

Ronald Melzack recalls the development of the McGill Pain Questionnaire

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RONALD MELZACK: Well, anyway, let's not worry about that.

Also, when I was at MIT, there was another guy I met that was very, very important, and that was Warren Torgerson [Warren S. Torgerson 1924-, professor emeritus of psychology at Johns Hopkins]. I didn't know what to do with those pain words. I had done an experiment and all that came out of it was that the more pain people have, the more words they use, and I knew also that the words fell into groups like hot, warm, burning, searing, that sort of thing; palpitating, throbbing, beating, pounding. There were obvious groups, but I didn't know what you'd do with it.

Now at MIT, when I was at MIT, the psychology department had a thing they called the Pretzel Club. So we ate pretzels and drank beer every second Thursday night or something -- I've forgotten how it went -- but the guys from Lincoln Labs and other places - psychologists from a variety of different parts of MIT that were really far out -- they were special laboratories working on government money -- these guys would come in and join us. And one of those guys was Warren Torgerson. And we each gave our little spiels and Warren Torgerson gave his talk on multidimensional scaling. I'd never heard of multidimensional scaling. In fact, I hate statistics. If anything, I used to run from statistics. But here suddenly is a statistician who really had a technique that looked like it could do the job. So I went to Torgie and said, "Would you do this work with me on these pain words?" And he said, "Well, let me think about it," and after a while he said, "Yeah, that would be fun." So we began to do these studies. Now, what happened --

JOHN LIEBESKIND: You know, I have to make a comment here. It suddenly strikes me that you have had incredible success in your career interesting other people in working with you.

MELZACK: I have.

LIEBESKIND: And to your advantage, and obviously very much to their advantage.

MELZACK: Absolutely.

LIEBESKIND: And that's not so easy. A lot of people -- certainly I have had difficulty going to -- I mean, not with my students, but going [to] outside -- people, "Oh, I'm too busy, I'm doing

this and that”; but you’ve had very good success with that. I think that’s a hallmark of your career.

MELZACK: Yes, very good success. And it’s been flukey -- some of it has been flukey, some of it has been -- I mean, the fact that, it’s to Warren Torgerson’s great credit that he said, “Yes, I’d be interested in this problem,” because up to that time he’d been doing most of his work with squiggles. I mean, quite literally, he would make squiggles on a blackboard and people would have to say which squiggle was most like another squiggle or least like another squiggle, and now suddenly there were words, so he found that a very challenging problem that was right up his area. Maybe that was my lucky fluke. Or maybe that is a talent that I figure this problem will interest this guy, you see. I choose the right guy.

But anyway, Torgie is a perfectionist. So we kept doing experiments, and then when I came to McGill I was still doing experiments, and no matter, every draft, Torgie would find something wrong, unlike Pat and I, where we would come to a draw and we’d say, “OK, we’ve sweated through this enough, this is how we’ll publish it.” Torgie always had one more experiment to do. And finally one day I said, “Torgie, either you accept this draft, or this paper will -- I’m just going to publish this goddamn paper.” So he made some changes and said, “OK, I can live with this paper.” And I said, I’m never going to write another paper with Torgie -- he’s going to drive me crazy. And that’s why, all the work afterwards he has not been a colleague.

But that first paper on the language of pain is the classic paper on that thing [Melzack R and Torgerson WS. On the language of pain. *Anesthesiology* 34 (1971): 50-59.] That’s the big one. And Torgie gets enormous credit for that. But afterwards it just couldn’t be. So the McGill -- I called it the McGill Pain Questionnaire -- with no names -- I didn’t want my name on it. Other people put my name on it, they called it the McGill Melzack Pain Questionnaire. That was never, ever, ever, my doing. It was always the McGill Pain Questionnaire, with the understanding that it was based on the paper I did with Torgie. Well, that thing began to catch on. It caught on very quickly.

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