From Theory to Practice and Back Again in Therapeutic Jurisprudence: Now Comes the Hard Part

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In actuality, therapeutic jurisprudence (TJ) is not and has never pretended to be a full-blown “theory”. More properly, and more modestly, it is simply a “field of inquiry” --in essence a research agenda—focusing attention on the often overlooked area of the impact of the law on psychological well-being and the like. From the very beginning, however, TJ has sought to work with frameworks or heuristics to organize and guide thought.

The very first paper on TJ, for example, spoke of the importance of studying the therapeutic and anti-therapeutic aspects of the law in action, and encouraged us to think of “the law” as legal rules, legal procedures, and the roles and behaviors of legal actors. Especially since the framework is a mere guide for focusing our work, it has held up, even though the categories can sometimes overlap: for example, a judicial sentencing hearing would presumably be classified as a judicial “procedure,” but the manner in which a judge actually conducts the hearing would presumably be classified as a judicial “role.” But since this scheme is merely a conceptual framework and not a true “theory,” we need not worry about exactly where to pigeon-hole a particular item--the item, regardless of its precise classification, would in any event be of interest to the TJ community.

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4 The “and the like” language is intentional, reasserting the point that it is unwise to attempt a precise definition of “therapeutic”. The point is fully discussed in Scope, supra n. 3. The normative side of TJ is still being worked out, but, for now, suffice it to say that, even as a field of inquiry, there is a “soft” normative element in the sense of suggesting that emotional consequences are interesting, important, and ought to be explored. And if the law can be made more therapeutic and less anti-therapeutic in a way that is not terribly controversial (which I think is often the case), the law or its administration should be reformed to accomplish that end. For a recent proposal that TJ adopt the normative approach of the social work profession, see Susan L. Brooks & Robert G. Madden, Relationship-Centered Lawyering: Social Science Theory for Transforming Legal Practice (2010) (hereinafter “Relationship-Centered Lawyering”).


6 Relatedly, the conceptual guide for thinking can prompt investigators to broaden the categories somewhat. Amy Campbell, for example, who concentrates in therapeutic jurisprudence relating to health policy, has sensibly
Despite the importance of all three categories—rules, procedures, and roles—the topic of the present paper relates to the promotion of the development of TJ practices, especially by lawyers and judges, and thus the last of the above-noted categories—the roles and behaviors of legal actors—will have its 15 minutes of fame.\(^7\)

Another conceptual framework that has proven valuable to the growth and practical application of TJ and its practices is the notion of “psycholegal soft spots and strategies”.\(^8\) That concept grew out of TJ’s alliance with Preventive Law (PL), another perspective that, like TJ, falls squarely within the non-adversarial justice domain.\(^9\)

PL preceded TJ and encouraged the lawyer to anticipate and deal with “legal soft spots”—either “trouble spots” to be avoided (e.g., a viable challenge to a will), or “opportunity spots” to be taken advantage of (e.g., gathering documents so that, in the US, one could apply for Medicare the moment one qualifies for it). PL offered TJ certain office practices and frameworks for applying the law therapeutically.\(^10\) TJ’s contribution was to expand the PL focus from “legal” soft spots to “psycholegal” soft spots—the psychological baggage that often accompanies legal moves and measures.

For example, a proposed legal action might not pose a risk of legal vulnerability, but it might cause anxiety, stress, depression, hurt and hard feelings, embarrassment, sibling rivalry, and the like. In such cases, robust counseling—or what some have now dubbed “zealous counseling”\(^11\) or “relationship-centered” legal counseling\(^12\)—might lead lawyers to have conversations with clients about certain strategies for reducing the psychological fallout.

For instance, a mother might, in her will, decide to leave more of her property to her struggling daughter than to her prosperous son. Or she might choose to leave property outright to one of her adult children but to leave it in trust for her other adult child, the one who has had a running battle with

\(^7\) Note that the TJ emphasis on “roles” relates basically to the administration of the law. That emphasis, in turn, flows from another conceptual framework—that of distinguishing proposals for actual law “reform” from those of “applying the existing law more therapeutically.” See David B. Wexler, Applying the Law Therapeutically, 5 Applied and Preventive Psychology 179 (1996). For an application in the area of domestic violence, see Bruce J. Winick, Applying the Law Therapeutically in Domestic Violence Cases, 69 UMKC L. Rev. 33 (2000).


\(^9\) See Nonadversarial Justice, supra n. 3, at 65. In the US, the term “comprehensive law movement” has been used to describe the collection of relevant perspectives. See Susan Davidoff, The Role of Therapeutic Jurisprudence in the Comprehensive Law Movement, in Practicing Therapeutic Jurisprudence: The Law as a Helping Profession 465 (D. Stolle et al., eds., 2000) (hereinafter “Practicing Therapeutic Jurisprudence”). And the recent book by Susan Brooks and Robert Madden focuses on TJ, preventive law, as well as restorative justice and transformative mediation, to build a framework for what they call ‘relationship-centered lawyering.’ See note 3, supra.

\(^10\) See Psycholegal Soft Spots, supra n. 8.


\(^12\) Relationship-Centered Lawyering, supra n. 4.
alcoholism and drug abuse. While these dispositions may be fully acceptable under the prevailing law (and thus not constitute true “legal” soft spots), they may well ruffle feathers within the family. And the TJ/PL sensitive lawyer might thus want to raise with the client these “psycholegal” soft spots, and possible “strategies” for softening them, such as leaving a letter of explanation to the children.

These strategies can involve “opportunity” spots as well—such as how an HIV-positive client, now drafting a will, a living will, and a health care directive, might use the preparation of those documents and the naming of a surrogate decision-maker as an opportunity to contact and attempt a reconciliation with a fallen-away family member.13

The general TJ/PL framework of psycholegal soft spots and strategies covers legal counseling in both the civil and the criminal law realm. In criminal law, for example, Winick has written about how a lawyer might help soften the pernicious impact of legal labeling regarding the “incompetence” of a client to proceed.14

But TJ scholarship has also provided a conceptual framework for thinking specifically about lawyering and judging in the criminal law sphere, using the rather routine case of United States v. Riggs15 as a springboard. Reduced and oversimplified to its bare bones, Riggs involved a defendant suffering from paranoid schizophrenia who, after failing to take his prescribed medication for a few days, was pulled over by the police and found to be illegally in possession of a gun.

Riggs, who remained on bail during the entire process, pled guilty to illegal gun possession and, during a long delay in sentencing, again started taking his medication, was reminded daily by his mother to do so, and also began, on a monthly basis, taking an injection of a long-acting intramuscular medication.

At the sentencing hearing, the judge was impressed with Riggs’ compliance and cooperative attitude, commented that matters seemed “under control,” and sentenced Riggs to 3 years of probation.

Riggs provides a useful vehicle for looking at the “components” of TJ criminal lawyering and judging. Those components are part of a “tripartite framework,”16 which consists of:

1. The Legal Landscape—in this case, a) the ability to defer sentence, to demonstrate that Riggs could live successfully in the community; and b) the ability to impose probation instead of a mandatory requirement to impose incarceration).

2. Treatments and Services—here, the availability of medication to control symptoms, as well as the availability of a long-acting intra-muscular injection.

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13 Practicing Therapeutic Jurisprudence, supra n.9, at 52.
15 370 F.3d 382(4th Cir. 2004), vacated by 125 S. Ct. 1015 (2005).
3. Practices and Techniques—this category relates especially to “roles” of legal actors, and in the present case is illustrated by: a) arranging for the mother to be involved in reminding Riggs to take his daily medication, and b) judicial praise (noting Riggs’ cooperative attitude and that matters seemed ‘under control’).

In Riggs, the use of the above-noted “Practices and Techniques” is more likely the result of commonsense and happenstance, rather than the invocation of principles from the TJ literature. But that literature could add other related practices. For example, literature on enhancing compliance with medical advice or judicial rulings notes the advantage of involving family members, reflected in the case at hand by reminders given by Riggs’ mother. But another practice that could have been used, and that could likely also enhance compliance, would be to conceptualize probation more as a bilateral behavioral contract and less as a unilateral judicial fiat. And the technique of judicial praise, which seems to reinforce law-abiding behavior, might be used also upon the successful completion of probation.

The important point is to underscore the tremendous development of TJ during the last two decades: it has moved from a new twist on mental health law to a psychologically-sensitive approach to law in general; it has become truly interdisciplinary and international; it has moved from theory to practice, and has become increasingly influential in professional formation, especially in legal education, as part of the curriculum and in law school clinics.

Lawyers and judges have been increasingly exposed to these developments and frameworks; they are starting to see and use TJ more explicitly and systematically, more plentifully and powerfully. When I edited the book *Rehabilitating Lawyers: Principles of Therapeutic Jurisprudence for Criminal Law Practice*, I made an effort to collect and publish a number of TJ practices and techniques, such as:

1. An allocution statement prepared by an attorney in the Oklahoma Federal Public Defenders Office to give his clients “voice” and to educate them about the factors that go into a judicial sentencing decision.


3. The pleadings used by John McShane, a lawyer in private practice in Texas, in which he introduced the judge to the role of a TJ lawyer and in which he engaged in what he termed a “jailhouse intervention” to move a client from jail to a treatment facility.

\[\text{17 Id.}\]
\[\text{18 Id.}\]
\[\text{19 David B. Wexler, Two Decades of Therapeutic Jurisprudence, 24 Touro L. Rev. 17(2008).}\]
\[\text{21 Rehabilitating Lawyers, supra n. 11.}\]
\[\text{22 Id. at 173-180.}\]
\[\text{23 Id. at 181.}\]
4. A pleading filed in a sentencing proceeding by an Ottawa law firm urging a community treatment order in part because of the supportive signatures gathered from neighbors of the defendant.\textsuperscript{25}

And every time I attend a TJ meeting at which practitioners and judges present, I hear and learn more. At the 2006 international TJ conference in Perth, Western Australia, for example, information of interest was presented during a panel of judges. Thus, Liverpool Community Court Judge David Fletcher spoke of how, in those instances in which he felt it necessary to impose a short incarcerative sentence, he followed up by promptly sending a supportive letter to the incarcerated individual, following up on discussions earlier had in court regarding matters such as the client’s expressed needs and the availability of certain services. I later obtained a copy of a representative letter and included it in the “Practices and Techniques” section of the \textit{Rehabilitating Lawyers} book.\textsuperscript{26}

Also mentioned at the panel—and later collected in my book—were two practices mentioned by Perth Drug Court Judge Julie Wager: a) rearranging the courtroom seating to accommodate the participation and inclusiveness of extended families, especially important in cases of Aboriginal clients, and b) sponsoring an educational session for all court staff on virus transmission relating to HIV and to Hepatitis C—so as to improve staff reaction to drug addicted clients, clients often avoided by staff because of misplaced fear that proximity alone could be sufficient for spread of the virus from a possibly infected client.\textsuperscript{27}

More recently—at the TJ stream of panels at the 2009 New York City conference of the International Academy of Law and Mental Health—Vancouver Community Court Judge Tom Gove spoke of a few techniques he employs. One was having a client approach the bench to sign a behavioral contract, driving home the importance of the conditions and also giving the client a full sense of participation. Another was sentencing a client to perform community service at a treatment program; the judge thought the client, once exposed to the program up close, might feel comfortable enough to decide voluntarily to partake of its services. That practice, incidentally, would seem to be supported by the body of psychological research on the “priming process” and on “channel factors”—methods that might gently “nudge” a person to avail oneself of services.\textsuperscript{28}

These judicial examples bring to mind the cogent comments recently made by the Hon. Justice Kevin Bell in his review of VCAT(Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal), of which he serves as President. In promoting TJ as an appropriate objective, Justice Bell insightfully described TJ judicial roles as “interstitial,” and remarked: “it [TJ] occupies the space within and allowed by binding laws. It invites the

\textsuperscript{24} Id. at 193.
\textsuperscript{25} Id. at 185.
\textsuperscript{26} Id. at 172.
\textsuperscript{27} Id. at 180.
institution and the judicial officer to administer the law, so far as possible, consistently with promoting the well-being of the participants.”

What we are witnessing, then, with TJ’s “coming of age,” is a bench and bar increasingly interested in and knowledgeable about TJ. Many are extremely supportive and are urging and inviting their colleagues to join in. And, beyond that, we now have a bench and bar already making substantial creative contributions to the actual practice of TJ.

As I have noted elsewhere, my hope is for us to be able to use good concrete examples derived from the various conceptual frameworks to create what might be termed a new type of “TJ case law.” We might, for example, speak of the “HIV family reconciliation case,” the “jail intervention case,” the “Judge Wager seating arrangement case,” and the “Judge Gove community service order case.”

These sorts of cases could be continually collected, disseminated, discussed, critiqued, tweaked, and disseminated again. They could be improved upon by input on practical and logistical issues (“the type of seating arrangement I used, and that worked really well, was a bit different”), issues of wording (“in the HIV family reconciliation example, what about merely saying to the client, ‘why don’t we simply put off signing these documents until next month, and you can think about whether you want to contact your father before our next appointment’”), or issues derived from psychological insights (“actually, according to the psychological literature on priming and channel factors, I think the client would be more likely to keep the appointment if she were given a map and asked to show how she would get from her home to the facility”; or “in my experience as a therapist, men are often very worried about filing bankruptcy because they fear embarrassment from the reaction of family members; before filing, they might want to think about sitting down with a close family member and talking about the difficulties and options”).

In other words, we could create a new body of “practical interdisciplinary scholarship” around this new case law, and my guess is that this so-called case law would be of immense interest to law students, a most welcome break from their rather steady diet of “traditional” case law consisting of appellate opinions. There is, however, a major obstacle to the development of a TJ case law: there is no systematic way to gather the practices, techniques, and strategies developed and used by judges and lawyers. The insightful but busy practitioners creating these techniques are understandably not naturally inclined to write up and publish their ideas.

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29 Hon. Justice Kevin Bell, One VCAT: President’s Review of VCAT 82 (Nov. 30, 2009).
30 Psycholegal Soft Spots, supra n. 8.
31 Rehabilitating Lawyers, supra n.11, at xviii.
32 Unlike the area of practices, techniques, and strategies, which fall conceptually under the realm of “legal roles,” the other areas of interest to TJ should not face the same difficulty of gathering new information. Legal academics, for example, can be expected to write about newly established or proposed “rules” and “procedures”—the so-called “legal landscape” issues. See, e.g., David B. Wexler, Therapeutic Jurisprudence, Legal Landscapes, and Form Reform: The Case of Diversion, 10 Fla. Coastal L. Rev. 361, 363-66 (2009) (discussing, from a TJ perspective, the legal landscape of federal sentencing law). And mental health and criminal justice professionals and academics will likely write about new and important developments in “treatments” and “services.” See, e.g., Bonita M. Veysey et al (eds.), How Offenders Transform Their Lives (2009).
33 See note 44, infra.
been collected and disseminated purely on a “hit or miss” basis. But for a new practical interdisciplinary scholarship to develop based on this information—for us to be able truly to take the step of now going “from practice to theory”—we need to think of ways to collect more systematically these practices and techniques.

This is no easy task. Prior efforts to gather such information—through invitations extended in law review articles, for example—have simply not borne fruit. The result should come as no surprise, given that, as noted earlier, this type of activity is not “self-executing.”

What is needed, it seems, is a type of “captive audience” of judges and practitioners, an audience from which creative practices can be “extracted.” Putting the cart before the horse, the website of the International Network on Therapeutic Jurisprudence has already established a “TJ Practices Project”—a place where interested persons may post their practices and, more likely, where those who have “extracted” practices from a captive audience can later post them.

We now need to brainstorm how to form these groups of captive audiences. Here are some of my first thoughts (and I hope others will help “grow” the list):

1. **Continuing Education Programs**—a TJ program for judges, or for lawyers, or for mental health professionals could, at the close of the lecture portion, reserve time for the audience to contribute comments on practices, techniques, and strategies. Brief written comments could be solicited by the presenters, or, better yet, participants could, right then and there, be asked to input their contributions on the TJ Practices Project page, noted above.

2. **Legal Clinics and Journaling Assignments**—Law school clinical programs are increasingly incorporating a TJ perspective in their training and in their representation of clients. Such clinics deal with such fields as elder law, criminal law, juvenile law, immigration law, even business law. These clinics would provide an excellent setting for practicing TJ and for recording TJ practices that have been employed. Professor Leslie Cooney, of Nova Southeastern Law School in Florida, has done just that with a Business Law Clinic. Students prepare journals about their cases and the TJ dimensions of the same, and, as is typical in business school internship/externship programs, also

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35 www.therapeuticjurisprudence.org.

36 Mental health professionals may have much to contribute to the formation of suggested practices for lawyers. For example, therapists will obviously be seeing clients under stress, and many stressful situations will have a legal dimension: divorce, custody, bankruptcy, a lawsuit, a criminal or juvenile charge, etc. Mental health professionals will, therefore, have likely discussed strategies with clients about how to deal with these situations.

prepare a final report reflecting on their work and their experience.\textsuperscript{38} These experiences and reports could likewise be uploaded to the TJ Practices Project page.

3. **Law Student Interviews of Lawyers and Judges**—a project in law school classes in TJ, or in Non-Adversarial Justice, or in the Comprehensive Law Movement, could involve interviewing lawyers and judges and recording and reflecting upon their practices, ultimately uploading some of them for wider dissemination.

When, through these or other means, we develop a process for continually collecting TJ examples from practice—and preserving them in an accessible forum such as the TJ Practices Project—we will have the raw ingredients for the creation of a new TJ case law, new TJ treatises of techniques in specific practice areas, and for academic commentary on the practices, on their possible improvements, on their compatibility with psychological principles, and on ethical considerations.

In a recent personal communication,\textsuperscript{39} Professor Thomas Barton, a leading preventive law scholar,\textsuperscript{40} suggested that this model is “what ideally should be the relationship between the academic side and the practitioner side.” Many practitioners “are inspired to find ways to make the theory [TJ] work.” And an “extensive web of communication” would permit the “experimentation to be highly decentralized, but then replicated.” He concludes with the interesting insight that this process is very much akin to “the way the common law evolves, except less constrained and with broader, faster communication.”

The scholarship resulting from this TJ case law may be different from more conventional scholarship in a number of ways: length, formality (or informality) of writing style, preferred journals and audiences, references, and many more. One hopes that this new breed of practical interdisciplinary scholarship will not have to fight for academic respectability. It is only natural that the changes wrought in the legal profession by TJ will lead to a new, useful scholarship different from the often dispiriting scholarship produced by the conventional “culture of critique.”\textsuperscript{41} It is time, too, for the academy finally to bridge what Judge Harry Edwards saw almost two decades ago as “the growing disjunction between legal education and the legal profession,”\textsuperscript{42} and to recognize, in Professor Barton’s words, “what ideally should be the relationship between the academic side and the practitioner side.”

\textsuperscript{38} Leslie Larkin Cooney, Giving Millennials a Leg-Up: How to Avoid the “If I Knew Then What I Know Now” Syndrome, 96 Ky. L. J. 505 (2007-2008).
\textsuperscript{39} Email of November 26, 2009.
\textsuperscript{40} Thomas D. Barton, Preventive Law and Problem Solving: Lawyering for the Future (2009).
\textsuperscript{41} David B. Wexler, Therapeutic Jurisprudence and the Culture of Critique, 10 J. Cont. Legal Issues 263 (1999).
It is a promising sign that, just at this time, Professor David Yamada has written a very thoughtful and important paper entitled “Therapeutic Jurisprudence and the Practice of Legal Scholarship.”43 His article is a scathing critique of the “standards” typically employed by American student-edited law reviews. In contrast, Yamada is strongly supportive of the less traditional path taken by much TJ scholarship—shorter, straight-forward, jargon-free discussions of issues important to the reform of the law or its administration. In fact, Yamada urges that such scholarship serve as a model for legal scholarship more generally. In TJ terms, changing the “rules” of the game of typical law review acceptance policies would result in a far more therapeutic atmosphere for the legal academy44 and, as importantly, would result in the production and publication of legal scholarship more useful to the profession and to society at large.

44 Our discussion has been focused on the travails of law professors. But that situation, bad as it is, is compounded manifold for the occasional busy judge or practitioner who wishes to write and publish a short piece with a novel idea relating to judging or to practice. Recently, I received a call from a wonderful judge complaining about how insulted she had been by the shabby treatment she received from law students telling her paper simply did not meet their law review’s scholarship standards. These sorts of experiences only add to the reluctance of practitioners to think of sharing their important experiences. No wonder some of my earlier attempts to encourage judges and lawyers to disseminate their ideas failed so miserably