Increasing Forensics Research: Recognizing Our Strengths

David Worth

Much of the usual critique of forensics research emphasizes external constraint on (or prevention of) the research process or discusses apparent inadequacies in forensics research methods (Klumpp, 1990; Logue & Shea, 1990; McKerrow, 1990; Porter, 1990, for example). In many ways, both of these lines of inquiry appear to be correct. I wish to propose, however, that we are not taking advantage of our present opportunities. Assuming that there are researchers who are capable and that the normal configuration of forensics positions around the academy is not likely to change on a large scale, we remain faced with the question of how to improve our research in terms of both quality and quantity despite external forces and lack of time. In this response I will first focus on the nature of forensics scholarship as a lifestyle and second on kinds of scholarship that recognize and take advantage of that lifestyle. Finally, I will suggest that institutional mechanisms could be developed to encourage and aid research.

To begin, we must consider the idea that the difference between productivity for forensics and non-forensics scholars is a deeper issue than simply scheduling and time allocation. It is a lifestyle issue. The conditions for a "normal" work-day (or any work period) are radically different between the two groups. In addition, the cycles that characterize the work-year are different. The implication is that the lifestyle, and, accordingly, the work style and resulting work are different.

Non-forensics scholars divide their time between teaching, research, and service. Scholars are able to settle into semester-long and yearly routines that include regular blocks of time devoted to research. These should usually occur on a daily or at least weekly basis. If I teach on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, I can schedule blocks of time, or even perhaps whole days, for research and writing on Tuesdays and Thursdays. The point here is that the conditions for regularity are present and should be taken advantage of in order to do consistent work.

The typical forensics scholar, however, divides her time between all of these in addition to the "main" job of coaching, administration, and travel. Because of travel, several weeks of each semester are simply unavailable for research and writing. Tournament travel may mean leaving Thursday afternoon and returning Sunday night. Thursday will be spent packing, picking up vans and petty cash, preparing to leave, etc. Monday hopefully will be spent as a day off or as a teaching-only day because one is tired. So, on a tournament week, the forensics

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scholar loses most of the week. It will be spent on forensics exclusively. Weeks between tournaments will be spent catching up on grading, planning lectures, and research/writing. All of this will occur in addition to finding time for "having a life" that other scholars will enjoy on weekends. Because this lifestyle becomes more hectic at certain times of the year (around nationals, for example), and a semester or quarter really is not really much time, forensics professionals are very nearly forced to live much of their professional time in a much less structured routine that often precludes, or at least discourages, regularly scheduled time that can be devoted to research. For many, it seems that research feels like something external to the daily demands of our jobs. Administrative concerns absolutely must be addressed, the coaching must be done, and the travel is unavoidable for most coaches.

I am arguing here that many of the concerns expressed by Billings can be addressed, in part, by a real examination of the lifestyle and the very real effects it has on work habits. Clearly, there are researchers in forensics who are not well trained, and one can make the case that the time concerns expressed above contribute to that. One can also agree that ill-trained researchers tend to produce others of the kind. This is not unique to forensics, however. There are ill-prepared researchers in all areas of the academy. One might argue that in some cases forensics scholars are given more room by their departments. I mean this in a very restricted sense: Because they are away so often, forensics scholars may not be viewed as involved in the daily research endeavor (at least conceptual in nature) of the department, and may therefore be allowed (or left alone) to conduct research with less oversight or input from peers. This might be an area worth studying.

There is, however, nothing intrinsic about forensics scholars that makes them less trainable or less capable of doing research. Indeed, as Billings points out, as coaches for intellectual activity, forensics scholars would appear to be among our most capable. Interestingly, one must acknowledge, as the author does, that writing for speeches is different and that this has been argued to be the cause of lack of publication or for weak style for pieces written by forensics scholars (Klumpp, 1990). I am arguing here that it is lifestyle that contributes to the insufficient research and writing practices that sometimes characterizes forensics research.

The time structure that the forensics scholar must follow, however, appears to be unavoidable for most working in the field. The challenge, then, is to find research and writing practices that better accommodate the forensics scholar. The obvious place for this kind of change is in the area of tenure requirements and work exists studying and arguing for better recognition of forensics instruction as academic labor (Preston, 1995; Jensen, 1993; Murphy & Ferri, 1991; Gill, 1990; Porter, 1986; Klopf & Rives, 1965). Clearly, this basic area of concern holds promise for helping forensics scholars and it is certainly the most logical place to start.

It seems likely, however, that tenure requirements for one class of scholars within a specific field will be slow to change and will be adjusted only in minor ways. In isolated cases, coaches at various levels of academics will be given unique tenure requirements that suit the forensics lifestyle as a profession. Overall, however, it seems clear that we must find ways to conduct research (and thereby meet
standard tenure requirements, along with doing research in order to improve forensic education) that can allow us to work within the time structure of our lifestyle and the concomitant work habits necessitated by that lifestyle. In other words, some of the solution lies in our own choices about conceptualization of study, method, and type of research we produce.

In particular, one way to turn the time structure to our advantage is to use the time at tournaments for research. This can be promoted in two ways. First, researchers can choose methods and subjects that allow them to collect data at tournaments, and second, tournaments can encourage the process of research collection. As I have argued elsewhere (Worth, 2000), the tournament setting is under-researched from the ethnographic approach. As participant observers, coaches are uniquely situated because they spend so much of their time "in the field." In addition, it should be noted that this kind of field research is already funded, eliminating a major barrier to a great deal of ethnographic research.

The richness of the experience of forensic education comes from its experiential nature. We teach and reinforce through the necessity of doing. Given this basic feature of the forensic experience, it is a prime candidate for a method that explicitly looks for structures of lived experience, such as ethnography. In addition, a number of settings present themselves for study within the tournament travel setting. Van rides, hotel stays, and the tournaments themselves each offer many substructures for study in addition to themselves as settings. This response is neither a justification of ethnographic methods nor a guide for research using these methods. The point here is that the time that one might normally view as preventing research can be spent doing it.

Tournaments also offer potential for other kinds of study, both qualitative and quantitative. Usually, national tournaments offer chances to distribute surveys and questionnaires. Rarely does one encounter these at the average tournament. Though there may be regulations on each campus that differ concerning this, perhaps more organized mechanisms could be made available for data collection as a normal part of a tournament. Other areas of the academy routinely use their basic courses for data collection. We should be using our basic activity, the tournament, in the same way. In addition, one might argue that such research will be more appropriate since, while the samples are always similar kinds of people, they do make up the subject of study, as they are direct participants in the process being studied. Thus such research presents a better sample than the typical use of the basic course, in which subjects tend to be "undergraduate students at a large Midwestern university" who might or might not have experience relevant to the topic under study.

In any case, clearly significant samples and, in some cases, sample sizes approaching the level of population (some national tournaments, for example), offered at tournaments present us with myriad possibilities for study. In addition to observational methods mentioned above, researchers have the possibility of interviewing and conducting qualitative research based on data gathered in the interviews. While the tournament day is already busy, tournaments usually offer pockets of time spent waiting for the next event on the schedule. These are times to
schedule interviews. With planning and forethought, one could easily agree to
conduct interviews the morning before the tournament starts on Friday, a time
when many people have to be in the city or town in which the tournament is being
held but when most do little beyond practicing. In addition, there is usually
time before awards spent waiting on tabulation, completion of final rounds and other processes. Clearly, not all tournament structures are the
same, and regional differences in scheduling and travel necessity lead to
differences in the kinds of times I cover here. The point is, however, that
subjects are there and there is usually time somewhere in the weekend. For
researchers in other areas, interviewing subjects who live elsewhere repre-
sents a major hassle and expense. Forensics researchers encounter them as
a matter of necessity since travel is an inherent part of competition.

What we need are mechanisms for encouraging and aiding such research at
tournaments. National tournaments offer review processes for proposal for study.
Such a process seems to be in our own and our students’ interests. In terms of
forensics as a discipline, the review of research procedures is responsible and sens-
sible for the same reasons universities require such processes. Perhaps one of the
major associations should offer a review or approval process that could be used as
a standard for approval. While some organizations have authority only over their
national tournaments, they do set guidelines usually followed by tournaments dur-
during the regular season. Offering a sanctioning process of some kind might be one
way to encourage research and provide a check on procedure that protects subjects
and researchers. Reviewers could be sought who have experience with both foren-
sics and research outside the forensics world. This could be an attractive service
activity for scholars who have left forensics and have moved into more standard
research positions. Since this is not the place for a full proposal for such a mecha-
nism, this outline is necessarily only a sketch. The point here is that some institu-
tional involvement beyond the national tournament level might stimulate research.

Of course no mechanism will increase our research amount and quality un-
less it is utilized. Researchers must choose to do the research. This is where we
must choose to find ways that better fit our lifestyle and allow us to flourish within
the academic structure as it is. I agree with Billings that we will be forced to find
ways of doing more and better research and might argue that more is at stake than
our status as “stepchildren.” Certainly our credibility is at stake. In addition, how-
ever, credit for our intellectual labor is at stake. Also, the potential for improve-
ment of our activity is at stake. This should be the motivation for such research in
the first place. Realistically, our status within the academy will, at least to some
extent, be determined by our research production. It is also determined indirectly
by the success of our students. Better research should be motivated by a desire for
improving forensic pedagogy. Motivated by these two important concerns, foren-
sics researchers should begin to look for ways to capitalize on their current situa-
tion.

In this response I have suggested first an interpretation of the lifestyle of the
forensics scholar as it shapes the possibility of research, and second outlets exist
within the current structure that can be utilized. Finally I have suggested that our
organizational structures could be used to encourage research and improve its quality. Clearly, there are unique pressures and constraints on the forensics scholar. We should realize, however, that there are also unique opportunities for research in our discipline as well.

References


