

UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

**Diversity Factor Interview Questions: Dr. Silvia Mazzula**

By Melanie Robbins M.S. , Indiana University .

**Please give me a brief summary regarding where you went to school and your training.**

I am a Counseling Psychologist and Professional Counselor by training. I went to The College of New Jersey for my undergraduate degree in biology and masters in Counseling and Human Services. I received my PhD in Counseling Psychology at Teachers College, Columbia University.

**Please share a little about your professional work and research.**

I wear a lot of different professional hats. I am a tenure-track assistant professor of psychology at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, CUNY, where I teach graduate courses in forensic mental health counseling. I am also a mental health researcher. Most of my research examines the role of acculturation experiences and discrimination in mental health outcomes. I have an active research team of graduate students at John Jay College and collaborate with interdisciplinary research teams at Columbia University.

My most recent professional hat is related to a grant award I received to address the underrepresentation of historically disadvantaged populations with advanced research degrees. As a result of this award, I had the privilege of organizing the “Latina Researchers Conference: Increasing the Pipeline for Future Scholars”, which took place this year in the spring. We brought together about 200 attendees from diverse disciplines and from every academic background, from graduate students to post-doctoral fellows to tenure faculty. It was an inspirational and intellectually stimulating gathering. After the meeting, it was evident that more work was needed to meet the needs of aspiring investigators and

therefore founded the “Latina Researchers Network”. We hope to continue to provide the next generation of investigators with examples of excellence in scholarship and with opportunities for research collaboration and networking to succeed in academia.

**What inspired your interests in these areas of practice and research?**

My lived experiences as a first generation immigrant from Uruguay and as a first generation college student have inspired my work (clinical and research). These experiences have helped me to be empathetic to the needs of marginalized groups and to also be able to think critically about providing culturally relevant treatment and conducting research that includes voices traditionally silenced. As a counseling psychologist and professional counselor, I am also an advocate for social justice issues—which I always try to address in my teaching, clinical, research and professional work.

**Have your research interests changed over the years? If so, how?**

Yes. Although I am sure some students know exactly what they want to study when they first begin their training, I entered the field with a little less direction. Initially, my interest focused broadly on multicultural issues in psychology, and mostly from a clinician’s perspective. As a counselor, I noticed some of my clients’ issues were not easily explained by existing theories and research. As a result, I pursued a career in research where I could contribute to this knowledge base. As I engaged in my research training, while simultaneously practicing as a clinician, I began to focus more specifically on research studies that examined the relationship between acculturation experiences and mental health. I had amazing clients whose strength and resilience shaped my current research focus on looking at acculturation experiences that serve a protective role for immigrant families, particularly Latino/a families. I’ve also had great mentors who have helped me to focus my research program. Now, I primarily focus on research and teaching.

**What are some of your current projects?**

At John Jay College, my students and I are working on studies that examine biculturalism and the role of culture in preventing mood disorders. We are also conducting a large



Mazzula and her children

NINA GHISELLI continued from page 9

content analysis of empirical publications examining the extent to which issues of race and culture are included and incorporated into research studies. These are extensions of projects that I started at Columbia University during my training. We are also starting new projects that examine the role of acculturation experiences in reducing high-risk behaviors among racial/ethnic minority populations in general, and youth in particular. One of these projects is supported by the National Institute of Minority Health and Health Disparities' Loan Repayment Program. I am also a National Institute of Health (NIDA) fellow at Columbia University's Child Psychiatric Epidemiology Group and work with an interdisciplinary team on studies that seek to understand the needs of Latina mothers who are involved in the criminal justice system. At Columbia University, I also collaborate with investigators at the Center of Excellence for Cultural Competence where we are starting a project examining the needs of Latina adolescent girls who engage in high-risk behaviors.

**What kind of things would you like to do in the future?**

In the future, I would like to continue to work, and expand, on my current projects, particularly those related to addressing high-risk behaviors among youth. I would also like to continue to develop the Latina Researchers Network. I am now at a place where I can use what I learned throughout my training to ensure there are more faculty of color to meet the needs of our growing community. I believe it can be a thriving community of researchers and scholars that ensures the next generation of investigators reflects the diverse population of this country.

**What do you like to do for fun?**

I have two beautiful sons, Mateo who is six and Lucas who is four. I love to be silly with them, read books, catch and take care of small creatures – my little ones love insects – and watch them eat the vegetables we plant together in our small garden.

**How do you balance everything you do, such as research, service, seeing clients (if you see them), teaching, and life outside of work?**

I try to take it easy on myself. I recognize that I have a lot to

juggle and that I can't do everything at once. For work, I try to keep a weekly schedule of everything I do, from my writing time, to service activities, to prepping for my courses. As a mom, my boys are my priority. However, as with work, I also recognize I can't do it all and be everywhere at the same time. I do my best to be emotionally present with them when we are together and I involve them in everything I do – even if it is as simple as talking through with them how I am making dinner. Letting them be actively involved in mundane activities gives us precious and quality moments together. I also work very hard at not feeling guilty when I can't be involved in everything at once. I'm learning to tell myself it's OK.

**What is your favorite thing about your job?**

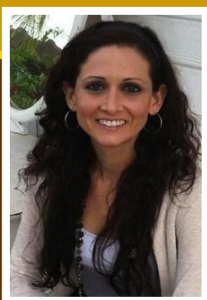
The flexibility of academia is what I value the most about my job. Although it can be challenging to work with a little less structure than the traditional 9-5 hours, it helps me be there for my children. I would not change this flexibility, particularly since my boys are still so young and watching them grow is what gives me joy.

**What advice do you have for grad students?**

Throughout my training, I recognized the importance of mentors and support groups. A lot of times, as students, we may find it intimidating to approach others when we need help. It took me a long time to step outside of my comfort zone and ask for mentorship. I encourage all of you to seek out role models who can guide you and provide the resources you need to succeed. Just remember, no one mentor has all the answers. So don't be afraid to have many in your corner.

**Any additional information you would like to share?!**

Yes. I would like to leave you with a quote I have always kept with me: "Only those who reach too far will ever know how far one can possible go" ~ T.S. Eliot. Never let fear of rejection or fear of doing something no one in your family or social support network has done stop you from reaching for your dreams.



**Brief Biography of Interviewer**

Melanie Robbins is a second year doctoral student in the Counseling Psychology program at Indiana University. She received her B.A. from California State University, Channel Islands in Psychology, and her M.S. in Counseling and Counselor Education from Indiana University. Her research interests are heavily focused on geriatric mental health care, particularly in long term care. She has also been looking at substance use in older adults, and has an interest in mental health needs of LGBT older adults.