence increases the rewards and the challenges still further. For the past decade, undergraduate students have played an integral part in an ongoing and expanding research project focusing on mentally ill criminal offenders at a local forensic facility. Their involvement and skill level have varied over the years but it has always central to the success of the effort. This chapter will describe these efforts, the typical duties students carried out, some of the successes and some of the challenges.

What is the Forensic Unit?

Forensic psychology tends to be inherently interesting and certainly does not suffer from a lack of sex appeal. As a result, students interested in conducting research in forensic psychology do not tend to suffer from the same initial misconceptions about research being boring that other students do. These students tend to be attracted to it like moths to a flame. Students get excited about the possibility of working with so called criminals. They have visions of axe murderers, sexually violent predators and serial killers dancing through their heads. Nonetheless, the daily grind of our research tends to be different than the sensational aspects that most students think of when they think about forensic psychology.

We collect our data at a maximum security forensic hospital (i.e., the forensic unit) that serves the entire state. While the types of patients have evolved over the last decade, they have remained somewhat constant. Patients generally have mental health problems and have some involvement in the legal system. They could be in the facility for a pretrial evaluation, awaiting sentencing, participating in some form of treatment, or were transferred after they were sentenced for a crime. These patients could include people who are being evaluated for competency/insanity or found incompetent/insane, people who were sentenced to prison and developed

mental health problems that he prison could not address adequately, people who were civilly committed at a local hospital and became too aggressive for an unsecured facility, and sexual offenders. Even though axe murderers and serial killers tend to be rare, there are a variety of cases that still peak the interests of student researchers.

The sex appeal of forensic psychology and conducting research with this type of population tends to draw students with a wide variety of abilities and personalities that should be considered before they participate in forensic research. As a result, we have developed an informal screening process for potential research assistants over the years. Given the sensitivity of the data and the potential dangerousness of these patients, we tend to only select students who the two psychologists working on the project know personally or have been referred by current research assistants. Though the number of students varies, there are about 3-5 students working on the project at any given time.

In addition to some kind of personal knowledge of the potential research assistants, we take a preliminary tour of the facility in order to gage their comfort level around potentially dangerous and mentally ill individuals. In the past, some students have decided after realizing the nature of the facility that they were not comfortable and were not going to pursue the opportunity. We also conduct an informal interview to better determine the emotional maturity and overall personality of the student, both because of the research itself and the importance of working with the team. All of these steps are taken to insure a good match between the student, the focus of the research and the team itself.

Typical Tasks Involved in Our Forensic Research

Over the years, the types of duties that the research assistants engaged in have varied with changes in the facility and our role in the overall facility. As a result, the duties I will describe may not occur currently but have occurred at some point during our research. One aspect that should be mentioned is that the research does not occur in

isolation. Students and I work closely with psychologists, psychiatrists, psychology interns, social workers, and all the staff to provide information that is also usable for clinical purposes, not simply for research purposes. If not for the need to provide good care to the patients, our research would not exist. Some of the information we collect is used specifically for evaluation and treatment purposes by the staff. As a result, we take pride in knowing that our efforts can make a difference in the lives of real individuals.

Research assistants are primarily responsible for coding archival data from the institutional files at the facility. These files generally contain information about the individual's mental health history, criminal history, social and family history, employment history, substance abuse as well as their institutional behavior and response to any treatment efforts. Students examine these records from multiple facilities, as written by multiple professionals, and often consisting of inconsistent opinions and findings to arrive at reliable and valid personal histories of these individuals. In training research assistants, they code multiple practice files and then compare their responses to previously trained research assistants efforts on identical files. Trained research assistants also assist in filling out some basic information for risk assessment instruments that other professionals use in conducting formal evaluations of the forensic patients.

A second task that the research assistants assist with is the psychological testing of patients. Students may sit down on the individual wards or bring patients to a central conference room where patients fill out a standard packet of psychological questionnaires upon admission. This practice allows the students to get some hands on experience with the patients instead of simply coding files. Students also sit in on actual forensic interviews for patients with a staff psychologist and/or advanced graduate students. This opportunity gives the students yet another chance at patient contact. Typically, after the interview the staff psychologist sits down the graduate students and the research assistants to discuss the particulars of the interview and any questions they may have about it. Although it is not directly related to the research itself, the students really enjoy this unique opportunity and it contributes to their understanding of the different psycholegal issues relevant to the research. It also provides an additional motivation for the long drive and sometimes less than thrilling hours of coding files.

Successes of Our Research

Students have found this experience very rewarding for a variety of reasons. Students have routinely commented that the experience and the resulting discussions have given them an abundance of practical knowledge. Students who work with us have not only used this knowledge in psychology graduate programs but also law school and law enforcement. Furthermore, the research gives them great insight into our legal and mental health systems. For example, students have commented that they have learned more about mental health working on this research than they ever did in their abnormal psychology class. Students continually comment on the importance this practical knowledge has played in their overall college education.

In addition to the practical knowledge that students routinely acquire, we also attempt to encourage students to acquire professional product from their experience, especially those interested in attending graduate school in psychology. Our students have routinely been co-authors on scholarly presentations at national and regional conferences. They have also increasingly taken the lead on projects that have been presented at these same conferences as well as regional student conferences. A more intimidating and time consuming aspect has been publishing these projects in professional journals. Nonetheless, students have been co-authors and first authors on professional publications. We have even had some recent success in students applying for and receiving small grants for their research. These projects have focused on a variety of questions. Do different types of sex offenders exhibit different cognitive distortions? Can we accurately predict future violence with structured and actuarial measures of violence? Do scores on a self-report measure of psychopathy predict treatment success? No matter the project, we believe that the unique experience and the professional product we encourage has helped our students gain admission to some of the most prestigious law schools and graduate programs in the country.

Challenges of Forensic Research

There also are a number of challenges to conducting this type of research, some challenges are generalizable and some are inherent to our specific circumstances. Most research focuses on the importance of protecting the safety and well-being of the participants. It is rare that researchers must also look out for their personal safety as well. Nonetheless, it is an important issue in working with

individuals who are mentally will and have a history of violence. However, we are very proud that not a single student has been verbally or physically assaulted in all of our time working on the research.

Besides the physical danger, there are additional challenges. There is a significant time commitment for the students. Students typically travel two hours both ways to the facility in order to be onsite for three hours once a week. Having a 5 hour block of time is often difficult and entails significant planning by the students and myself. Working within any government agency can be political and interfere with the scientific research process. Our situation is no different. There are professional turf battles that prevent us from conducting the research in the most efficient way. In addition, we are dealing with real human beings that are facing potential legal action and are mentally will. These patients may be less than forthcoming, poor historians, or simply distort the truth to suit their own agenda. Educating students about these issues and still conducting meaningful and quality research can be challenging. Furthermore, the mental health system and the legal system have changed significantly and necessitated changes in our research. For example, when we first started the research a minority of the patients at the forensic unit were sex offenders. Given the political and public push for additional limitations for sexual offenders, they now represent the majority of our participants. In addition, patient turnover has become much more rapid. Patients used to be in the facility for months or years and now may only be hospitalized for weeks or days. This change has meant that gathering meaningful data has become even more difficult.

Finally, as mentioned before it takes a unique individual to be able to read about the most vile and despicable acts that humans are capable of perpetrating. Students have to be able to read and discuss violence and explicit sexual behaviors. Because of the explicit nature of this information, it is quite common for professionals and the students to cope by using humor when appropriate. This approach often requires additional emotional maturity from the students to know when it is appropriate and when it is not appropriate. We have had some

students who have had difficulty and we have parted ways with students who have been unable to carry themselves professionally. For example, some students have had difficulty dressing appropriately for interacting in a facility that housed sexual offenders, instead of dressing like they were going out on a Saturday night with their friends.

In addition to professional maturity, there are other qualities necessary in the students who work on this project. They need to be able read this disturbing information in a detailed and meticulous manner, which is especially difficult given that the data is collected for clinical purposes and not done to ensure reliable and valid scientific data. Students also need to maintain a high degree of confidentiality. Not only are they dealing with sensitive clinical data but there are also legal consequences that demand even a greater level of confidentiality. Confidentiality becomes even more difficult when friends and relatives happen to read or see media reports of a high profile case and ask the research assistants about patients the media may report are at the forensic unit. Many of these issues fall under the review of an Institutional Review Board (IRB). Our research must pass through the review of the University IRB as well as the facility IRB. However, the IRB expectations are usually in line with our own professional expectations and present few significant hurdles, especially since much of our research is archival or simply involves accessing existing clinical information that would have been collected without our involvement.

Conclusion

Conducting forensic research with undergraduate students has been extremely rewarding and provides a unique experience that few other students are afforded. Working as part of our research team provides students with an opportunity to learn about the capabilities of humans beings, while learning a great deal about the mental health and legal systems. Despite the challenges that working with young men and women on this type of research can pose, the benefits have certainly outweighed the costs.