

1

Introduction

*Connecting Academics and Practice
in Corrections*

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The essays to follow are written by professors with practical experience in corrections. Each essay contains the author's valuable and insightful reflections on their efforts to achieve important objectives while employed in the field. Like academia, the workplace is an environment in which important knowledge is produced and disseminated. The advantage of drawing from academic scholars with practical experience in corrections is that they can combine "real world" and academic knowledge and show the relevance between the two. The authors use their real world experiences to illustrate theoretical and methodological concepts and to demonstrate approaches to practice. In retrospectively applying their theories and perspectives to corrections, the authors contribute to the development of a bridge between academic scholarship and practice.

This first chapter is designed to introduce the reader to the book's two main tasks. First, it seeks to establish the value of integrating course work and practice by discussing some of the key benefits, difficulties, and general strategies involved in making connections between academics and practice. Second, it provides a preview by describing the general nature and purposes of the collection of essays, including an identification of the types of issues covered by the authors.

❖ THE VALUE OF INTEGRATING ACADEMICS AND PRACTICE

Many if not most educators, professionals, and students would agree that it is important to be able to make connections between academic course work and everyday life, including professional practice. Instead of simply hoping that students will find a way to apply what they have learned in school after graduation, their abilities to use academic knowledge in practice must be cultivated while they are still in school. Relating concepts taught in courses to real world scenarios in assignments, tests, and other activities is good practice for applying them “for real” at work and in other environments. It cannot be assumed that the ability to make connections between academics and practice comes naturally. It can be difficult to make connections between what is learned in courses and what happens in practice even in studies oriented more toward professional practice. For example, social work students may find it difficult to see the relevance of theory to their experiences at internship or practicum sites (partly because of conflicting goals between the agencies and the academic discipline), even though making theory–practice connections seems to be one of the main purposes of such programs (Lewis & Bolzan, 2007). Also, students have their own backgrounds and theoretical orientations that may clash with some of the people they work with or under when entering the field, which could create interference or lack of support in attempts to connect academics and practice. Thus, to truly understand the usefulness of connecting academics to practice, studies must also be directed toward learning *how* to apply academics to practice and vice versa, not just *about* academic and practice subjects. The authors of this collection of essays assist here by exhibiting some connections between scholarship and practice.

Often, the relevance of social scientific concepts to practice is not immediately obvious. For example, one of the contributors to this volume, N. Prabha Unnithan, points out in an earlier article (1999) that it can be difficult to make connections between abstract criminology and criminal justice policy, although they can become clear upon a careful examination of the relationships between certain theories and policy types. (“Get tough” policies, for instance, are based in deterrence or rational choice and “just desserts” punishment theories.) Policies and programs created to deal with crime have their foundation in some kind of crime causation theory, and social research methods are used to test their effectiveness (Unnithan, 1999). It is important for students to understand the relevance of criminology to practice, but intensive steps must be taken to make connections between the two clearer. To achieve this goal, instructors use various methods to bring discussions of practice into course work. These methods include analyses of policy-relevant readings and assignments that require students to make the connections between criminological theory and criminal justice policy. For application assignments and reading materials intended to connect coursework with practice to work, however, they must be embraced (Unnithan, 1999). Often, instructors hear the complaint that information taught in their courses, such as theory, is not relevant or useful to real life or prospective careers. This view may be supported by organizational cultures wherein academic knowledge clashes with workplace norms, values, beliefs, and objectives. While educators, professionals, and students equally share the burden of making academics practical, students will hopefully be open to the possibility that it is the reluctance to learn academic material and how to apply it that ultimately renders it useless to some people.

Stohr (1999) argues that a partnership between academics and practice can improve ethical behavior in corrections. Professor Stohr reveals that while she was an undergraduate criminal justice student, she did not fully realize the relevance of her ethics studies to employment in corrections. Later, after working as a correctional officer and prison counselor, she experienced this relevance firsthand: “On virtually a daily basis at the prison, I was faced with both minor and/or major ethical considerations” (p. 91). These considerations included ensuring the consistent and fair treatment of inmates and reporting violations by “friendly” inmates as well and by reporting verbally abusive staff, racist comments by supervisors, harassment (sexual and otherwise), staff’s failure to perform duties, and supervisory approaches

that threaten security (Stohr, 1999, p. 91). While Professor Stohr admits that at times she struggled to make the right choices, she believes that her professors helped forearm her to confront ethical dilemmas. Her experiences thus have very important implications regarding the connection between theory and practice. When thinking abstractly about how we will conduct ourselves in our prospective careers or not thinking about it at all, we may assume that because we are good people, we will do the “right thing” and clearly know what the right thing is. However, without some kind of early practice struggling with ethical issues and other matters presented in criminal justice courses, students remain inadequately prepared for the challenges of the workplace. Indeed, the process of transforming formal book knowledge into practical knowledge begins while one is still in school, especially if the formal knowledge is being applied to authentic problem solving (Collin & Tynjälä, 2003). Thus, as Stohr (1999) demonstrates, academics have much to offer in promoting ethical conduct in work environments, which means very real benefits for both staff and management.

Some academic subjects have more direct relevance to the workplace, including ethics and social scientific studies of organizational environments and their broader institutional contexts. Workers who understand the social structures in place and social processes operating beyond their immediate positions and specific organizational units (departments or programs, for example) are better prepared for career success and making beneficial contributions to the organization and community. It is important to avoid approaching practical experience with tunnel vision, concentrating merely on the duties of one’s job and the functioning of one’s unit. This principle seems to be apparent in Gordon and McBride’s (2008) *Criminal Justice Internships: Theory Into Practice*, a popular text used to prepare students to learn from their internships, including making connections between academics and practice. In this book, three chapters in particular cover subjects that place practical experiences within larger philosophical and social scientific contexts. Ethics are covered in Chapter 8, including discussions of corruption, misconduct, quality of job performance, confidentiality, appropriate interpersonal relationships, reporting unethical behavior, the role of personal values, and, generally, ensuring justice and fairness in the criminal justice system. Organizational structures (formal and informal), a topic of great interest to sociologists and social psychologists who study formal organizations, are covered in Chapter 9. Noting that organizational variables affect group and individual behavior, the authors spend much of the chapter applying pioneering sociologist

Max Weber's "ideal type" organizational framework to two hypothetical criminal justice agencies (one public, one private). In Chapter 10, the author draws from the disciplines of political science, economics, and law to discuss topics such as politics and power, globalization, budgeting, legislation, and social control. The subjects covered in these three chapters are those that criminal justice–social science students will likely come across several times before graduating.

Social scientific knowledge has important implications for practice and policy; it is relevant to the real world of work if persons actually employ it and do so wisely. But practice also informs scholarship, creating a reciprocal relationship between academics and practice. As McNeill (2000) argues, theory and practice should "interrogate" one another. This interrogation must be localized, meaning that the relevance of one to the other must be viewed within each unique context in which practice takes place. The people, places, variables, and relevant theories that are present across situations are very diverse, so while some patterns can be found across contexts, theoretical-practical understandings that emerge in some situations may not apply to others (at least not without modification). According to McNeill (2000), "criminology performs a service for practitioners by sharpening their grasp of the relationships between values, understandings of crime and criminalisation, policy and practice responses to them, and evidence of the effectiveness of these responses" (p. 113) while practice in turn offers criminology "the detail and depth of individual and local experience" (p. 113).

In corrections, several offending reduction strategies target the possible causes of crime; by eliminating or neutralizing the *criminogenic* factors acting on some individuals, it is hoped that they will discontinue offending. Many of these strategies are influenced, at least in part, by theories proposing causes of crime. If these strategies work, if they lead to beneficial outcomes, theories on which they are based can be validated to some extent, but if they do not work (or do not work very well), then the theoretical bases must be reevaluated. Hence, theory influences practice, and practice in turn influences theory. People working with offenders serve important social welfare and justice functions by working to reduce harm to victims, potential victims, and offenders (McNeill, 2000). In doing such work, however, one may slip into becoming concerned only with administrative routines that maintain criminal justice systems (not that these are unimportant) and not the causes of crime and what to do about them. Criminology enables practitioners working with offenders "to think differently about their work and to develop their practice" (McNeill, 2000, p. 108).

Practice and academics not only inform one another but also overlap. In fact, one does not have to work as a teacher or researcher in a collegiate setting *to be* a criminologist, political scientist, anthropologist, sociologist, psychologist, and so on. The work of some field professionals is defined by the practice of academic disciplines, making them *practicing* criminologists, political scientists, anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, and so on. The common ground between academics and practice should not be surprising. The study of human behavior and society for the sake of solving real world problems has been a cornerstone of social scientific disciplines, such as sociology, since their early development. Social scientists working primarily in academic settings also tend to be quite concerned with the applicability of their work to solving problems, and many are making deliberate attempts to increase the applied value of their disciplines to meet the needs of current populations (Ruggiero & Weston, 1991).

Because they use social scientific knowledge extensively in the field, social science practitioners are in a strong position to recognize and discuss the practical value of academic disciplines. Practicing sociologists who participated in a survey conducted by Ruggiero and Weston (1991) identified academic topics, including deviance, social control, and criminal justice, as relevant to their work and stressed that it is important for students to learn about practicing sociology and be exposed to examples. It was clear that they perceived that their work fit into many of the subjects traditionally taught in introductory sociology courses. The practitioners identified “what sociological practice is really like,” “the importance of research and theory for practice,” and “the fundamentals of sociology” as the most important issues to be taught to introductory sociology students (Ruggiero & Weston, 1991, p. 216). Further, they considered three aspects of what sociological practice is really like to be especially important for students: “that practice can have a positive impact on society and often is oriented toward social change,” “that there is a wide variety of potential applications,” and “that sociological practice actually exists and one can be a sociologist outside academic settings” (Ruggiero & Weston, 1991, p. 216). In many cases, college students will not become formal practitioners of the disciplines they study. Still, social science coursework is based on the hope that all students taking social science courses, in some way, will become social science practitioners—that they will use their studies to improve their performance at work and make contributions to society.

Integrating school-based and work-based learning, theory, and practice, for example, is essential in developing expertise in one’s employment field. More specifically, actively engaging in problem solving is the key to being able to use formal educational knowledge in the

workplace (Collin & Tynjälä, 2003). While students may value the knowledge they are gaining in their courses and hold the belief that it has the potential to be applied in practice, how to use this knowledge to solve problems in the workplace may not be readily apparent (Collin & Tynjälä, 2003). Real life examples of persons applying academic knowledge to practical problem solving, both successful and unsuccessful, can be helpful to students developing their problem-solving abilities.

In addition to internship and practicum work experience, there are a variety of ways that real world knowledge of the field may be brought into course work—for example, field trips, guest speakers, service learning projects, and brief experiences in practical settings (such as police ride-alongs). These learning strategies are effective ways to demonstrate the concepts being taught in the course and therefore bridge theory and practice, and they help students make more informed career choices (Payne, Sumter, & Sun, 2003). By using practical experience to illustrate theoretical and methodological concepts and research trends, it is easier to see the connection between academics and practice. (Robert F. Meier and Teresa F. Smith cover internships and experiential learning in-depth in Chapter 16.)

Further, professors and instructors often bring practical knowledge into their courses using their own field experiences. College teachers have extensive formal educational backgrounds. Much of the knowledge that they impart in courses stems from their own formal learning experiences. However, like anyone else, they have also learned from workplace experiences. Many were at one time in the same position as their students participating in internships or practicum or working in jobs related to their studies. Their experiences often have a great deal of relevance to the material taught in courses, such as when an event or situation can or cannot be explained by a theory, illustrates a concept, or is consistent with or an exception to a research trend. A teacher's practical experience is therefore a very valuable teaching resource. Drawing from personal experience has at least three benefits: It helps capture students' attention by adding a "human touch" to lectures, provides concrete examples to help clarify concepts, and offers students insights into potential areas of work. Thus, students can benefit from the practical experiences of their teachers as well.

❖ A PREVIEW OF THE ESSAYS

This collection of essays offers another way to bring the field into course work. The authors use their personal experiences to help teach academic knowledge. The book is a blend of a more traditional way to

present course material (readings from a book) with a more real world approach, as each author is a type of presenter with personal experience in the field. The reciprocal relationship between academics and practice is inherent throughout the essays, as they provide students with knowledge that can be related to the field but do so by applying practical experience to the academic study of corrections. As stated earlier, problem solving is essential to making connections between academics and practice. The authors of the essays often discuss their attempts to solve problems at the workplace and explicitly or implicitly offer possible solutions to current problems. While the authors identify several problems in corrections work, it should be noted that the book has optimistic intentions.

Often, when professors and instructors create activities intended to help students make connections between course work and practice, they require students to report on practical experiences and find common ground between academics and practice. This book does the opposite: Professors report on *their* experiences and place them within scholarly frameworks. The essays also exemplify how to learn from personal experience—how to use personal experiences as evidence of reality without making false generalizations. The authors apply general theories, principles, and empirical trends as frameworks for understanding their experiences (reason deductively, from the general to the specific), while avoiding the opposite—making broad generalizations based on their unique personal experiences. Their discussions of their experiences are grounded in scholarship; the essays go beyond simple storytelling, although each tells an interesting and important story. While the essays contain a great deal of advocacy and critique, arguments are based on concrete experience and scholarly analysis.

Throughout the essays, authors tackle questions such as the following:

- What challenges or problems arose in dealing with correctional clients or employees? What ethical concerns did you have? Were you properly prepared to deal with offenders? What might have you done differently?
- What was your initial experience like? Did the assumptions that you had about working in corrections turn out to be realistic? Did you have to modify your approach to your work?
- What specific strategies or general approaches to treatment, management, or administration did you use and were they effective? Were there any theories or perspectives supported or negated by personal experiences?

- Which harmful and/or helpful conditions and situations did you experience? Which conditions and/or situations inhibited or facilitated your efforts?
- What intrapersonal tools did you use to cope with your correctional experience? How did you relieve stress, deal with frustrations, and handle the many contradictions inherent in a corrections job?
- What kinds of empirical issues did you encounter? How did your experiences compare to broader research trends? If you were involved in policy or program evaluation, what kinds of challenges did you face—where did you and the agency succeed, and where did you and the agency fall short? Does your experience have any research and/or policy implications?
- Were there interesting relationships and interactions with system-involved persons and/or other employees worthy of discussion? Were there any interesting characters?
- What did you learn about yourself?

While the authors chose and developed their own topics, writing style, and structure, each essay includes pertinent personal background information, a workplace overview (descriptions of the agency, relevant programs, specific sites, and employment positions held), a narrative analysis of experiences (conditions, routines, and events serving as evidence supporting the author's arguments), and the lessons learned from the experiences. Further, each chapter, including this introduction and the conclusion, ends with sets of discussion questions and recommended readings. The questions are designed to facilitate discussions and assist in digesting the material in the chapter. The recommended readings identify related literature that offers further exploration into the subjects of the essays.

Several specific issues will be encountered throughout the essays. Some essays deal with operating correctional organizations—with administration, management, supervision, frontline staff, and even prisoner advocacy and protection issues. Some deal with services such as mental health care, therapy and counseling, treatment programs, and education. Some deal with interpersonal relationships at work, such as relationships with superiors and coworkers and rapport and proper social distance with sanctioned persons. Some essays deal with personal struggles—such as workplace stress and coping, personal journeys and self-discovery, tinkering with problem-solving strategies, and assessing if one is truly making a beneficial impact

(making a difference)—while others deal with connecting corrections to larger social issues, such as social inequality, discrimination, social change, social justice, and working with women and minority populations. Finally, the essays occasionally offer a bit of corrections history. In terms of the types of corrections covered, the essays offer a sampling from the three general areas of incarceration, community corrections, and juvenile corrections, as authors worked in prisons or prison systems, probation or parole, and residential or community juvenile corrections.

Also, the types of scholarship that authors associate with their practical experiences are very diverse. Because of the nature of the book—reflective essays on personal experiences—its mission is not to impose theoretical, methodological, or philosophical standardization but to draw from the unique experiences of authors with different scholarly and professional backgrounds. The nature of the book also means that the authors will be more subjective. The essays are quite different from what crime and justice scholars typically write. The authors often take sides on contested issues, and their views may seem controversial at times. In fact, several other scholars and practitioners will disagree with them. The essays may draw several kinds of reactions from the reader, including agreement and disagreement as well as anger, sadness, and surprise. All of these feelings, however, can accompany learning. While each essay offers, in some way, a persuasive argument, it is not the intention of the book as a whole to advocate any particular views or opinions. Rather, the book intends to reveal what the authors went through while working in the field and what they now think of their experiences in an effort to bring scholarly concepts to life and demonstrate the relevance between academics and practice.

Two more important points need to be raised before ending this chapter. First, while it is hoped that the essays help prepare readers for corrections work by offering a sort of window into what it can be like to work in the field (through the eyes of professors), it is not the intention of this book to offer advice, expert or otherwise, on how to practice *specifically*. Rather, it intends to help prepare readers by helping them to see the connections between academic studies and practice. This book does not pretend to be a technical training manual for practicing corrections, and it is not intended to interfere with professional field training. It does not intend to *direct* readers to think, feel, or act in certain ways, although essays may compel them to approach corrections work with conviction, determination, and intelligence. It is hoped,

then, that this book serves the corrections profession by playing a role in educating its workers.

The second point has to do with optimism. The following essays offer frank and honest accounts of the tough conditions experienced by persons working in corrections. As some authors state, the reality of working in prison is often very different from workers' preconceived ideas. In some way, the authors may often be revealing what they perceive to be the "ugly truths" of the corrections profession. Some of the stories have to do with persons who entered the field as idealists, fueled perhaps by their college education, only to have their idealism severely threatened by rude awakenings in the form of hostile interactions with persons in custody as well as fellow employees, the inability to have a positive impact, frustration with the administrative failings of the system, and/or social injustices. It will become clear that these conditions played a significant role in some authors' decisions to leave corrections. It is not the intention of this book, however, to make one pessimistic about working in corrections and striving to achieve its goals. While this book intends to give readers insights into the many challenges and obstacles in corrections work, it also intends to offer possible solutions and hope. The frank stories are better interpreted as warnings of some of the struggles that may be encountered—warnings that may help others prepare to meet the challenges that threaten to strip the professional of ambition and compassion.

Corrections workers are charged with controlling, punishing, and changing individuals, which makes adversarial relationships almost inevitable. Consequently, workers must take caution and protect themselves and others from manipulative, harmful behavior on the part of persons under correctional supervision. Additionally, it can seem that peers and superiors do not take a conscientious approach to their work and that they are there mostly for the paycheck. All too often, coworkers engage in misconduct themselves, creating moral and ethical dilemmas for colleagues who disapprove of such behavior. But while one should avoid being naive about these types of matters, it is also important to avoid the other extreme of becoming cynical because persons under correctional supervision often have honest intentions and engage in prosocial, or at least harmless, actions, and the field is full of many honest hardworking professionals who persistently believe in the goals of good corrections. It should be recognized that the following essays also offer accounts of successes, rewarding experiences, or even the bright side of problematic situations.

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❖ RECOMMENDED READINGS

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What kind of work are you interested in? Do you have a specific job or career in mind? How important is a college education and degree to your career goals? Explain your answer.

2. Do you think that the material covered in social science and criminal justice courses (theories, concepts, principles, research methodology, empirical trends, etc.) will be useful to you at work? Why or why not? Does anything from your studies so far look like it might be relevant to practice—a certain theory, for example—and if so, how?
3. What are the difficulties in making connections between academics and practice? For example, what are potential problems in trying to apply material learned in class to work? What kinds of problems do you think you personally will have in connecting academics and practice?