
AP-LS Student Committee

Career Corner

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The Career Corner intends 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 Career Corner profiles Yee San Teoh, Ph.D., Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology at National Taiwan University. Dr. Teoh's research focuses on investigative interviews of child victims and witnesses and the relationships between developmental science, law, and public policy. Dr. Teoh has received teaching and service awards due to her distinguished contributions in translating psychology to the law in East Asia. Her major honors include introducing the NICHD Protocol to Taiwan, being the first local psychology scholar to help exonerate innocent death row inmates, and serving on Taiwan's President's Council of Advisors on Judicial Reform. In addition to international organizations, Dr. Teoh is also an active member in several Asia-based organizations such as the East Asian Association of Psychology and Law and the Society for Applied Research in Memory & Cognition - Southeast Asia Regional Meeting. Dr. Stephanie Cardenas, Visiting Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychology at Williams College, and the 2020-2021 Student Committee Campus Representative Coordinator interviewed Dr. Teoh and co-authored this column with Emma Marshall, a 5th-year J.D./Ph.D. Student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and the 2020-2021 Student Committee Chair, and I-An "Amy" Su, M.S./LL.B., a 3rd-year Ph.D. student at Cornell University, Founding and Managing Partner of LegalChime Attorneys-at-Law, and the 2020-2021 Student Committee Experimental Liaison.

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

Dr. Teoh: After taking Prof. Michael Lamb's Children's Testimony course at the University of Cambridge, where I did my Master's degree, I became interested in law and psychology. I was interested in Developmental Psychology, and Prof. Lamb's course was fresh to me. Even though I was familiar with the research on eyewitness memory, the application to children was fascinating.

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

Dr. Teoh: I did a three-year Bachelor's degree in psychology at Durham University in North-Eastern England. After that, I joined the Social and Developmental Psychology Master's program at Cambridge. At the start of the program, I had already decided that I would probably do a Ph.D. So, I went on to do my Ph.D. with Prof. Michael Lamb. After graduation, I moved to Brooklyn College, CUNY, in the U.S., and completed my postdoc with Prof. Margaret-Ellen Pipe. My Taiwanese husband and I were far apart in two different states at the time, so we decided to apply for and fortunately secured faculty positions in the same university (National Taiwan University).

AP-LS Student Committee: How did you decide on a graduate school program?

Dr. Teoh: It was a peculiar situation. I applied for a Ph.D. grant at the same time while Prof. Michael Lamb had a research assistant position opening up. My thought was even if I couldn't get a Ph.D. grant (because there wasn't a specific announcement time), it would be nice to work with Prof. Michael Lamb, save up some money, and prepare for a Ph.D. program. Eventually, I got the job first and then received a Ph.D. grant. Fortunately, it worked out well because Cambridge allowed me to hold on to my full-time Ph.D. program grant but do a part-time Ph.D. program instead. So I finished my Ph.D. in four years (not a typical three-year track) with my first two years as a part-time Ph.D. student.

AP-LS Student Committee: How do Ph.D. programs differ in the U.K. from the United States?

Dr. Teoh: Unfortunately, I do not have the best answer because I do not have many experiences interacting with Ph.D. students in the U.S. When I was a student in the U.K., I didn't meet students from the U.S., and I did not have Ph.D. students during my postdoc in Brooklyn. To the best of my knowledge, the Ph.D. duration is different. It is rare for Ph.D. students in the U.S. to finish their Ph.D. in three or four years, while it is typical for their U.K. counterparts. Another big difference is the course requirement. In the U.S., doctoral students need to take courses, while those in the U.K. are encouraged to access various resources independently. I have discussed the pros and cons with my colleagues, most of whom studied abroad in the U.S., while I am the only one of two U.K.-educated faculty members in the department. There might be some advantages to taking more classes, especially statistics ones. For instance, at National Taiwan University, doctoral students have access to in-depth or advanced statistics courses such as structural equation modeling (SEM).

AP-LS Student Committee: Did you always know you wanted to go into academia?

Dr. Teoh: I did not always know I wanted to go into academia. I was aiming to be a clinical child psychologist when I entered the undergraduate program in psychology. After interning with a clinical psychologist in the summer, I was worried that it might not be the job for me because I might get too emotionally attached to my clients/patients. So I knew I needed to try something else that was still related to developmental psychology. I was fortunate to secure an opportunity in Dr. Sue Leekam's lab. While working with her, I realized that I love to do research, so I decided to pursue postgraduate study. But, entering academia and working as a faculty member were not part of a concrete plan. Even after doing my postdoc, I still asked myself if I should take a break in between and try something else. But now, it's clear that I love being with my students and my current lifestyle.

AP-LS Student Committee: What are the most satisfying aspects of your career?

Dr. Teoh: It has to be knowing that, especially in our field, through research and training, we can improve the justice system. For instance, I completed an eight-hour investigative interviewing training earlier today for prosecutors and police officers. It's rewarding to link research with teaching both inside and outside the university and hearing about the impact of training from frontline practitioners. Also, I love working with students and being inspired by them.

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. Teoh: It was challenging at the beginning. When I first came back to Taiwan, most of the legal practitioners I came across had never heard of psychology and law. I had judges asking me why I was involved in legal cases and why I would be concerned with the justice system. At one time, I was working on a suspected wrongful conviction case (a capital case) involving a false confession. A judge questioned my involvement in the case,

saying that a confession is solely a legal matter. I had to explain the ‘human factors’ related to a confession, and that’s why it’s an important topic in psychology. Prosecutors also questioned my involvement in legal cases, saying that I don’t understand Taiwanese laws. I simply listened to their concerns. Legal practitioners have their reasons for doubting or being suspicious of academia. Academic scholars can be considered arrogant or detached from society, and researchers have been criticized for merely exploiting practitioners for research. So I spent years establishing relationships with legal practitioners and listening to them as much as possible during training. Legal practitioners started to see that I genuinely want to work with them and support them. Now they are inviting me for research and policy collaborations. I have heard similar stories from my other Asian colleagues. It took them up to ten to fifteen years to bridge the gap between practitioners and researchers in some cases.

AP-LS Student Committee: What is your involvement in AP-LS?

Dr. Teoh: I have attended and presented at AP-LS conferences. When I was a Ph.D. student in the U.K., I did not have the time and funding to attend international meetings. Because of the distance, I was more heavily involved in AP-LS when I was a postdoc in Brooklyn. Also, I think if AP-LS takes place in the summer, more non-North-America-based researchers and practitioners could participate.

AP-LS Student Committee: What do you think are the most significant roles/functions for organizations like AP-LS in psychology and law?

Dr. Teoh: I believe AP-LS helps build and facilitate connections among the psychology-law community. Also, conferences are essential for us to keep up to date with the latest research and the most pressing issues (e.g., specific laws passed in the U.S.) that we need to pay attention to and how the AP-LS and APA’s stance on the subject. I like the idea of white papers, which I always share with students in my classes because they are usually written by the most prominent scholars in our field, and they provide insights to both researchers and practitioners.

AP-LS Student Committee: If you could go back in time to that moment and give yourself one piece of advice about graduate school, what would it be and why?

Dr. Teoh: Exercise. It’s challenging to stay mentally and physically healthy during graduate studies. I was often sick when I was in Cambridge, maybe because of the climate, but probably because I didn’t go out much. I would have been a lot more productive and happier if I exercised regularly or went outdoors more often. So when I was doing my postdoc in New York, I was out and about a lot. Even during the winter, I was at Central Park in the snow.

AP-LS Student Committee: What advice do you have for AP-LS undergraduate student members? What is your suggestion about deciding on a graduate school program?

Dr. Teoh: My advice for AP-LS undergraduate student members, which might differ from other psychology undergraduate students, is connecting with practitioners and stepping out of your comfort zone. For instance, I often encourage undergraduate students to attend NGO-organized activities (e.g., workshops, talks) related to psychology and law. Many undergraduate students did not appreciate the meaning of attending such activities because they seemed irrelevant to research and CV-building. I told my students that even if they are uninterested in off-campus events, they might be inspired in some ways, which could potentially influence their career choices. Such a situation is common in Taiwan as many parents prefer that their children focus on their studies.

AP-LS Student Committee: What is your suggestion about deciding on a graduate school program?

Dr. Teoh: Research interest comes first, of course. Second, you need to be able to get along with your advisor, or else graduate study may become a painful process. I was very fortunate to have great advisors and mentors.

This suggestion is particularly relevant to those based in foreign countries, such as students in Asia, as they usually do not have prior experiences interacting with their prospective advisors in person if they aim to study in, say, North America or Europe. Third, location (and climate!) matters. If one hates the cold, spending five years in a place with long freezing winters will be miserable.

AP-LS Student Committee: From your perspective, what are the biggest challenges facing the field of forensic psychology today? How can students address those challenges?

Dr. Teoh: I think there is still a long way to go before scholars could successfully or effectively translate their research into practice, at least in this part of the world. For instance, I'm interested in rapport building during forensic interviews with vulnerable witnesses. When I'm assisting prosecutors in their child interviews as an intermediary or answering judges as an appointed expert witness, I still see so many gaps between what is recommended in research and the solutions sought by practitioners. One solution might be for students to connect with practitioners more frequently and engage more in constructive discussions with practitioners. It can be intellectual-stimulating to hear a practitioner share their experiences (and struggles!) in real cases. We need more practitioner-guided or practice-informed research.