
AP-LS Student Committee

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Career Corner

Content Editor: Alexandra Lugo, 5th year Ph.D. Student in Clinical Psychology at Palo Alto University and the 2021-2022 Clinical Liaison

The Career Corner is intended to highlight the individuals who work at the intersection of law and psychology, where they come from, how they got there, and how their experiences influence their research, teaching, and/or practice. This edition of Career Corner profiles Ashley B. Batastini, Ph.D., Assistant Professor in the Department of Counseling, Educational Psychology and Research at the University of Memphis. Dr. Batastini's research focuses on innovative intervention strategies for criminal justice-involved populations, with particular emphasis on improving mental health and behavioral outcomes to directly target and reduce risk of future criminal conduct. She has been considered an expert in correctional treatment research, which has yielded policy changes in areas related to the application of telehealth technology to forensic examinations and clinical treatment. Dr. Batastini was the 2022 recipient of the Saleem Shah Award for Early Career Excellence in Psychology and Law.

Alexandra Lugo, 5th year Ph.D. Student in Clinical Psychology at Palo Alto University and the 2021-2022 Clinical Liaison, interviewed Dr. Batastini.

How did you become interested in psychology and law?

I always had a general interest in why people decide to do the things they do, things that get them into trouble, things that deviate from the norms of society. I originally thought I might do something in law enforcement. In high school, I took psychology and criminology class electives separately. So, I had these separate interests and didn't realize that they could be mixed. I then decided to attend an undergraduate institution, University of Pittsburgh, that I really liked for a number of reasons. They didn't have a criminology major, so I selected a psychology major by default. Again, not really thinking about these interests being connected. Then I remember being in the advising office and seeing all these pamphlets with different types of psychology, including forensic psychology. I plucked that one out and thought, "Yes, this captures what I'm interested in!" So, I realized I could marry these two interests. I started to move away from an interest in a law enforcement career involving locking people up and more towards work involving the change process. From there, I found some ways at the university to do some of that work, including an undergraduate internship at a state prison. That experience broke down a lot of stereotypes. I felt really connected to that environment and that experience transformed my interest into more of a passion.

Can you briefly describe your graduate school experience and trajectory?

While an undergraduate student, I had also obtained research experience on grant-funded projects addressing juvenile justice at a medical center outside of my institution. I had decided to apply to graduate school, but I didn't have good guidance on how to be a competitive doctoral program applicant. I didn't receive acceptances to any doctoral programs, but Drexel University emailed me encouraging me to apply to their master's program. So, I applied and was accepted, thinking that it could be a great stepping stone to a doctoral program while not even recognizing the institution's place in the forensic psychology world. That experience really

provided a lot of clarity regarding the field of forensic psychology, conducting research and writing academically, and applying to doctoral programs. My master's program really opened a lot of doors for me, yet I still had some difficulty getting accepted into a doctoral program. I was waitlisted before being accepted to a couple of programs. I ultimately selected Texas Tech University because Robert Morgan was doing the research that I wanted to do, particularly with serious mental illness among correctional populations and program development. So, I think I got into the institution and program that I belonged in the most, that aligned best with my interests.

What drew you to an academia/research career?

My master's program at Drexel University was heavily research-oriented and didn't really include clinical work. I found that I really enjoyed research... maybe not the statistics piece, but I enjoyed coming up with an idea and designing the methodology to carry it out. I also developed skills in scientific writing. So, I felt like I was contributing something by using these skill sets to conduct research. Also, as I started to advance in my program at Texas Tech, I began serving as a mentor to students earlier in the program. I found that I also had skills in helping them accomplish their goals, and I really enjoyed that.

Can you tell us a bit about the research you are working on right now?

We have a spectrum of projects at the moment, all focusing on particularly vulnerable groups. It's hard to imagine how much more vulnerable you could get when looking at correctional populations, but rural communities have additional issues. So, one of the projects is a two-part study examining rural needs related to criminal justice issues and barriers to crime reduction and service access. Another project involves a mobile therapy app that could not only supplement existing programs in counties but also serve as a big resource in counties with very few existing programs. Some counties have almost no mental health care providers within their facilities, so a mobile app could really increase access in those cases. We also have a project involving a training program for correctional officers to aid them in addressing criminal thinking errors through more therapeutic rather than punitive methods.

How did you become interested in telepsychology/telehealth research?

That was also Bob Morgan's doing. I was trying to think of a dissertation idea. I don't know what prompted this exactly, but he suggested that I develop an idea related to telehealth. He was saying, "It's the new thing, it's coming." We had a telehealth program at the Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center that was conducting psychiatric consultations within some of the prisons. So, we considered looking at archival data related to those consultations. It was approved by my committee, but ultimately rejected by the department of criminal justice. Bob had a connection in the Kansas Department of Correction where they were using telehealth in one of their prisons for group treatment on segregation units. I went to the prison and collected data and examined the differences between clients who were receiving treatment the traditional way and those who were receiving it via telehealth. It was a very messy project. Still, it helped me to see the benefits of telehealth in terms of it being related to issues of mental health care accessibility, finding creative ways to reach people who are the most vulnerable. Addressing populations that are difficult to reach for whatever reason, whether they are located in a rural area or isolated within an institutional setting, has been a theme that's persisted throughout my research.

From your perspective, what are the biggest challenges in psycho-legal research?

Correctional research in particular is difficult. There are a number of bureaucratic challenges that come into play. You have to have a lot of time on your hands, you have to have a lot of patience, and you have to have a lot of persistence. It also often requires what I like to call a "champion on the inside," someone within the agency who believes in my idea and who thinks it will be worthwhile. This may be convincing someone that the idea aligns with their agency's goals while saving staff time, being cost effective, and/or reducing crime. So, it can be a matter of thinking and speaking in terms of their mission. However, when it comes to my

students, or students in general, I suggest staying away from direct prison research and instead find creative ways that you can examine your areas of interest without involving people who are currently incarcerated. That way they can accomplish what they need to for graduation within the timeframe needed to do so. If students want more hands-on correctional research experience, it will be far less stressful to find a faculty mentor or researcher who is already doing this work and jump on as a collaborator.

Do you have any advice to give students who are considering careers as clinicians in forensic psychology? What sorts of training experiences do you suggest that they prioritize?

I think the first thing is to get an understanding of the field of psychology and law, ideally as an undergraduate student. It may be less glamorous than what people think it is, but it is much broader. Division 41, the American Psychology-Law Society, is a great place to start. If your interests are within correctional work, further expand the search. The Criminal Justice Section of Division 18 (Psychologists in Public Service), for example, is one way I started to connect more with correctional psychologists. In researching options, consider what types of training experiences you need to achieve your career goals and determine whether those experiences are available at institutions and their graduate programs. The other important factor is finding a good mentor both in terms of their mentorship style as well as their areas of focus. So, look for people doing the kind of work you are interested in and reach out to them, even if they are at another institution. One of the benefits of work becoming more virtual is that you may be able to get involved in research with professionals at institutions across the country or even internationally. In my experience, those involved in this field are always interested in having students reach out to them. If nothing else, it's a nice ego stroke!