

Research Assessment 9

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Analysis:

Last week, I went on my first mentor visit and I was able to learn a great deal about the work of Forensic Psychiatrists in a legal setting. Dr. Dunn invited me to observe a trial being held at the Dallas County Courthouse in downtown Dallas. Dr. Dunn was testifying on the mental status of an individual for the prosecution. While the state was trying to prove that the defendant intentionally and knowingly harmed his mother, the defense was trying to defend their client by claiming the exact opposite even if there was an extensive amount of evidence against their case. The defendant being evaluated was being charged with beating his mother to death, otherwise known as murder. As a result, it was interesting to witness courtroom procedures involving expert witnesses.

First, some background information on the trial. The defendant, Melik Smith, was found hiding in a bedroom clothes closet while his mother, Onkuli Morris was found dead wrapped in a comforter in a bathroom. The police were initially called to the scene because of a worried individual alerted the police. The individual had not heard from Morris for days and had knocked on the door of the apartment. Smith however had informed the individual that Morris was not home. The person then left a note on the windshield of Morris's car which was later revealed to have been removed by Smith through surveillance footage. When police officers entered the apartment to investigate, they found a trail of blood leading to the bathroom. A bunch of bloody clothes and the murder weapon was found in the apartment were found. Smith was arrested and taken to Dallas County Jail and Morris was taken to the ME's office. After the medical examiner, Dr. Lenfest, performed an autopsy, the cause of death was determined as blunt force trauma.

Now onto the mental health perspective of the case. The defendant had a history of diagnoses as an individual with paranoid schizophrenia (now only called schizophrenia). As a result, he had delusions, hallucinations, disorganized thinking, and poor social skills. All of these caused Smith to need medication to keep his schizophrenia in check. In fact, his mother was the one who took Smith to his doctor

for injections of medication. I learned that the defense psychologist evaluated Smith based on a few interviews and a few interrogation tapes that were taped when he was medicated. The tapes showed that Smith was psychotic at the time and was having hallucinations. Additionally, the expert psychologist mentioned how Melik Smith unfortunately had a traumatizing childhood and upbringing. She explained how Smith had been physically and verbally abused by his grandmother and how he later became aggressive with his sister. The psychologist also commented on how Smith could form judgements of intent even with schizophrenia when questioned. She elaborated by explaining how knowing right from wrong can influence that evaluations. I was able to connect this to previous knowledge I had about insanity. Interestingly enough, the wording of the defense psychologists comment on knowing between right and wrong is the base of the Brawner Test. As mentioned in my Evidence of Learning 2, "under this test, defendants are insane if, because of mental disease or defect, they lack the substantial capacity to appreciate the criminality of their actions or to conform their behavior to legal requirements." She also made sure to add though that she could not provide an opinion on his intent. However, the State made sure to drag up that the defendant undoubtedly intentionally and knowingly harmed his mother. They brought out information such as the fact that Smith cleaned up the crime scene and wrapped his mother in a comforter. They also brought up how he was aware enough to visit an ATM and to try to make a withdrawal. The defense in turn brought up insanity, but the defense psychologist stated that she couldn't provide an opinion on that subject. Additionally, the prosecution objected to the defense's attempt to turn the case into an insanity trial. The defense defended their attempt by bringing in the precedent of Jackson case involving guilt or innocence. I later searched for the case mentioned and found out that there are many Supreme Court cases involving a Jackson that later became precedent. After careful deliberation, I determined that the case mentioned was a 1979 Supreme Court case called JACKSON vs. VIRGINIA. After the expert witness's testimony was over, Dr. Dunn mentioned how he agreed with the defense psychologist's expert opinion. He told me about how it was his professional opinion that Smith was very mentally ill and that he couldn't comment about Smith's intent.

During the entire testimony of the defense psychologist, the jury was absent which confused me. Why wasn't their a jury present during a trial as important as a murder trial? Doesn't that seem odd? I later found out that the jury was absent

because it was a hearing that was being conducted outside of the jury's presence. The hearing was being held by the judge to determine whether or not a mental health defense could be admissible and whether not the judge should allow mental health illness evidence before mitigation. This is part of what is called a judge's gatekeeping function. In regards to forensic psychiatry, the judge's function is to determine the expert witnesses testimony should be allowed, Since the judge sustained the prosecution's objection, it was made certain that the defense could not claim the defense of insanity. However, the judge allowed the defense attorneys to argue the defense of diminished capacity. Although a diminished capacity defense does not allow a defendant to claim not guilty, it does allow the defendant being convicted of a lesser offense. As a result, Smith was being charged with murder instead of capital murder.

Overall, I learned a tremendous amount about the relationship between law and psychology. I was able to observe the way both fields cohesively interacted with each other to create great testimonies. Additionally, I was able to listen to the expert testimony of a medical examiner on the results of his autopsy on the deceased. This portion of the testifying, although slightly disturbing, appealed to the medical interest in me. I found it very interesting to hear about the procedures used to do the autopsy as well as the information determined from it. Even though I did not plan or expect to learn about anything besides psychology, I am glad that I was able to discern other information as well. Not only that, but I also got to observe the questions the attorneys asked because I might be asked those questions in the future. Even the most miniscule details of the experience helped me gain hands on experience and a good amount of knowledge.