

The Career Corner is intended to highlight 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 the Career Corner profiles Dr. Angela van der Walt, Bureau of Prisons- Psychological Evaluations Section. Dr. van der Walt has research interests in forensic evaluation, violence risk assessment, severe mental illness, and policy development. Laura Stevens, a final year Psychology PhD student at the University of Birmingham and 2022-2023 Student Committee Experimental Liaison, interviewed Dr. van der Walt.

AP-LS Student Committee: How did you become interested in law and psychology?

Dr. van der Walt: In undergrad, I knew I wanted to be a psychologist, but I thought I wanted to be a child psychologist. I did a minor in child and family studies, and I realized that whilst developmental psychology was interesting, it wasn't particularly riveting for me. However, as part of my minor, I took a class called 'Psychodynamics of the Family', and the professor was writing a book on Hitler and Hitler's family. This prompted me to consider why people engage in violent behaviors, which led me to pursue a master's in forensic psychology.

AP-LS Student Committee: Can you tell us about your career trajectory, starting from your forensic masters?

Dr. van der Walt: Prior to finishing my undergraduate, I started looking at what forensic master's programs were available. At the time, there were only two schools in the US that had a master's degree in forensic psychology, and one was at the University of Denver. I was really into outdoor activities like hiking, biking, and snowboarding, so Colorado was a great fit for me. When starting my masters, I didn't really have a good understanding of forensic psychology, other than working with people who have committed crimes. Through the program I learned that there were two separate areas I could pursue. One would be treating individuals that have been involved with the law, and the other would be conducting evaluations with those same individuals. I really liked evaluations, so when I finished my master's, I worked with a forensic psychologist in Denver. While working, I realized if I wanted to be able to conduct more independent work as an evaluator, I needed to pursue my doctorate degree. That is what led me back to school at the University of Denver to complete my doctorate in Clinical Psychology. As part of this program, I completed my internship at the Bureau of Prisons, Federal Medical Center in Rochester, Minnesota. I'm from Minnesota originally, so it was a nice fit for me, and it was a great experience. Up to that point, I had never worked with incarcerated individuals. I had previously only worked with individuals on probation or parole, or pretrial, or somewhere in the community. The medical center had individuals who were both committed as mentally ill and dangerous, and/or, serving a sentence but requiring inpatient mental health treatment. This was the first time I worked with individuals that were incarcerated or committed and it was eye-opening to see what severe mental illness was really like.

Following my doctorate, I worked for the Minnesota Sex Offender Program conducting risk assessments, and while this was interesting, I missed conducting pretrial evaluations. So, I returned to the Bureau of Prisons and moved to Missouri to work at the United States Medical Center for Federal Prisoners. This gave me the opportunity to a) work with many talented, forensic psychologists and b) work with high-security inmates with many significant mental health symptoms. While this was one of my favorite jobs, the location did not work for me and my family, so in 2016 I took a Chief Psychologist position in Colorado. Here I was the director of a psychology department. While I supervised other psychologists completing forensic

evaluations, I had little time to complete them myself. In 2022, a position opened within the Psychological Evaluation Section of the Bureau, which I was selected for. I was very grateful for this, as it allowed me to again immerse myself entirely in psychological evaluations. In this position, one of my goals was to increase training and career development for forensic psychologists within the Bureau. Through this, I had the opportunity to be involved in the development of our forensic postdoctoral fellowship positions.

Currently, we have 5 postdoctoral fellowship positions at 5 different sites (Englewood (just outside of Denver, Colorado); Chicago; Springfield, Missouri; and two in Butner, North Carolina (one at the Butner medical center and the second within the Commitment and Treatment program). Our goal was to provide high level forensic training to individuals completing their predoctoral internship, so they could become experts in the field of forensic psychology.

AP-LS Student Committee: Can you tell us any more details about the internships available under your program?

Dr. van der Walt: We have several internship positions available within the Bureau at a variety of sites, both at mainline institutions and at our medical centers. Some of the internship programs have a focus in correctional psychology, while others are more focused on forensic psychology. Additionally, certain Bureau sites provide the opportunity to obtain experience with both incarcerated males and incarcerated females, which is a unique opportunity.

AP-LS Student Committee: Can you tell us anything else about what would make a student competitive for one of these positions?

Dr. van der Walt: Each site may have different requirements. If a student is interested in a particular Bureau site, I would really recommend the student to reach out to the internship coordinator at that site. This would give them the opportunity to ask questions about any specific training requirements that site has or additional experience that would be valuable to obtain before applying. When I was applying for internship, I remember being told that I needed to have a well-rounded experience, not just work in forensic settings; however, all my practicum experiences involved forensic sites because that's where my passion was. I think most sites are interested in applicants having experience working with law-involved clients, as well as experience administering a variety of psychological tests. Also, we value experience working in a correctional setting, so check in with your local Bureau prison and see if they offer practicum experience. Certainly some of our internship sites are more competitive than others, so it is always best to check with the site coordinator and review the Bureau's internship brochures available at [BOP: psychology internships](#).

AP-LS Student Committee: Can you tell us any more details about the postdoctoral fellowship positions available under your program?

Dr. van der Walt: All five of our forensic postdoctoral fellowship positions are located in sites that have a pre-existing internship program. We wanted to place them in locations with strong forensic departments, in addition to strong training programs. We also wanted to locate sites where we could pursue American Board of Professional Psychology (ABPP) waivers. This would allow our Bureau forensic postdoctoral fellows to immediately pursue board certification and not have to wait the required five years at non-waiver sites. Our goal is to provide our postdoctoral fellows with all the necessary training for board certification if they wish to pursue it. Therefore, all of the training directors at our sites are either board certified or have more than

5 years' experience in forensics. This ensures that we have well-qualified forensic psychologists providing training for our postdoctoral fellows and allows them to qualify for the ABPP waiver.

We also want to ensure that there is consistent training across each site; so, each week the postdocs will participate in a group video call with a forensic psychologist who works within the Bureau of Prisons. The psychologist will present on a specific forensic topic and facilitate discussion. Therefore, our post-docs won't only receive training from their respective postdoc site, they will get the opportunity to interact with and get training from other expert forensic psychologists around the country working for the Bureau of Prisons.

We also want to help our postdocs get licenced as quickly as possible so that they can progress directly into a forensic psychology position within the Bureau. Given our postdocs will work for the Federal government, they can be licensed in any state. There are states that allow psychologists to become licensed before a full year of postdoctoral experience, so our goal is to facilitate study groups that will prepare our postdocs to take the EPPP, and then focus on any additional licensing requirements. Our goal is to have all of our postdocs licensed before the end of their training year.

AP-LS Student Committee: What would you say is the most satisfying aspect of your career?

Dr. van der Walt: For me, even after completing forensic evaluations for 15 years, I still find the work fascinating and captivating. Every defendant I work with is so unique and so my work never gets boring. On one hand, the work in and of itself is exciting, but I think it's also an opportunity for me to provide information about these defendants to the courts, so they have a better understanding of these individuals. It's rewarding in that sense as well.

AP-LS Student Committee: What would you say are the major obstacles that you faced in your career, and how did you overcome them?

Dr. van der Walt: I've been very fortunate in my career and haven't had to face significant obstacles. Primarily this is because I've had the opportunity to learn from a lot of talented psychologists in the Bureau of Prisons. These opportunities have really helped me navigate the field of forensic psychology, so I never felt like I was doing it on my own. Though I have certainly encountered minor obstacles in my career. One would be running a psychology department within a prison system, and working with individuals who haven't been trained in mental health. Due to this, I found myself constantly having to teach them about psychology time and time again, and this brought its' challenges. Additionally, being a woman in a leadership role in the prison system has also brought obstacles. Many times, I felt as though my voice wasn't heard or respected. To overcome this, I continued to advocate when advocacy was warranted and continued to demonstrate that the information I provided was based on research, and that utilizing this research for the agency would be beneficial. Doing this repeatedly did earn me respect. However, I think this was an obstacle that a male in my position wouldn't have necessarily had to overcome.

Additionally, working for a bureaucracy comes with challenges. Our policies, at times, limited what we could do in the agency and making changes to these policies happens very very slowly. This can be frustrating when you have a great idea and have to spend the next two years jumping through hoops to make it happen. But it has taught me perseverance. Working in policy development is another area of focus for me in my new Bureau position.

AP-LS Student Committee: If you had a time machine and you could go back in time and give yourself one piece of advice about grad school, what would it be and why?

Dr. van der Walt: I was always interested in applying research to my work, and not as interested in actually conducting research. I feel like my tendency to avoid completing research was a missed opportunity that I should have taken advantage of. If I could go back, I would take the time to learn more about the fundamentals of research, because it is so important to have this understanding as a forensic psychologist. Instead, I have had to teach myself these skills over the years when I could have more easily taken the opportunity to learn from research experts while in school.

AP-LS Student Committee: Do you have any advice on how to select the right academic program for you?

Dr. van der Walt: I think the relationships I have developed through my programs have been so meaningful to my development as a psychologist. My advice would be to prioritize programs where you feel a strong connect with a professor, and you have similar career/research interests. This will allow you to develop more meaningful relationships, rather than applying to a program because you see a professor as being the top person in that field. Choosing a career path based on strong relationships is really important, as these relationships often facilitate your future career opportunities.

AP-LS Student Committee: From your perspective what are the biggest challenges facing the field of psychology and law today? And how can students potentially address those challenges?

Dr. van der Walt: I think one of the biggest challenges is staying on top of the ever-changing field of psychology and the law. Therefore, we should all be regularly sharing our knowledge with each other and staying aware of current research and case law. One-way students can address this is by always saying yes to trainings opportunities offered to them and attending conferences such as AP-LS to hear about up-to-date research and developments in the field, and then bring this information back to their academic programs and practicum placements.