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Voyages of discovery

BY ROBERT TAORMINA

A FORMER student recently wrote to me about the work she is employed to do in her new job, which involves a good deal of data mining. She claimed that the work, despite being tedious and time consuming, is remarkably easy compared to first learning how to do research in psychology. She went as far as to compare learning the rigours of the scientific method to 'visiting the dentist' because each new weakness discovered in her research proposal felt like being told she had another 'cavity' to be fixed.

In replying to this student, I searched for an alternate, more positive simile and happened upon a comparison between engaging in research and the initial voyage that Christopher Columbus made across the Atlantic Ocean. The more I thought about this more agreeable comparison, the more similes I detected, and I would like to share these with students who might read this article and with other teachers of research methods courses – they might find this comparison useful the next time they teach their classes.

Before beginning his journey, Columbus had to learn all the details about ocean-going ships and the science of navigation in order to sail them. Likewise, a research psychologist must first learn the details of the scientific method. Columbus had to learn how to use instruments of navigation, such as the sextant, the use of which is a complex process that requires a certain amount of calculation with reference to tables and knowledge of the motion of the Earth and Sun. Similarly, research psychologists must learn how to do statistical analyses and to use instruments such as the statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS), and must refer to various reference tables.

Before attempting his journey, Columbus needed to consult existing maps and information that were available from previous explorers, however fragmented or

incomplete they might have been. In a very similar manner, a research psychologist must review the available published literature by previous researchers along with other information on topics that are

related to the concept to be investigated. Based on the available maps and information he had, Columbus then drafted a new map that depicted the relationships among the known land masses, and plotted a tentative course for the destination he hoped to reach. Likewise, a research psychologist creates a research model that represents the variables to be investigated, generates hypotheses about the relationships among those variables, and plans a research design to guide the research endeavour.

The story of Columbus' voyage also includes the several efforts he made to obtain financial sponsorship so that he could have the necessary ships, sailors and equipment that were indispensable to making such a journey. Likewise, the research psychologist also engages in a search to secure funding for the materials, personnel, and equipment needed to initiate and carry out the research project. Once Columbus had found a sponsor, he was able to begin his voyage across the ocean; an ocean that many thought was an endless sea. Similarly, once the research psychologist has obtained the needed funds, the research project can be launched and the data-gathering phase of the

research journey across the 'ocean of data' can be started.

Eventually, Columbus landed and had to ascertain the longitude and latitude of his new location by means of his sextant and associated computations. Similarly, the research psychologist reaches a point where the data have been gathered and entered into computer files so that they can

be analysed. At this point, Columbus realised that he had discovered new islands and a continent.

Comparably, this is where the research psychologist might discover new relationships (among variables) or even new paradigms in the science.

The discoveries made by Columbus required new maps to be drawn to incorporate the new land masses. Likewise, the new

findings of the research psychologist might require existing theories to be revised or refined. Of course, we can also compare the troubles and difficulties of Columbus' entire voyage to the difficulties research psychologists face in the various aspects of undertaking and conducting a research project. However, in the end, there is little doubt that the results of Columbus' voyage led to the excitement of discovery and to his fame. Likewise, the rewards for the research psychologist can also be quite satisfying personally as regards gaining a sense of discovery and accomplishment, and professionally, when one's research is ultimately published.

In conclusion, I do not claim to be the first person to note that doing research in psychology is like discovering 'new worlds'. I am also certainly not an expert on the voyages of Columbus, but I do hope that this little exercise in simile might be useful in stimulating a greater degree of interest among students for both learning about and engaging in scientific research in psychology.

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