

A Scientist Walks Into a Church...

By Amol Utrankar, RPLP Undergraduate Research Fellow

A word of advice to all pre-meds: the best thing you can do for yourself as an aspiring physician is to get off the beaten path and spend time on distinctly non-medical things. Ditch the clinic. Take a break from the science lab. Think of the most 'out-there' thing you can possibly do, and run with it.

This summer I've had the opportunity to engage people of religious and scientific backgrounds in conversations about how they think about "big-picture" issues. I've visited congregations, participated in prayer services, and interviewed people of all walks, and it's been nothing short of life-changing. Now, what does religion have to do with medicine? How does qualitative sociology make me better prepared for a future in healthcare?

Immersion - Sociology research gives me a unique vantage point on the social background, cultural values, and individual motivations that each patient brings to the clinic. By understanding the social context for people's views and actions, I feel better prepared as a physician to incorporate insights on the biological basis of disease with the social determinants of illness. In particular, religion is such a core aspect of the beliefs and communities that shape health status, and it's been eye-opening to see how those factors influence people.

Engagement - In many ways, qualitative research is incredibly unnatural. As a researcher, I enter a setting where I have little to no experience. I learn the ways of that setting and build rapport by cultivating an insider status. In interviews, I build spontaneous relationships of trust, elicit people's narratives, and then translate those stories into theories of how societies live and function. It's a process of engaging, learning, and applying that remarkably parallels the doctor-patient conversations that happen at the bedside. And, like medicine, it's a process that can be messy; in sociology, the challenges of finding the line between researcher mirror the struggles that physicians often face to balance empathic engagement and professional detachment.

Perspective - As I've studied the viewpoints of others, I've developed the ability to question my own beliefs and see them not as absolutes, but as one plausible perspective among many. I've come to understand that the faith religious people place in divine entities and supernatural phenomena is often not unlike the faith that scientists place in data-driven analysis and the objectivity of a scientific method rooted in repeated empirical observation. By understanding my own perceptual biases, I feel better capable to question them, understand their limitations, and consciously phase them out, and I anticipate that I'll be a much stronger clinical thinker for it.

Today's medicine is about so much more than molecular interactions and clinical checklists. It's about the social contexts that influence health. It's about the humanistic engagement between patients and providers. It's about the balance between the systematic approach of evidence-based medicine and the reality that medicine is, fundamentally, an imperfect science. More than ever, I feel empowered to translate these fresh insights and experiences into a future of serving others through patient-centered care.

Farewell Jared Peifer

In August 2013, Jared Peifer joined the Zicklin School of Business at Baruch College, The City University of New York, as an assistant professor. Jared joined the RPLP in 2011 as a post-doctoral fellow, lending his statistical and sociological experience largely to the Scientists in International Contexts studies. In addition to his role in research, Jared took an active part in the RPLP events, remarking on how "it has been exciting to merge into this network of religious scholars". The RPLP benefitted from his mentorship, as Baruch College surely will. On his time working with the Undergraduate Fellows, he reflects "I really enjoyed working with Rice undergrads. They're a bright bunch for sure. In a lot of ways, I envy them for being exposed to so many aspects of social science research as undergrads. They bring so much energy and really are the heartbeat of RPLP".

