
AP-LS Student Committee November, 2021

Career Corner

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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 Lora Levett, PhD, a professor in the University of Florida's Department of Sociology, Criminology, and Law. Dr. Levett is an Associate Editor for Law and Human Behavior and is currently serving as the 2021-2022 President of the American Psychology-Law Society (APA Division 41). Broadly, Dr. Levett's research focuses on improving legal decision-making including the roles of expert evidence, jury decision-making, and eyewitness identification. Kamar Tazi, a 2nd-year Clinical Psychology PhD student at the University of North Texas and 2021-2022 Student Committee Chair-Elect, interviewed Dr. Levett.

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

Dr. Levett: I first learned about psychology and law in my undergraduate research methods class. I went to Central Michigan University, and I was taking a class with Terry Libkuman who, at the time, studied issues surrounding eyewitness identification behavior. In my research methods class, we had to write a proposal, and the example that he gave us was about eyewitness identification. This was around 1998 or 1999, and it was really compelling to me—this idea of mistaken identification and that someone could identify someone, be really confident in that identification, and be wrong. So, I thought I would start looking into that literature and thinking about writing in that area for my class proposal. I actually found our journal, *Law and Human Behavior*. I was paging through the journal at the library, and I found article after article really interesting. I felt like, “Oh my gosh, this is amazing!” It opened this whole world to me about research and trying to use science to increase just outcomes in the legal system. I think I actually wrote my proposal on juries. Then, I got involved in research with Dr. Libkuman, and I ended up doing an honors thesis on jury stuff. I discovered that I really liked the research process, so when I was a senior, I decided to apply to graduate school. The rest is kind of history from there.

AP-LS Student Committee: What were the most important factors for you in choosing Florida International University for graduate school?

Dr. Levett: The most important thing for me was to be able to focus in on the kind of research I wanted to do. I knew at the time I was a little more keen on juries than I was on eyewitnesses. Now, I go across the breadth because I'm interested in decision-making in general. I look at how eyewitnesses make decisions to pick someone out of a lineup or how juries make decisions. We have some work on prosecutors in my lab right now, looking at how people make appropriate decisions and how to help them make better and more accurate decisions. It is really fascinating to me. That was really the most important thing for me in looking for a graduate program. There were a few things that really attracted me to FIU. The first was that I really liked the focus of the program, that it was a degree in legal psychology, and that the classes and curriculum also provided

exposure to more general information—social psychology, in my case. The program was focused on the research questions, the ideas, and the classes that would help me study the things that I wanted to focus on. The second thing is that, when I went to visit and was looking into the faculty in the program, I was excited about the possibility of working with Margaret [Margaret Bull Kovera, PhD]. She did so much of the work at the time (and since then) that I've found fascinating and creative. We also really hit it off, so I thought it would be an awesome opportunity to work with her. I also liked the other faculty. I sat in on a graduate class. The students were great, the professor was fantastic, and it all felt like a great fit for me.

AP-LS Student Committee: Is there anything you miss about graduate school?

Dr. Levett: One of the fun things that I miss about graduate school is the camaraderie of the students. It is so nice to have a cohort of people who are all working on common goals. Certainly, that continues (like when I was an assistant professor and there were other assistant professors doing the same types of things), but you don't get the same sense of camaraderie as you do in graduate school. As faculty, you are much more individually responsible for your research program and for developing your lab. It's a bit of a different feeling. I do miss that camaraderie and working hard towards shared goals that I had with other graduate students.

AP-LS Student Committee: Tell me about how you came to be so involved in AP-LS.

Dr. Levett: I started attending AP-LS when I was in graduate school. I always thought it was really neat to go to the business meetings because you get a little more insight into what's going on, what the organization is like, and how it works. I started doing that and going to the conference, meeting people, and networking. Then, when I graduated, I wanted to get involved in a committee or to contribute in some way. At the time, Margaret (my graduate advisor) was President of AP-LS, and one of her initiatives was to support early career professionals, because there weren't a ton of resources available. I started working with her on some of those initiatives, since I was an early career professional at the time. From there, I got to know the organization and people, and I sought out other opportunities to volunteer and be on committees. I always tried to make it a point to volunteer my time because I think it's really important for our profession to have AP-LS for resources and support. I'm really proud of a lot of the stuff we have done for students and early career professionals in terms of supporting research, travel, and those kinds of things.

AP-LS Student Committee: What can current graduate students and early career professionals do to be more involved in AP-LS and the field more generally?

Dr. Levett: As far as AP-LS, there are all sorts of different ways to be involved. One way is through the formal volunteer drive in the spring, usually around the conference, where you submit your information to the different committees you would like to work with. Committees review the applications and fill their spots that way. This is one way to be involved. Another way is to just reach out. Look at the AP-LS website and see the different committee that there are, and reach out to people like, "Hey! I would love to work on something in AP-LS. Can you tell me if there is something I can do to assist in these areas?" We originally started the volunteer drive because, prior to that, it was a little more informal. Sometimes we would issue a request saying, "This committee needs people," and we'd send an email to the members and see who responded, or people would use word of mouth or networking to fill committees. We can still do that, but we want to make sure that it's transparent. But also, don't discount those informal channels, like networking or reaching out via email. We are always eager to get people involved when they want to be involved. It's a really open and welcoming organization in that way. I think sometimes it can feel confusing to know how to get involved. It's just a matter of reaching out and taking the initiative or submitting to the volunteer drive. This is our organization so it can be what you want it to be. If you see something that is lacking or other ways we can improve based on your

experiences in other organizations, bring those ideas and contributions because they'll make it better for everybody!

AP-LS Student Committee: What is most rewarding about your line of research, and what do you find most challenging about this work?

Dr. Levett: I tend to be a puzzler, so I like to figure out the answers, come up with the questions, and think about what we know, what we don't know, and how we figure out what we know or don't know. Developing how we answer questions and then figuring out what we know now and can say about X, given what we found, is very exciting and motivating for me. As far as the most challenging part, research can be really hard. It can be very challenging to go through the publication process when you're on the second R&R [revise and resubmit] and you're like "please just publish my paper!" but it's really satisfying at the end of the day to see how the paper improves and to be able to say, "Wow this is good; I really made a contribution." So, it's challenging but ultimately very satisfying.

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

Dr. Levett: This really ties into my presidential initiative work because I want to increase the public impact and public value in our research. I think that, for a lot of us, the reason we got into the field in the first place, the "why," is because we want to improve the criminal-legal system; we want to make more just outcomes, and I think sometimes we, as a field, tend to get away from that. Especially in academia, our rewards tend to be really focused on teaching, research, and service, but service is very narrowly defined as service to the university or service to the profession. We don't talk as much about service to the public and trying to make a difference with our research. We are, by definition, an applied field. I think the clinical folks are a little better about doing that on a day-to-day basis because a lot of clinical practice is applying what we know about the research to the specific case or to particular issues. My initiative is really focused on trying to engage in a bit of a culture shift where we start valuing and placing emphasis on this idea of public impact and how can we best use our research in this way.

Part of this is that there is a whole science behind the science of how psychology makes a difference. A lot of times we don't get training on that or talk about that in our graduate programs. One of the things scientists often think is that if people knew differently, they would do better. We think it's an information deficit where, for example, if police knew that doing certain things in the lineup would reduce the chance for mistaken identification, then they would do it; we just have to tell them. That's not really how it works. Instead, you have to look into the shared underlying value system and build those bridges and rapport before you can effectively make a difference. There have been so many people in our field who do this successfully and who are out there contributing and making a difference by testifying in legislative sessions, giving expert testimony, working with interrogation groups, and these types of things. One of the things we can do better as a field is to provide more structure, training, and resources for people who are wanting to make a difference so that it isn't so nebulous or dependent on individual people taking others under their wing to show them how it's done.

AP-LS Student Committee: Are there other larger projects you are working on in your role as president?

Dr. Levett: Another thing we are looking at is how to better recognize our members for their contributions and things that they do. Part of the culture shift we're working on is offering recognition as an organization for people who are doing these things really well. I have a small task force looking at our awards and grants and trying to think a little bit more creatively about how we can structure these things.

AP-LS Student Committee: Is there anything you would like to add that I haven't asked about?

Dr. Levett: For the student members, I just want to emphasize that we try really hard to be a student-friendly organization. I know that going to conferences, networking, and talking with people can feel pretty intimidating when you're a student, but I want to encourage students. We want them to feel at home and like this is their organization. In that, I want to stress that students are welcome and that we really enjoy your input, participation, and everything you all bring to the organization. Reach out to people and talk to people—strike up those conversations because you might be surprised about how great it goes for you.