My Journey from Research to Impact: Long Road and Much Traffic

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Summary: In this article, Amina Memon discusses some of the highlights of her career in applied cognitive and social psychology including those who inspired her. Copyright © 2014 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

My passion for psychological explanations for human behaviour began in high school when I decided to study Advanced Level Psychology. It was the first year the subject was being taught at this level, and I managed to get individual tutoring from my teacher Richard Gross (e.g., Gross, 2010) in the science behind psychology. An understanding of hypothesis testing and the scientific method has to be the starting point for any research in Psychology. The next stage is mastering the skills of dissemination. Learning how to interpret and present data in a written report was something I got plenty of practice at during my degree studies at North East London Polytechnic (NELP) [now University of East London (UEL)].

At UEL, I had the good fortune to receive mentoring and guidance from such charismatic leaders as John Radford and my then personal tutor and now dear friend Ernie Govier who instilled in me the importance of having a good grounding in all areas of psychology. However, breadth is no good without in-depth knowledge because to do good research, one has to develop a critical appreciation of the literature and that only comes from detailed study. I choose to focus on the two areas of psychology that most interested me: cognitive and social psychology. One of those topics I was fascinated by was person identification, and it was a couple of my lecturers at NELP Ray Bull and Brian Clifford (e.g., Clifford & Bull, 1978) who inspired me.

This is an example of an area of research where one has to understand the social context in which behaviour occurs. For example, the ability of an eyewitness to recognise a face seen earlier will depend on conditions at the time of encoding, witness demographics as well as what happens during and after the witnessing experience. For example, eyewitness identification may differ younger and older eyewitnesses and whether they are identifying someone from the same ethnic group or of a different race. Whether the witness is being threatened at the time and whether decisions are made in the presence of others are other factors that constitute the social context (refer to Wells, Memon, & Penrod, 2006 for a review).

When addressing an applied question, it is tempting to get out there and attempt to recreate real world conditions and assume that an understanding can be achieved simply by observing the effects of different variables on performance. However, one of the most important lessons that came from my postgraduate studies with Vicki Bruce was the significance of theory in applied work. A good example is my ear-liest studies on the cognitive interview that set out to isolate the individual components used in questioning witnesses. I wanted to understand which of the several techniques elicited the most detailed information from eyewitnesses (Memon, Wark, Bull, & Koehnken, 1997). It was through trial and error that I learned over the years that I could not separate the effects of the different components of the cognitive interview and that the techniques actually work together. For example, it is when the interviewer transfers control to the witness (for example, by allowing the witness to dictate the pace of the interview and pausing) that this then creates optimal conditions for allowing the witness to mentally reinstate the context.

It took several experiments to work out how important the interview structure and skill in communicating with the witness was. It took multiple studies as well as a detailed analysis of interviewer and interviewee behaviour to reach this conclusion. So, another lesson learned was not to stop with a single study. In my later studies, I examined how characteristics of the witness such as their cognitive competence and interviewers (for example, experienced interviewers versus novices) influenced the quality of information obtained in a cognitive interview. It was the theory-driven questions that improved my understanding of the boundary conditions, and I was able to use this information in my training and dissemination activities.

Again with a focus on theory, I developed a good understanding of the numerous variables that can influence eyewitness memory performance. Conducting an eyewitness simulation is no mean feat. Each study is painstakingly time consuming, and achieving a high degree of precision and control is not always possible. However, as an applied researcher, one has to weigh up the pros and cons of doing research in the laboratory with collecting data in the field. In recent years, I have looked at the eyewitness decisions of real witnesses in identification parades, and this work has posed some new challenges (refer to Horry, Memon, Wright, & Milne, 2012). One of the most obvious problems is there is no often no way of determining the ground truth or establishing with any certainty the conditions at the time of encoding and retrieval. It is for this reason that researchers should take care when translating research findings into policy recommendations. One approach that I found helpful in my research on the cognitive interview was to conduct a study space analysis. This is an in-depth analysis of every study that has been conducted on a given topic, and it allows us to identify the breadth and adequacy of an empirical literature base and to assess trends and gaps in the area that...
individual researchers might otherwise not see (Malpass et al., 2008). For an example of how this approach can supplement a meta-analysis, refer to Memon et al. (2010).

You now have the impression that I chose a difficult area to study, but I have not been put off working in the laboratory on procedures that can simulate what may happen in the real world. Our work on memory conformity or how one witness can change another witness’s memory during discussion (Gabbert, Memon, & Allan, 2003) is a great example of how our understanding of social influence processes can contribute to application. I continue to be driven by the need to apply my work and take up any opportunity I can to get involved in training, expert testimony and communicating with non-academic users of my research.

Conducting applied research has its challenges. The ability to translate laboratory research into accessible and useful information for the non-psychologist or even the non-cognitive psychologist is a rather specialist skill but one which all researchers should have. Students can learn so much from these information giving and sharing activities, and some of my most interesting research questions come from my interactions with the users of my research.

In recent years, I have begun to make a more concerted effort to influence policy and practice in the Psychology and Law areas. I recently completed a master’s degree in Human Rights, and I am on advisory boards of private and public sector organisations whose goal is to prevent miscarriages of justice. These external links provide an opportunity for researchers to apply psychological research findings and potentially influence policy. For example, in my role as a trustee for the Centre for the Study of Emotion and the Law (http://www.csel.org.uk/), we are looking at how best to disseminate high-quality applied research to benefit people who have been oppressed and victimized and are seeking protection in law. By keeping abreast of developments in related disciplines and going outside of the narrow confines of the university laboratory, the impact of research can be far reaching. I would urge students to make the most of social media and networking activities to engage with users of our research and if possible forge collaborations earlier rather than later in the research process. When writing grant applications, involve practitioners in the design of the research studies and in the dissemination of research findings early on in the research process.

My research is increasingly driven by policy and practice goals but that still leaves time for intellectual playfulness. One of current fun projects is looking at why eating a yet unpeeled pistachio gives us more pleasure than a shelled one. In a nutshell, it might have something to do with effort. The project arose out of a conversation with one collaborator (Rob Jenkins) about mindfulness at a conference and another (Jens Hellmann) over a beer. We are still trying to crack the procedure! With a new colleague (Laura Mickes), I am planning a project to look at what makes female comedians funny and whether men are more likely to laugh at their jokes than women. We will begin sourcing our sample soon by visiting local comedy clubs. Who says research cannot be fun! That brings me to my final point, which is what makes doing research such a rewarding experience. For me, it is all about working with others, because exchanging research ideas with colleagues is what makes our research grow, so go tweet your ideas rather than keep them to yourself. Knowledge comes from sharing and from working together and learning from each other’s mistakes. Find as many mentors and positive role models as you can to support you during your career and do not be afraid of venturing outside the laboratory. If you are as fortunate as I have been, your mentors and collaborators in your research will propose, and you will keep trailblazing. Finally, I would like to leave you with a quote from William James (1890): *Act as if what you do makes a difference, it does."

REFERENCES


