
AP-LS Student Committee February 2023

Career Corner

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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 Lauren Gonzales, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Medical Psychology (in Psychiatry) at Columbia University Irving Medical Center. Her research focuses on social determinants of mental health including recovery and community integration of individuals with mental illness diagnoses in civil and criminal legal settings.

Ashley Dhillon, a 2nd year Clinical Psychology Ph.D. student at Adelphi University and the 2022-2023 Student Committee Communications Officer, interviewed Dr. Gonzales.

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

Dr. Gonzales: Growing up I knew something combining psychology and law was an option, but I was not interested in it initially. I became interested in psychology in high school when I took one of the Advanced Placement courses offered. My dad had been a police officer on a SWAT team in Southern California where I was born and would say to me then, “you know there are psychologists who work within the legal system and its lucrative and it’s something you could go into,” and I would think “no, I want nothing to do with that!” What had interested me then was the research we learned about in that AP class, including the Milgram experiment and the Zimbardo Stanford prison experiment. I was interested in social power dynamics and how influential power and authority can be, which ended up leading me in a much more indirect way to psychology and law.

AP-LS Student Committee: Can you briefly describe your career trajectory, starting with your time as an undergraduate?

Dr. Gonzales: I did my undergrad at NYU, and I was a psychology major and a sociology minor. I initially thought I’d go into sociology or social psychology because I was interested in social dynamics and how they influence people at the individual level. We read Erving Goffman [[Stigma: Notes on the Management of a Spoiled Identity](#)] for one of my sociology classes, and I became interested in stigma as applied to the mental illnesses that I was learning about in my psychology courses. Specifically, I became interested in how people are labeled as having a psychiatric disorder, and how this labeling can create even more problems for them beyond the

symptoms that they could be experiencing. I eventually realized that this fit within clinical psychology, and I wanted to study how stigma affects people within the mental health service system. I read some papers written by Phil Yanos as I was working on my undergraduate thesis and found out he was at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, and eventually applied for graduate school there.

So, I really landed at John Jay because Phil was a professor there, and he did a lot of work looking at stigma, “serious mental illness,” and psychosis, and I wanted to work with him. I landed in this clinical/forensic program, which has been very well known for its forensic training. It was a really happy accident for my training because I wanted to work with and learn more about these very stigmatized populations; what better place to go and work and train than in forensic settings, because that’s where you see some of the most marginalized and stigmatized populations with a label that follows them for their entire lives. I still feel a lot of times, in terms of my interests, like the kid in high school who kind of moves between different cliques; I don’t generally call myself a forensic psychologist, even though I have forensic training. I considered but eventually did not go for ABPP forensic board certification. I work within the intersection of these social determinants of mental health, and that includes having contact with the criminal legal system as one component.

AP-LS Student Committee: What drew you to your academic/research career?

Dr. Gonzales: I think they really complement each other. I always knew I wanted to do research, participate in the development of knowledge, and be able to characterize processes that are happening in the real world. In clinical work you see those things happening in the room, and my experiences as a clinician influence the way that I develop research questions; sometimes I see something that I am curious about, or it’s something that makes me angry related to power dynamics, or what I’m seeing going on in the field, in a session, or on an inpatient unit. Knowledge driven by experience and vice versa is really important to me. My research has been really applied in that way and I think both are important. I would say I started with more of a research focus, and I think I am still in that space, but I think it’s important to have both because if you keep doing only the research, you can lose that human element. At least in my experience, these data points are actually people and experiences, right? I keep that in mind as well as questions like, what’s the point of the research that I am doing? Who is it going to help? What is it going to improve?

AP-LS Student Committee: What do you find rewarding about the current work you do?

Dr. Gonzales: I always struggle with these types of questions because I feel like it changes a lot. I find the connection aspect really rewarding. A lot of the time during COVID-19, the research I was doing was remote, online-survey based, and now finally having the opportunity to do work with people in real life again has been extremely rewarding. In research, I am now using more participatory methods like community-based research (CBPR) which has been hugely rewarding. Like I mentioned, I am interested in power dynamics and how they play out and contribute to mental health disparities. Being able to have a truly collaborative relationship with people who have been historically marginalized by researchers and have historically been seen as “subjects” with research being done on them, not with them, is important to me. Learning from those

research models and from people who are doing this work has been extremely rewarding. On the clinical side, some of the first steps with folks is talking about stigma and almost an unlearning process that must take place. Part of that work is really rewarding too. As someone who is interested in stigma and marginalization, having the opportunity to work to undo some of those processes is really cool.

AP-LS Student Committee: In your perspective, what are the biggest challenges in psycho-legal research?

Dr. Gonzales: One challenge is working within a system that does serve to further marginalize folks. I shifted to doing some more advocacy-based work with organizations like the Institute for the Development of Human Arts (IDHA-NYC: idha-nyc.org) and peer-led psychiatric survivor programs.

There's a longstanding movement with folks voicing that going through traditional Western mental health services has further traumatized, marginalized, and stigmatized them to the extent that it caused harm. I have a stronger awareness of this which I don't think I had when I was a trainee. I kind of knew it was there in terms of the power dynamics, but you don't go into a field like clinical psychology or clinical forensic psychology thinking that you're potentially going to contribute to harming folks vis-à-vis being situated within this system. I think working within some settings, especially those that are more coercive and have punishments built into them, has been a struggle. I think at times it can be difficult to situate yourself and your values within that kind of system, and I think that is also partly why my career has taken the trajectory that it has.

AP-LS Student Committee: Have you faced any major obstacles in your career? If so, what were they and how did you overcome them?

Dr. Gonzales: The biggest challenge of my career so far has been figuring out where I fit within a given field. There are so many different subfields within psychology and clinical psychology, and my interests and my work span across many of them. I don't feel like I've ever had one specific organization or networking opportunity where it's just like, "oh, this is my conference I go every year, or this is my home base," because it's spread out across many different organizations and bases. On one hand, there are a lot of great things about that. There are so many opportunities to work with amazing teams of folks who are doing incredible things, and I have a lot of room for collaboration. On the other hand, it's kind of like going between those "cliques" I mentioned and figuring out where I fit and learning how to package my interests in a way that makes sense. For example, going on the academic job market was a huge learning experience. How do I present this to different places in ways that make sense and seem holistic? That's something I try to help students and other people with who are at that stage, now that I'm at this point in my career.

AP-LS Student Committee: Do you have any advice for students who want to be involved within the field of law and psychology?

Dr. Gonzales: Get started as soon as you can. Psychology and law is a small world. I met and trained with folks in graduate school who I'm still good friends with and collaborators with

today, and that's how I maintain my connection to the field and to new people I've met over the last few years. Making sure that you find those spaces with people doing work that you're interested in and not being afraid to reach out while you're in training is really important because training is the best time to do that. Also, be careful to not pigeonhole yourself too much and get overly specialized. One of the things that I loved about my graduate program was that, yes, we had the forensic emphasis and specialty, AND we were encouraged to get the general clinical training first because it is important to have well-rounded training and not just your specialization. I've worked with students who are interested in doing forensic work, and I continue to encourage them to get good generalist training first and then go from there.

AP-LS Student Committee: What are your hobbies outside of academia?

Dr. Gonzales: Over the pandemic I took up running, and I never thought I'd be a runner. I was the type of person initially who would run half a block and I'd hate it, myself, and everyone else...but I took it up to the point of running the NYC virtual half marathon over the pandemic and then I quit and went to something else. I'm the kind of person who tends to pick one thing, go headfirst into it, and then eventually once I lose interest will find the next thing. That's how I keep myself going in terms of the work-life balance. Other than that, I have a dog named Boot and he is a hobby in himself. He takes a lot of time and attention, which I am happy to give! I am also very fortunate to have landed back in NYC after having moved for internship and post doc so I'm taking advantage of living in an amazing city and all of the things that come with it.

AP-LS Student Committee: Is there any piece of advice you'd like to share for students in their training?

Dr. Gonzales: Towards the end of my graduate training I attended a panel of professionals discussing how they got to where they were in their careers and all the people were forensic in some way. One panelist said something along the lines of (and I wish I could remember who this was), "you know, the advice I would give to you is to just take the opportunities." Essentially they were saying that if you're not exactly sure where something may go, if it sparks your interest, just do it and see what happens. If it doesn't go anywhere immediately or seems to fizzle out, maybe you just made a connection, or you learned something new. Of course, it can end up taking a lot of your time and that's also a consideration. But if there's something that interests you, even if you're not exactly sure where it will lead - if it's a new collaboration, a seemingly random externship or training opportunity, or a community organization that you just learned about that seems interesting, go for it! As an example, cognitive behavioral therapy for psychosis was something I'd been interested in throughout graduate training. I didn't get much specialized training in CBTp when I was in graduate school, and so when I ended up coming back from my post doc training, I still wanted it. I went for it - it took a lot of time, I made some connections, and there were a few moments where I wondered what I was doing it for; I did not have a clinical practice at the time and was a full-time teaching and research professor. However, it ended up resulting in really cool collaborations and relationships, and I'm also getting to use all of those things in my current position at Columbia. Being able to just see where some things take you without having everything planned out exactly ahead of time can be valuable.