

Sharon S. Wang
Personal Statement

Tempted by free pizza at the age of 15, I walked into my first meeting of Teens for Change, a teen dating violence advocacy group. I had no idea what teen dating violence was, or why it merited an entire group to address it. By the time I walked out, I had learned that 1 in 3 adolescents experience abuse from a dating partner, and, free pizza or not, I would be back to learn how I could help. The next day at school, I couldn't help but wonder if a couple fighting by their lockers signaled a deeper, more malicious problem, or if another couple's cheery dynamic stayed the same when no one else was watching. I was shocked at the pervasiveness of abuse at such a young age, and I couldn't stop thinking about the long-term consequences of those hallway events. While I didn't know it at the time, attending that first Teens for Change meeting was the beginning of a decades-long passion to understand gender-based violence and to mitigate its long-term consequences.

I was committed to continuing my work from high school when I matriculated at Northwestern University, so I joined Sexual Health and Assault Peer Educators (SHAPE), a student organization addressing rape culture and sexual violence on campus. Through SHAPE, I gained an understanding of gender-based violence from a community-based, survivor-centered approach. More importantly, I learned about intersectional feminism, which underscored all the work we did in SHAPE. The idea that all identities we inhabit intersect to create a complex, nuanced portrait of individuality struck a chord with me. Theoretically, how many different ways could people experience the same event (e.g., sexual violence) due to their multitude of interconnected identities? Were there certain combinations of identities that could protect someone from experiencing the maladaptive consequences of sexual assault?

While I knew that gender-based violence was where I found purpose and passion, I never envisioned I could combine my personal interests with my professional aspirations. I entered my undergraduate career with plans to major in chemistry and potentially attend graduate school. Through a chemistry laboratory course, I discovered a budding interest in research. As a freshman, I was awarded the Weinberg Summer Grant to conduct an independent research project on the effects of antioxidants in coffee. I found the rigor and precision of research soothing, yet challenging, and my independent research project allowed my intellectual curiosity to bloom. But I found myself increasingly at odds: on the one hand, I was passionate about SHAPE and gender-based violence; on the other, I was equally lured by intellectual curiosity and research. At the suggestion of my academic advisor, I took Introduction to Psychology, and I discovered that psychology could provide me the opportunity to conduct research, like chemistry had, while allowing me to incorporate my personal interests, gender-based violence.

Experiences during and after my undergraduate career have reinforced that academic research is the right field for me. My work in the Relationships and Motivation Lab, under the direction of Dr. Eli Finkel, provided me with foundational research skills. As I learned to synthesize data and manage participants in double-blind, randomized-controlled experiments, I was brought back to my high school questions, this time informed by what I learned in both SHAPE and psychology classes. After graduating from Northwestern in 2018, I became a psychometrist at AMITA Health to explore the possibility of a more clinically-focused career. Working directly with patients and making an immediate difference was extremely rewarding,

but I found myself missing research's excitement and creativity. Seeking a more research-oriented position, I took my current position as a lab manager in the Social and Behavioral Development (SBD) Lab under the direction of Dr. James Li, a clinical psychology professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

During my time in the SBD Lab, I have gained a deeper understanding of clinical psychology research, and Dr. Li's longitudinal research on externalizing disorders has sparked an interest for me in understanding violence over time. Motivated by questions I had pondered since high school about long-term consequences and individual differences, I proposed an independent research project to examine trajectories of depression in maltreated individuals. We used data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health), a prospective longitudinal examination of U.S. adolescents followed into adulthood. I was interested in learning and applying advanced longitudinal methods (i.e., latent growth curve analysis) to the study of violence and examining how early childhood violence might affect mental health, social and interpersonal outcomes, and socioeconomic outcomes over time. I wondered why some children who are maltreated appear "resilient." Furthermore, I questioned whether "resilience" truly existed when examining individuals across multiple domains of functioning. We discovered that, indeed, many maltreated individuals who do not exhibit long term trajectories of depression (i.e., "resilient" individuals) still experienced worse functional outcomes when compared to non-maltreated individuals. This work led to a poster presentation at this year's APA convention and a manuscript that will be submitted in December 2020. This experience has given me the opportunity and confidence to conduct each aspect of the research process, and it has allowed my intellectual curiosity to thrive, confirming that academic research is the right field for me.

These experiences, from Teens for Change to my recent maltreatment project, have solidified my desire to pursue a clinical psychology PhD. Intersectionality has played a crucial and recurring role in my journey to a clinical psychology PhD, and ultimately, intersectionality is the foundation upon which my research interests lie. Broadly, I aim to examine the ways that individual and contextual factors intersectionally influence the experience and outcomes of gender-based violence, especially in minority communities. I believe that a career as a clinical psychologist will best position me to examine gender-based violence and its related sequelae. It will also allow me to leverage academic research to better support survivors of gender-based violence by producing work that can inform best practices for marginalized populations. I hope to find a PhD program with a strong emphasis on high impact research with practical applications, opportunities for interdisciplinary collaborations, and close alignment between the faculty's research interests and my own.

At that first Teens for Change meeting, I may not have known exactly what I walked into, but over the course of the past decade, I have come to realize that it was never the free pizza that drew me in; there was something in their mission that spoke to me. I am extraordinarily lucky to have found a career path that lies at the intersection of what I am passionate about and what I enjoy doing. I look forward to the opportunity to discover more meaningful intersections in my work to ultimately give back to survivors of gender-based violence.