

# GETTING THERE IS HALF THE FUN: PRACTITIONERS-AS-RESEARCHERS AND VICE-VERSA

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*In January of 2001, the authors of this narrative set out to conduct an ethnographic investigation into the culture of a correctional facility for juvenile male offenders. One of the researchers was primarily research driven, and the other more practice oriented, but both were highly familiar with this population and the setting. This narrative explores the unanticipated lessons learned about the fluidity between research and practice lenses through the process of conducting this study. Through the relationships formed with the research participants, the authors came to appreciate how research and practice modalities and knowledge could truly complement and benefit one other. In this narrative, three interactions with research participants provide a foundation to explore the benefits of an integrated researcher-practitioner social work stance.*

It has often been said of road trips that "getting there is half the fun." In fact, the adventures along the way are often the subconscious goal of the road trip; if one were just interested in the destination, one would fly and avoid the hassle of broken air conditioners, greasy roadside diners, and long stretches of road between inconveniently spaced rest areas. Still, even if the goal of a vacation is to stare out at the vast expanses of the Grand Canyon, for instance, the best stories, told in retrospect, will be precisely those of the rest areas, diners, and unanticipated detours encountered along the way. The Grand Canyon is unquestionably grand, and it is a worthy destination, but the real adventure is what happens between the front door and the end goal.

The study that forms the basis of this narrative represents one such road trip. When we started our ethnographic exploration of the culture of a juvenile correctional facility for young men, we set out with a sense of our own Grand Canyon; we knew what we wanted to have seen when the trip was over. We had no idea, of course, what else we would encounter along the way. Nor did we have a clear sense, even during the adventure itself, of what lessons we would learn from it. Now, having finished the study, several of

these lessons have come into focus. We believe these lessons have much to offer in the way of understanding the complexities of conducting field research in a social work setting. Hence in addition to our findings from our initial research questions (Abrams, Kim, & Anderson-Nathe, 2005), which represented our Grand Canyon, we also see the rich knowledge gained about the research process itself.

Through our interactions with the young men who participated in the study (in this paper we will highlight three cases in particular), we learned a great deal about the presumed divide between social work research and practice. Contrary to popular beliefs, our experience in conducting field research illuminates the very close connection between research and practice lenses and exposes the fluid space between these often "polarized" positions. Specifically, our interactions with the youth who participated in this study suggest that bringing practice wisdom and intuition into the research process, and research curiosity into practice environments, strengthens both forms of intervention. Just as we are aware that practice benefits from sound research, our experiences at one juvenile correctional facility reveal that research (and, indeed, researchers) can

likewise benefit from the integration of practice experience in the research process.

Since the lessons we learned emerged only in the context of our relationships with the young men in our study, they have been presented in a similar way in this paper. Consistent with the road trip imagery, before discussing what we encountered along our journey, we must describe the goal of the trip. Therefore, the paper opens with a general roadmap in which we provide an overview of our destination, consisting of the research question, setting, and environment. Three brief narratives follow, introducing a few of the youth who joined us on our adventure and framing the significant lessons we learned about the intersections of research and practice skills in a social work environment. The broad themes of these lessons, as well as their implications for improved social work practice and research, are discussed in the final section.

### **Our Grand Canyon**

In January of 2001, we set out on a collaborative field research project. Laura was working in her first year as a tenure-track assistant professor of social work at a research university and Ben was a graduate student in social work and public policy at the time. Laura had a solidly entrenched identity as a researcher and Ben leaned much more toward the practitioner angle. Yet despite these differences in perspectives, we came together through a mutual interest in youth work and in services for "troubled" adolescents in particular. Our goals for the research project were to gain an understanding of how treatment is understood and interpreted by a group of young men in a correctional facility. We also wanted to be able to describe how young men navigate identity influences encountered in residential treatment that deviate from their customary community settings. Essentially we were both interested in understanding the nuances of

treatment and the inner workings of a correctional institution that offered rehabilitation as its goal and "therapeutic treatment" as the conduit to that end. We had both worked in similar settings as practitioners and had seen the pitfalls associated with residential and correctional treatment for young people who had lengthy histories of risky and illegal behaviors. Through an ethnographic research study, we hoped to gain a better sense of how the clients, the young men, experienced their treatment and confinement in this type of institution and how practice might be improved to truly help the young people when they transition home.

To work toward these goals, for 16 months, between March 2001 and June 2002, we conducted participant observations and ethnographic interviews in one dorm unit in a county-run correctional facility for young men that we will call Wildwood House. Part of a major urban county's community corrections department, Wildwood House serves up to 75 teenaged male offenders through a comprehensive service network including juvenile rehabilitation services, treatment programs, and an on-site public school. Youth (ages 13-18) are sent to the facility as part of their juvenile court disposition and can stay between four and six months. The residents live together in age-graded dorms consisting of a large common room (also used as a recreation space), "time out" rooms, and a common sleeping room. The facility, although primarily a correctional program, emphasizes accountability and behavior modification through a behavioral treatment regime based on cognitive behavioral therapy (Cameron & Telfer, 2004; Lipsey, Wilson, & Cothorn, 2000; Mulvey, Arthur, & Reppucci, 1993). In addition to behavior modification, the program also emphasizes individual and group treatment.

Our initial entrée into the facility was a bit rocky. We struggled to gain acceptance from dorm staff and often felt uncomfortable being

perceived as “cold and judgmental researchers” when we both knew that that didn’t fit our personalities or our prior experiences. However, as time and conversation smoothed over our relationships with the staff, we were able to conduct the observations and interviews that constituted the primary method for our study. Our role could best be described as “participant-observers” in that we participated in the flow of the dorm, but we did not pretend nor position ourselves to be staff or “insiders” in the institution. Over the course of the 16 months, we conducted, jointly or separately, over 100 observation sessions. Together we also interviewed 12 youth, at least three times per informant, using an ethnographic interviewing style.<sup>1</sup> At the completion of our research we also interviewed dorm staff.

Although our initial forays into the facility were difficult to navigate, we ended up feeling very comfortable in the dorm and for the most part accepted as regular fixtures in the milieu. Hence we were able to find some interesting answers to our initial research questions. Yet in retrospect, it was what we learned along the way, mostly through our interactions with our research participants, that illuminate the fluidity and flexibility of research and practice positions that we wish to share in this narrative. Since these lessons are best understood in the context in which we encountered them, they are presented as they emerged, in our descriptions of actual moments with the young men we came to know on our research journey.

### **Lessons from the Road: What We Learned Along the Way Researcher “Interventions”**

When we first met Eric, he immediately struck us both as out of place in a correctional institution. Amid a cocky, physically fit, and competitive, excessively masculine peer group, Eric’s awkward humor, quiet thoughtfulness, and last-year’s-style clothing

stood out like a sore thumb. The character and tone of his interactions with others (peers and adults alike) separated him from the other residents, as well. While his peers chose to participate in the research study because they believed it would get them excused from certain program activities, Eric asked to be part of the study because he “wanted someone intelligent to talk to every so often.”

Eric was placed at Wildwood as the result of a significant, financially costly, and very public crime in a local suburb. Having no prior involvement with the court, Eric appeared not only uneasy but also perpetually uncertain in the world of juvenile corrections. Articulate and polite, he had never previously found himself in environments where self-disclosure was mandatory and where social privileges depend upon a staff person’s determination of “good and compliant therapeutic work.”

Over the several months of our engagement with Eric, we watched him transition from an awkward, self-described “band geek” into what Wildwood staff called the most manipulative resident to grace the facility in recent memory. Although some of this reputation was well-earned (Eric shared with us that he and his mother spent their time together on home visits making up “therapeutic issues” for him to share in group), our privileged position as researchers allowed us to see a different side of Eric. In discussions with him about his progress in the facility and his changing sense of himself, Eric presented an image of himself as confused by, rather than solely manipulating, the therapeutic milieu. It struck us that he genuinely struggled to completely grasp the level of introspection expected of him, and as a result, he routinely provided staff with partial information and half-truths. Negatively consequenced for manipulation, Eric became easily frustrated with his treatment program and came to a point of dismissing its value outright.

In one such situation, we observed a meeting between Eric and one of the staff at

the facility. Eric was called into a disciplinary session with a teacher in the on-site school for an accusation of dishonesty and deliberate manipulation. As the teacher bombarded him with demands for information, an admission of guilt, and apologies, we watched Eric become more and more frustrated and increasingly withdrawn. It gradually became clear that although Eric had been factually correct with this teacher, the statements he had made were half-truths. He had not explicitly lied, but he had allowed the staff to misunderstand his behaviors and statements. Accused of dishonesty, he got mad; he had, after all, provided true information. The meeting, which lasted over half an hour, finally ended with Eric being consequence, the teacher still lacking an apology, and both parties leaving the encounter angry at and dismissive of the other. Although it provided us with useful insight into the treatment process at the facility, the moment was more significant for the lessons it taught us about our own use of self as researcher-practitioners.

Walking down the hall after this meeting, Eric was stiff and his responses crisp. His frustration and anger extended five feet in front of him; there was no mistaking his posture. Ben felt frustrated by the situation, too, because although he was confident he could explain to Eric what had happened in the session (and that Eric would benefit from it), doing so would require that he step outside the role of researcher. Coming from a practice background, he wanted to intervene, but it felt somewhat inappropriate to do so in a research setting. Still, despite the internal conflict it caused (is this going to affect the research process?), Ben decided to shelve his "research hat" and intervene as a practitioner. Laura remembers Ben looking at her as if to say, "is this OK?" and even though she felt slightly uncomfortable with the situation, she did believe it was in the best interest of Eric if Ben could help Eric to make

sense of what the staff wanted from him. Although we did not know it at the time, this moment in the hallway became one of the most memorable adventures along our research journey. Ben remembers:

I talked with Eric about the difference between answering a question with a factually correct statement, and telling the story that people want to hear when they ask one question. It's like playing connect the dots – do you see a collection of dots, or do you draw the line between the dots and describe the whole picture? The teachers want him to connect the dots, and Eric has been describing to them (accurately) the individual dots. They call that dishonesty. Eric let us know that he understood what we were saying – that he "got it" finally. We talked about how it's hard to shift into the mode of connecting the dots when you've grown up in an environment where it's enough to just talk about the individual dots.

Ben has the sense, years after this exchange, that although the interaction was above and beyond our role as researchers, it provided a moment of genuine connection between us and Eric. Integrating our practice skills into the research process created the opportunity for Eric to know us as human beings, people who genuinely cared *about him*, not merely about what we could learn from him. At the same time, the connection we shared in that moment and in the weeks that followed gave Eric permission to open himself more fully to the research process. We learned more from him as the result of this interaction than we could have if it had never taken place.

Being able to transition smoothly between practice and research skills humanizes both

positions; it allowed us as researchers to more fully know and understand the participant's experience, while demonstrating to him that we were genuinely engaged and concerned about his well-being. We were willing to roll up our sleeves and *work* with him, rather than merely noting and studying his struggle. In essence, our position as researchers allowed us to see the struggle in a different way from the dorm staff and also to offer what we considered to be a very useful intervention.

### **Living with Clients' Complexities**

When we first met Jason, we were both impressed by his quiet, soothing, gentle demeanor. A first-generation Asian American whose immigrant parents closely adhered to cultural traditions (in Jason's words, they were "super old-school"), Jason had grown up having to function fluently in two worlds, being at once a tough, street-smart "gangsta" with his friends and a dutiful, obedient, caring son and brother at home. Each identity had been honed to perfection, and Jason could bounce back and forth between them without missing a beat, depending on the environment. With us, he was unfailingly warm and friendly; he held doors for Laura and laughed politely at Ben's stupid jokes. It created in us a strange discord, because when we sat with him in research interviews, we heard stories of the incredibly violent assault and other criminal behavior that brought Jason into the correctional facility and several other past placements as well.

In one interview, we watched Jason shift his self-perception several times, vacillating between descriptions of himself that were benevolent and good to those where he characterized himself as a heartless criminal. In this session, the three of us sat together in the same interview room we typically used, and we talked about Jason's sense of self. We asked how he would describe himself to someone outside of the facility, and Jason immediately launched into a story about his

family and his relationships with them. With great pride in his voice and a grin from ear to ear, he told us the story of how he had overheard his father saying that he really wanted a weed-whacker for the yard. Jason saved his money for as long as it took, even denying himself the small things he wanted to buy here and there, and bought the weed-whacker for his dad's birthday. As he told the story, he commented on how happy the gift had made his father and how much it meant to Jason that his family saw him as a "good boy" who was willing and able to provide for the interests of the family.

In the next breath, Jason shifted gears and told another, related story. Prior to the incident with the weed-whacker, Jason had had a significant run-in with the law. He and a friend, while burglarizing a property, had burned a garage in the neighborhood to the ground. His family found out about the arson, and as Jason related their disappointment to us, his eyes became teary. He could not look up as he described himself as a complete failure, a criminal, and an embarrassment to his parents. He even went as far as to say that he was the shame of his family as his brothers and sisters didn't have the same type of involvement with the law. It was in response to this disappointment that he wanted to "prove" himself with the gift of the weed-whacker.

During the remainder of the interview, we asked Jason what that experience meant for him. His response piqued both our curiosity, though for slightly different reasons—Laura was interested in his complex identity construction for her research purposes, and Ben seemed just very drawn to Jason as a person who was struggling with himself. Jason immediately said that burning down the garage meant that he was fundamentally bad. He saw himself as a criminal first and foremost; this was the word he would use to describe himself to an outsider. He was a bad person who had done bad things and there was little more to be said. In the next breath, however,

he talked about also being a good person who was capable of doing good things, as demonstrated by the weed-whacker. He talked about his commitment to "being a good person" upon his release from Wildwood House, and in the next breath, mentioned that he would not hesitate to beat down anyone who stood in his way.

From a research perspective, Jason's descriptions of himself demonstrated the complexity of self-construction and identity development in a correctional setting. In this way, the interview was immediately relevant to the "Grand Canyon" element of our research. From a practice perspective, however, it introduced troubling elements. Generally, social work practice trains us to see clients according to specific program philosophies. In the context of correctional work, we focus on drawing out contradictions like Jason's and working with clients toward an integration of them. Ben, in particular, felt the tug of this practice orientation throughout Jason's interview.

This was a different tug from what we experienced with Eric, however. In Jason's case, the desire to intervene was motivated less by an urge to provide a "missing piece" in a puzzle of communication than it was by a yearning to understand Jason's self-perception more fully. Our practiced research prompts were insufficient for the task; the moment demanded a different set of tools. Drawing on intervention skills for their evocative and probing qualities, to understand but not correct, we were able to ask the kinds of questions that allowed Jason to talk openly, exposing the complexity of his self-concept. Balancing these skills with our commitment to maintaining a research perspective, rather than one of clinical intervention, enabled us to appreciate – without having to correct – the contradictions Jason revealed.

Jason's conflicted narratives about his strengths, his aptitudes, and his general worth could obviously be indicators of the need for

intervention – for someone to help him find ways to reconcile these inconsistencies. In our stance as researcher-practitioners, we were able to see his contradictions as indicators not of pathology or unease, but rather of the complexity of his self-construction that both researchers and practitioners might find useful in understanding juvenile criminal behavior. Jason's participation in our ethnographic interviews allowed us to see him in his authentic and divided self, rather than as a project awaiting solution or completion.

### **Practice Makes Better Research**

When we met Humphrey, neither of us knew what to expect. Being overweight and pimple faced, he was often the subject of ridicule among his peers. Incarcerated for a sex offense, he was invested in maintaining a certain level of distance from them as he hid his true crime. Although the relationship we built with him was strong, neither of us felt the same connection with Humphrey that we did with some of the other young people. In reflection, it seems that some of this distance between us might have come from what we learned in working with him – another significant adventure along the road.

In one of our earlier interviews, Laura talked with Humphrey about the details of his offense. With most of the participants, this was a fairly routine interview; questions about the meaning of the offense and how it affected self-perception typically came later. With Humphrey, however, this interview took an unusual turn. During the session, Humphrey started talking about his offense, which occurred in his family's home against a younger relative. As he discussed the details of the crime, he became visibly agitated sometimes, his demeanor became defensive, almost aggressive. Over the course of about 15 minutes, Humphrey shifted from describing the details of his offense to justifying it in light of the frustration, disappointment, and near neglect he experienced at the hands of his

father and stepmother. The young man across the table from us transformed from the jovial character we had begun to know into an angry and defensive victim-turned-victimizer.

At some point in the interview, Laura became uncomfortable with the explicit sexual content of the conversation; asking questions about the details of a sex offense can be a patently uncomfortable exercise. Caught between feeling badly for Humphrey as a victim yet being angry at him on his sister's behalf, Laura wanted out of the conversation. Catching a nonverbal cue, Ben took over the interview at this point and walked Humphrey through the remainder of the questions. Ben's practice experience with young adult sex offenders allowed this transition to happen smoothly, and it created space for Laura to attend more directly to the content of the interview as research data rather than fuel for a personal emotional reaction.

Debriefing the interview after the fact, we realized that our experiences of the conversation had been quite different. Whereas Laura was impressed by Humphrey's ability to talk with us openly about his admitted sex offense, Ben's practice perspective led him to see Humphrey as resistant, at a very early stage in treatment, and largely dodging responsibility for the offense. Laura was surprised to hear from Ben that she had been somewhat "fooled" by his openness about his crime into thinking that he had actually moved to a more advanced stage of sex-offender recovery. Laura's field notes recorded:

After the interview, Ben and I did some debriefing. It was interesting because we had pretty different perceptions. Ben has worked more with sex offenders than I ever have. He thought that Humphrey was in a very early stage of treatment and should be farther along. I thought he was doing "OK" just by the fact that

he would even talk about his crime to us. Ben felt that he was still having a lot of trouble taking responsibility for his actions. It was good to get his perspective since he has worked extensively with this population. It is interesting how we get fooled by some but not by others.

The discussion between us about Humphrey's interview demonstrated to us the value of being able to apply practice wisdom and experience to research curiosity. Applying Ben's prior practice experiences to Humphrey's situation helped us not only to approach Humphrey from a different angle in subsequent interviews, but also to better understand and interpret his interview transcripts. In this case, the wisdom that Ben held as former practitioner with this population group lent itself to doing better and more informed qualitative research. As in Humphrey's case, we consistently came back to the place of valuing our practice skills as a way of retrieving and deciphering the information we were receiving from our informants.

### **Practitioners-As-Researchers and Vice-Versa**

Although we knew where we were headed from the beginning stages of our research together, we had no idea what we would encounter along the way. The lessons we learned from this journey and our interactions with our informants all taught us about the value of sitting in the liminal space between research and practice lenses – for the aim of both better practice and also better research. Our experience in conducting field research illuminates the close connection between research and practice lenses by exposing the fluid space between these often "polarized" positions. For in each of our encounters with Eric, Jason, and Humphrey, we realized that we could not clearly or

distinctly separate these two positions. Rather, adopting practices and techniques from both research and practice training lent itself to more trustworthy research on our part and perhaps more interesting applications for practice. Eric's story attests to the need for social work researchers to be willing, on occasion, to intervene, trusting the intuition developed in practice experience and taking the risk of overstepping the bounds of research. Jason taught us that those skills developed in practice can be used, indeed should be used, not only to intervene, but also to hone the tools of research. And our relationship with Humphrey reminded us both that, as much as practitioners benefit from the validation of research, researchers have much to gain by tempering their investigative curiosity with practice wisdom from the field.

These lessons were beneficial not only for us professionally, but also offer significant value to others who conduct research or are planning a project in a social work setting. We do not believe our experience as social work practitioners-as-researchers to be unique. People with social work experience, who are typically accustomed to the world of practice, may find themselves playing a new game on unfamiliar turf when they enter into the research world. Attentive more to the research question or methodology than to the research participants themselves, the switch in gears from practitioner to investigator demands skills and forms of self-presentation that many social workers feel ill-prepared to offer. Even in interpretive or qualitative research, without positivist demands for objectivity and researcher impartiality, investigators (in and outside of social work) are expected to position themselves in their study environments as researchers first and foremost. Those who come primarily from the world of practice may struggle to switch the lenses with which they approach their work. In many cases, this re-positioning works well; in others, it presents significant personal and

professional dilemmas. Practitioners turned researchers often feel that they must shed their prior experience in order to be credible "researchers" and, on the other hand, may struggle to avoid close relationships with informants that could border on interventions.

In our experience at Wildwood House, it was not possible nor even desirable to devoid ourselves of our own knowledge and practice experiences. In fact, many times, our skills and experiences in the field really helped us to gain trust with staff and also to build rapport with our informants. We found ourselves frequently exercising our practice wisdom and experience while maintaining a level of professional distance and boundaries required by research ethics as well. Perhaps rather than viewing these roles as wholly disconnected, we could conceive of a more fluid position for the practitioner-as-researcher where both identities are integrated and exercised. This integrated position can free researchers to draw upon their practice experiences without feeling that they have crossed boundaries in the process or without causing significant identity crises.

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**(Footnotes)**

<sup>1</sup> This means that we used guiding questions and themes to access the informants' world-views and experiences and at the same time we also allowed the interviewees to guide us in the interview process (Heyl, 2001).

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