Meet Crystal C. Hall, Office of Evaluation Sciences Fellow

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Bringing Psychological Science to Public Policy: Meet Crystal C. Hall, Office of Evaluation Sciences Fellow

A number of psychological scientists are engaged in the US government's efforts to improve public programs and policies. The Office of Evaluation Sciences (OES) in the General Services Administration is one of the leaders of this effort.

APS talked recently with Crystal C. Hall, an OES Fellow who is a psychological scientist and Associate Professor at the Evans School of Public Policy & Governance at the University of Washington. Hall's research examines decision making in the context of poverty.

APS: ***Can you tell us more about what the Office of Evaluation Sciences is and some of the recent projects that OES has been involved in?***

CH: Our main goal is to help agencies within the federal government apply insights from psychological science and other behavioral sciences to the way they are designing and implementing their programs.

We're a group of applied behavioral scientists from a variety of backgrounds, and we connect with agencies to help them think about potential improvements to their programs. Typically, we use data and metrics that are already being captured as a way of measuring the success of our improvement attempts.

APS: ***Have groups and agencies been receptive to working with OES?***

CH: Yes, they have been very receptive and in fact, OES receives many more requests for collaboration than the team can pursue. I think over time federal agencies have become even more invested in measuring outcome, and OES has built a reputation within the government where agencies really do appreciate this new lens we can bring to the work that they do, and to understand that we're really there, first and foremost, to serve them and help them work more effectively.

APS: ***Are there any particular projects you'd like to highlight?***

CH: In a recent report (click here), we described work we conducted in eight different areas. One of the areas is advancing economic opportunity and thinking about how we improve the way that families access different types of programs and services. Going into the next year, we are increasing our focus on projects and agencies that have outcomes tied to economic opportunity and health.

We've been doing some ongoing work looking at helping low-income kids get access to free or reduced-price meals. We've worked with the National School Lunch Program, which is part of the Department of Agriculture, to improve the processes by which people apply to this service to try to expand enrollment, so that we can improve the number of kids that have access to meals.

And then on the other side of the spectrum in terms of economic opportunity, we've also looked at improving the way that small family farmers access credit, through some targeted outreach to help farmers understand the process by which they can apply for these microloans.

With both of these projects, like many of our projects, we looked at the kind of mechanism by which individuals interact with the program and thought about how we can incorporate tools from behavioral science to improve that process, whether it's by simplifying or automating an application process, making changes that make it easier for an individual to submit an application, or communicating with individuals about a program in a way that is more effective.

APS: ***Can you tell us about your personal story and how you started working with OES?***

CH: I'd previously done some work with some state governments and the federal government on similar types of projects, coming in as the psychological scientist and engaging to help use the insights from our field to think about how to improve programs. It seemed like a natural next step to do more work with the federal government. I was connected with some members of the team by other colleagues, and fortunately, the timing was right for me to spend a year in DC. I've completed my full year, but continue to engage part time project and strategic work as OES continues its work.

APS: ***Do you have any advice for what psychologists should do if they're interested in getting involved in research with local governance or state or federal governments?***

CH: For me, the work started by finding connections in my home institution. One of the benefits that I had to get into this type of work a little bit more easily is that I am housed in a public policy school, so there are many natural connections that I can make with individuals that are doing on-the-ground work. Psychological scientists who are doing mainly academic work can find people at their institutions that are connected with people out in the real world. That was the first step for me, and it started very small, with very small projects, but then I was able to get experience and the novel set of skills you need for this kind of work.

APS: ***What are some of those skills that are necessary for success?***

CH: I think the most important one—on top of the typical skills you need to be a good experimental psychologist—is the ability to communicate effectively. Our agency partners come from diverse backgrounds in terms of their experience with experimental research. Very often, we're in a position where we really need to explain our work and the basics of research design to partners without prior experience in this area. Being able to work through the logistics of details such as experiment design, sample size calculations, or data analysis with someone in an agency is crucial, because if you're not able to be effective in terms of the communication piece, it's hard to get very far.

APS: ***What does psychological science uniquely have to offer to solve these challenges?***

CH: Psychological scientists have a unique lens to help us understand what happens in between some individual touchpoints for a policy or program and the ultimate outcome. In the policy world, often we implement a policy, look at the outcomes, and use that to evaluate how effective the policy was. Psychological scientists have a set of skills that help us think about why this process might not always be as straightforward as we expect it to be.

APS: ***Is there anything else you'd like our readers to know?***

CH: I think it's a really exciting time to be a psychological scientist that has an interest in applied behavioral science, and I think there are more and more opportunities coming for folks to do this type of work. There's lots of these kinds of little units setting up in different cities and states around the country. There's still a lot of work that we have to offer, so I look forward to seeing more and more of this research coming out.

Readers interested in learning more about some of OES's recent projects can read coverage in the APS Observer *magazine by clicking* here *and* here.

– K. Andrew DeSoto