Chapter 4

An Unconventional Career Path in Teaching and Neuropsychology

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This chapter was an extremely challenging endeavor for two reasons. First, I find it difficult to write about myself. Second, my approach to a career in psychology has followed an unconventional path. I believed as a young person that the methods commonly used to understand behavior were at best insufficient, at worst incorrect. Then, and even now, the path to addressing questions about behavior seemed to me muddled and insufficient. However, since thinking about the mind was a primary motive in my life, I was forced to pursue a previously uncharted road.

Early Years

In order to explain the present, a reconstruction of some of the past would be useful. I was born to an aristocratic and powerful family in Habana, Cuba. My paternal grandfather accrued wealth in the sugar business, and my maternal grandfather was president of the Bar Association of Cuba. My parents enrolled me in the most prestigious private school in the capital where I excelled in academics, earning the top ranking in each of the grades (as rankings superseded numerical scores). I was driven to school in a limousine and taken care of at home by my nanny. Leisure times were spent at the Habana Yacht Club where one of my grandfathers was, commodore. My mother, who had attended boarding school in Philadelphia, married into another prominent family. My father lost both his father and the anticipated inheritance unexpectedly in a mysterious fire. However, he was to eventually rise through the management of International Harvester of Cuba to a managerial position of significance. Little did anyone expect that more demanding problems for my family were yet to come.
Teaching and Responsive Learning

The educational process of teaching and responsive learning is centered around the idea of engaging students actively in the learning process. Teachers play a crucial role in creating an environment that fosters critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills. This approach encourages students to take ownership of their learning, promoting a deeper understanding of the subject matter.

Responsive learning involves tailoring instruction to meet the unique needs of each student. It requires teachers to be flexible and adaptable, able to adjust their teaching strategies based on the individual learning styles and preferences of their students. This can include using a variety of instructional methods, incorporating technology, and providing opportunities for collaborative learning.

In responsive learning environments, teachers use formative assessment techniques to monitor student progress and provide feedback that is timely and relevant. This feedback helps students identify areas for improvement and sets clear, achievable goals.

One of the key components of responsive learning is differentiation. This refers to the adaptation of teaching practices to accommodate the diverse learning needs of students. Teachers must be able to identify the unique strengths and challenges of each student to provide instruction that is tailored to their individual needs.

In summary, teaching and responsive learning is about creating a dynamic and inclusive classroom where all students have the opportunity to succeed. It requires a deep commitment to understanding the needs of each student and adapting teaching strategies to meet those needs. By fostering an environment of collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking, teachers can help students develop the skills necessary for success in today's world.
chosen interests. He acquiesced to the idea of further education and compromised with “no study outside the state of Florida.” Hence, applications were limited to Florida schools, although one application was covertly sent to the University of Georgia where there seemed to be good clinical and biopsychology training. Furthermore, Georgia was heavily involved with the Yerkes Primate Research Laboratory, originally founded in Orange Park, Florida (a place that I had become acquainted with during undergraduate years at the University of Florida). I was somewhat uncertain about specific career paths. However, the brain, abnormal behavior, and the adaptability to adversity were fascinating subjects awaiting further study.

Graduate School

Georgia accepted me into their biopsychology program, but I worked in both the clinical and biopsychology programs. Indeed, I basically pursued parallel educational tracks. My master’s thesis was supervised by Irving Betman, a clinician interested in studying abnormal nervous system function, whereas my doctoral dissertation was directed by Lelon J. Peacock, a biopsychologist well versed in both the nervous system and the history of psychology. If there was ever a “schizophrenic” existence, this was it. I would perform EEGs on volunteers from the psychology clinic during the day and perform septal lesions on hamsters during the evening at the psychology department’s animal laboratory. Needless to say, the parallel tracks caused a great deal of concern among the faculty and my peers alike, especially because the two programs were at the time not on speaking terms. My goal was to study clinical neuropsychology and “minor” in philosophy. How naive I was because neuropsychology as a career track did not exist; philosophy had no place in psychology during the 1970s, and, of course, I was still having problems with the English language and my finances.

I was stunned after my first year of training not to receive financial support from the program to continue studies at Georgia (none was available the first year either). In retrospect, I should have not been surprised. I had just finished receiving a B triple minus (one could not really obtain a lower grade) in sensory physiology from a professor who had begun to date my girlfriend of the time. In addition, my statistics professor had assigned me an incomplete in the first course of a three-course sequence. He very gently encouraged me to pursue another career after my presumably abysmal performance on the final exam. One of the lowest points in my life came when my advisor at the time, Bradford Bunnell, consulted with other faculty members about the decision not to fund my second year. One late Friday afternoon after the spring quarter exams, he uncomfortably told me that “The faculty believe that you do not have what it takes to obtain a doctorate in psychology...among other things your command of the English language is not acceptable.” I spent the summer months back in Jacksonville, Florida, working the night shift as a psychiatric technician trying to determine what options, if any, were still available. This situation could not be discussed with my parents who were struggling to support me, nor with my peers, as the entire spectacle was embarrassing and humiliating. Perhaps my father had been right about psychology. I was confused and depressed.

The solution to the predicament seemed to come from nowhere while working one of those never-ending night shifts. I decided that the professors at Georgia did not understand me and worse yet didn’t comprehend the important questions of the mind. I inquired from the graduate school at Georgia how quickly one could complete MS and Ph.D degrees; 3 years I was told. I proceeded to do what ever was necessary to finish in the minimum time, and in 3 calendar years both graduate degrees were obtained. Not only was I financially destitute, but the support from my parents was shaky, and my own emotional strength was buoyed by what I considered, at the time, to be questionable foundations. This was a matter of survival, nothing else.

My master’s thesis (clinical) was defended on January 6, 1978, and my doctoral dissertation (biopsychology) was defended the following Friday, the 13th. Along the way, I had established a relationship with a New Jersey-born, Florida-raised nurse who somehow always supported the unusual plans and ideas I had learned to harbor secretly. I had come to the conclusion that it was best not to share such thoughts because, at the very least, they were considered odd, and at the very worst, unattainable. Toward the end of my graduate education, I think she was the only person who believed in me. I doubted anything left to doubt. In the midst of all this turmoil we were married, and slowly plans for the future began to materialize.

Early Career Experiences

On January 16, the Monday after defending my dissertation, I was scheduled to begin teaching functional neuroanatomy at St. George’s University School of Medicine in Grenada, West Indies. So after a going away party, we embarked on a journey from hell. After stopping on what seemed every island in the Caribbean, we finally landed in Trinidad late Sunday night, with only minutes to spare for our commuter plane to take us to our final destination in neighboring Grenada. Unfortunately, our dog was impounded at the Trinidad airport, despite prior arrangements with the government’s veterinarian. To aggravate matters, I was arrested because of my Cuban citizenship, despite verifiable residence status in the U.S. An intoxicated soldier guarded our makeshift jail while I tried to figure out an “escape” so I could teach the following day in Grenada. We eventually left the compound under the cover of darkness and walked to the airport where we were able to retrieve our dog and depart on another commuter flight, without proper authorization, of course.

The Grenada airport at the time amounted to no more than a small building with a gasoline powered generator to allow for radio contact with incoming airplanes. Culture shock was only beginning. We traveled through the jungle, noticing poverty, despair, and the fact that everyone was Black. After arriving early,
following our immigration ordeal in Trinidad I went to teach, leaving my wife at
our rented house overlooking the ocean. The house had no walls, allowing the sea
breeze to enter. The classroom, as a traditional one, was not a well-ventilated room, the medical school
curriculum. The year was spent once more relying on how it felt to be fit. I also
spent my time building a neotropical laboratory, eventually an entire
environmental library. In the latter two cases, it was my responsibility to train
researchers, and organize the collection of data. The experience was informative, yet
restrained by my own MSF studies.

Just as we were getting adjusted to this unusual existence, Cuban ambassodor
informed us that, as a U.S. citizen, I was resident minimally required to enter the U.S. as quickly as possible.
Barbados, that I was best minimally assured to enter Barbados, which eventually it did.
With such assurances, my wife left for the United States. The ship waited on the
dock for us to arrive, and we finally did. The custom officials at St. Thomas, being in the holiday spirit, played with me:
the dog and did not check my outdated documents, allowing me to legally enter the
United States.

Such circumstances had left me numb, and I decided that I was going to settle
down, have children, and try to have a normal life. Among other things,
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State Hospital. We settled at a beach house, we began my work at Northeast Florida
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The state hospital was the defining place to work at, with the range of psychologists
who were trained there. During the training, I specialized in psychology at the University
of North Florida. I attended classes both in the early 1980s and several more
day had to complete a research and writing skills
with students having to complete a research program and a reputation for doing unique studies.
If service would be defined in a broad perspective, I have emphasized service
to the profession rather than to the university.
Teaching Psychology

Teaching, for me, has been dichotomized into two types of courses—the introductory course to psychology and everything else. I chose to teach Introduction to Psychology for several reasons: (a) I enjoy turning students on to psychology; (b) The course forces me to keep abreast with the entire field, and (c) A general course forces me to focus on basic questions about the mind that are often forgotten when one specializes. To this date, some of my best professional moments have come from discussions with first-year students about basic psychological questions. My upper level courses always revolve around two topics—disordered behavior (with an emphasis on physical/neural problems) and the history and theories of psychology. The history course provides a forum for the more philosophical questions about psychology within a scholarly and historical context. The other courses allow me to pursue a strong biopsychosocial approach to understanding human behavior, especially abnormal behavior. I have always taken great pride in teaching outside the classroom, including the laboratory and clinic. All my research students, whether undergraduate, graduate, or postdoctoral, have published with me. In my experience, the laboratory is a unique place for further learning and the stimulation for additional education. Additionally, all research students have pursued advanced careers in such areas as law, medicine, biology, and psychology. These students have always been my colleagues as I relied on them much more than they will ever imagine. To this day, their criticism and collegiality remain important to me.

Research Opportunities

My research has focused on understanding how biological, psychological, and cultural factors play a role in mediating human brain function. After exploring several measurement variables, my focus shifted to biological factors, namely antipsychotic or neuroleptic medications. The psychological issues I have typically emphasized have been the effects of perception and awareness in mediating the control of higher cortical functions, such as problem solving. These two lines of research required the use not only of “normal” subjects but clinical ones as well. The need for clinical subjects presents challenges in a university liberal arts setting. Finally, cultural issues have been important in my research. For example, I have been interested in how culture, especially the Hispanic culture, modulates the expression of brain function and dysfunction.

To pursue this line of research I needed the assistance of colleagues with larger populations of Hispanics. Fortunately, I was able to secure visiting professorships at the University de Madrid and also of Grenada, in Spain. I had previously been unsuccessful in establishing research collaborations in Puerto Rico, through the American Psychological Association’s Visiting Psychologist Program, and Argen-
tina, through a Fulbright Scholar award. These colleagues were more interested in pursuing behavioral and psychodynamic interests.

My research career has always focused on the presentation and eventual publication of research studies. To date, I have presented numerous studies at professional and scientific meetings in North America and abroad and over 100 of my articles, 48 chapters, and 6 books have been published, mostly in English. Also, I co-established Plenum Publishing Corporation’s book series in neuropsychology (15 to date) with Cecil Reynolds of Texas A & M University, and the journal Neuropsychology Review (4 volumes to date) with Gerald Goldstein from the University of Pittsburgh.

In recent years, questions of mind and brain have become very important to me. Clearly, the most unusual opportunity to answer such questions has come in the form of working with Roger Sperry, psychology’s only Nobel Laureate. Between 1992 and his death in 1994, I worked closely with Sperry in his emphasis on the study of consciousness and values. To accomplish this we stayed in close contact via telephone and fax, and I visited him at the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena every 3 to 4 months. Currently, I am assembling a festschrift of his former doctoral and postdoctoral students. At the 1994 meeting of the American Psychological Association (APA) to be held in Los Angeles, approximately 45 collaborators from nine different countries and spanning five decades of teaching and research will present research that has been spawned by Sperry’s ideas.

Service to the Profession

My service has been directed toward the profession of psychology, in general, and clinical neuropsychology in particular, although I have pursued both in parallel tracks. For psychology, I chose to participate at the state level where I began my involvement as a member of the Program Committee of the North Carolina Psychological Association. After agreeing to co-chair the committee several years later, my co-chair moved to the South Pacific and left me with the formidable task of developing the conference by myself. After chairing several successful conferences I was elected president of the organization. With the able assistance of Sally Cameron, executive director, several changes were instituted including the establishment of the North Carolina Psychological Foundation. I went on to serve as its Founding President and also to acquire a building and a permanent home for both organizations through the acquisition of a $350,000 gift.

I have also become involved with the APA in several capacities, mostly in education and minority issues. Within education, I served on and later chaired the Committees for Undergraduate Education (establishing the St. Mary’s conference; see McGovern, 1993), and Continuing Education (formulating the concept of mandatory education for licensed psychologists). I was later elected to and eventually chaired the Board of Convention Affairs (and APA’s 101st convention in Toronto). In Minority Affairs, I served as chair of the Awards Committee for the Minority Fellowship Program, directed by James Jones. In addition, I served on
the Board of Directors for Division Two (Teaching of Psychology) of APA by chairing its Undergraduate, Ethnic Minority Affairs, and later the Fellows Committees. In Division 40 (Clinical Neuropsychology), I served as a Member-at-Large and Ethnic Minority Liaison to APA. Additionally, I was also involved in the issue of prescription privileges by participating on APA's Board of Directors' Task Force on Psychopharmacology and chairing another related task force, for the National Institute of Mental Health. Finally, I served the National Academy of Neuropsychology as chair of the annual conventions during the late 1980s and eventually became the organization's 12th president.

Clinical Service

Interspersed with these academic pursuits, I have been fortunate to develop a successful practice in clinical neuropsychology. Initially I ventured alone, later joining a neurologist, and then settling for about 7 years with a gregarious group of doctor-level psychologists. Recently, I merged my practice with a large multidisciplinary medical practice as the only nonphysician doctor-level health provider. The practice formed a department of neuropsychology that is currently being expanded. Both in and outpatient services to neurologically impaired individuals are provided alongside board certified physicians in a very collegial fashion.

One unique aspect of the practice has been the focus on research. Patients have for a long time comprised a rich source for ideas as well as research volunteers. Further, several of my more able undergraduate students (e.g., Heather Griffith) have worked as technicians in the practice after graduation and prior to entering graduate school. As an outgrowth of our discipline's difficulties with reimbursement and scope of practice, I eventually became involved with the process of coding clinical services. Recently, I was invited to join the American Medical Association's Advisory Committee for the Current Procedural System—the first time a psychologist has been involved in this process. Further, I have been working with the Health Care Financing Administration, a federal agency that establishes guidelines for health care in the United States, to insure that a greater understanding and acceptance of psychology and neuropsychology is achieved by the health-care community.

Conclusion

Although my career journey is not over, and although there is more to reveal, I have tried to present the highlights of my unorthodox approach to psychology. A basic assumption has been that my professional development is but a reflection of my personal life. Teaching, research, and service to psychology have been the basic pillars in my quest for understanding the mind. The obvious direction for me has been to understand behavior better by studying brain disorders within a biopsychosocial context. Underlying this approach is the question of consciousness and adaptability.

I believe not only that I have chosen an unconventional career path, but the outcomes have, at times, been difficult to handle. Also, I have chosen to focus on my family that now includes three children, a difficult task alongside my career. Further, my base of operations has been a regional university not typically geared for a professional life such as mine. Hence, one may wonder how all this could have happened. My accomplishments are probably due to a combination of factors. My family has always been extremely supportive, and I believe the university has allowed me unusual flexibility, including the opportunity to develop a private practice. Earlier in my career I thought that establishing myself at a regional, and then relatively small, university would be detrimental, and it was never my intention to stay at UNC-Wilmington for more than 3 to 5 years. However, as my career developed, the base of operations seemed to become much more important than other factors such as quality of life and flexibility. Also, being a political refugee from another country encourages one to work extremely hard and take very, very little for granted. Finally, I have tried to develop a creative, energetic, and sustained plan to accomplish my goals.

Surprisingly, many of my initial goals have been accomplished and success and notoriety have followed, something I have been totally unprepared to handle. As a consequence, for the last 2 years my focus has been on an intellectual and personal re-charting of the unconventional path I began many years ago. Having established myself, both professionally in psychology and personally in the United States has freed me to pursue the important questions about the mind that I began considering as a young person.

I chose a career that would reflect my life and fulfill my intellectual curiosity. My questions about the mind appear unanswerable, but the process of questioning has been exciting. The rewards have been immeasurable. I can only hope that when it is all said and done, I can satisfactorily answer the question Roger Sperry always asked, "Have I made a difference?".

Reference