

# The TCU IBR Spotlight

INSTITUTE OF BEHAVIORAL RESEARCH



## What's New

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## Q&A with Yang Yang

Dr. Yang is a graduate of the IBR and rejoined the IBR in January 2020. She is a Research Scientist on a large scale research project funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA). Her specific areas of interest are substance use treatment for justice-involved individuals, health disparities, and advanced research methodology.

We sat down with her to discuss her background in research.

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## Q&A with Yang Yang

(Continued)

Currently, Dr. Yang serves as a Project Director on a NIDA-funded project – Preventing Opioid Use Among Justice-Involved Youth as They Transition to Adulthood: Leveraging Safe Adults (LeSA). She has served as Principal Investigator on several other projects in the past.

### What life events helped form your interest in conducting research?

My research opportunities allow me to interact with justice-involved individuals and collect both empirical and anecdotal information about their substance use treatment, which has helped shape my research interests. For example, once I was conducting research with a small group of women at a local jail. During weekly face-to-face interactions for a 2-month period, I was able to get exposed to the lived experiences of these women who went through the system multiple times and various life challenges/barriers they had to address to achieve positive treatment outcomes. Experiences like this have led me to believe rehabilitation is not just one program in a setting. It is a holistic approach involving multiple entities who are willing to coordinate and share resources. It also has led me to develop a research interest in using scientific paradigms to examine the effectiveness of treatment approaches and promote the update of evidence-based services.

### Why does LeSA focus on opioid use with justice-involved youth?

Across the US, an estimated 11.1 million people are misusing prescription opioid analgesics

(including prescription opioids and illicit opioids, such as heroin and illicitly made fentanyl and related analogs). Opioid overdose is a leading cause of accidental death. In the past two decades, there is a substantial increase in the number of opioid-related emergency department visits, hospital and intensive care unit admissions, and deaths among children and adolescents. With millions of youth aged 14-17 involved in the US Juvenile Justice (JJ) system and a high percent of them involving in substance use, it is a critically important opportunity to provide prevention intervention for Justice-involved youth and prevent the initiation and escalation of opioid use. Given the high co-occurrence of substance use and crime, the prevention intervention strategy will also help lower recidivism and promote public safety.

### How is this project taking existing interventions (TBRI) and adapting them for the target audience?

The LeSA project focuses on prevention intervention strategies that target the risk for substance use among youth in transition from secure residential facilities back to their communities. As part of the LeSA project, TCU is adapting and testing a trauma-informed approach - Trust-Based Relational Intervention® (TBRI) – with older adolescents involved in the JJ system.. The TBRI intervention model is an evidence-based, trauma-informed model of care for children and youth with histories of early adversity, including maltreatment, abuse, neglect, multiple out-of-home placements, and other relational trauma.

Adults in the child's family network (e.g., parent/guardian, extended family member) will be trained as "safe adults" using TBRI Connecting, Empowering, and Correcting strategies to help youth express their needs, improve self-regulation, and develop healthier relationships. The ultimate goal is to prevent the initiation and/or escalation of substance use (particularly opioid use). The hope is that by equipping "safe adults" in the youth's family system, youth will be less likely to engage in substance use and other harmful behaviors following release from secure facilities. TBRI can also be implemented within any context by anyone trained in the tools and strategies, and therefore provides a framework and impetus for empowering ALL adults, regardless of status or education, to be catalysts of change for youth. It does not require formal clinical training (e.g., counseling credentials); only training on principles and practices is needed.

**Why is it important to have parents/guardians (safe adults) involved in the project?**

JJ youth represent a vulnerable population, as many experience mental health disorders, dysfunctional family/social relationships, and complex trauma. This vulnerability is heightened among youth who are transitioning back into their communities after a period of residential detainment or treatment, and especially among those who have experienced adverse childhood events leading up to JJ involvement. LeSA has parents/guardians (safe adults) involved in the project is to leverage and equip family systems and provide JJ youth with emotional and instrumental guidance, support, and role modeling.



Dr. Yang Yang

**For more information about the LeSA project please contact Dr. Yang at [ibr@tcu.edu](mailto:ibr@tcu.edu)**

## *IBR SOAR Lab Goes Virtual*

The IBR SOAR Lab has kicked off for the fall semester - but this time virtual! Due to COVID-19, in person monthly meetings have been postponed. However, students, faculty, and staff participated in our first ever Zoom monthly lab meeting this month. This will be our new normal until in person meetings are allowed.

We are still accepting new members at this time and welcome all who are interested. As of now, we are also accepting applications for our Tier 2 portion of the lab.

To become a member, stay updated on the latest developments, or join a virtual lab monthly meeting please contact [Dr. Jennifer Pankow](mailto:j.pankow@tcu.edu) at [j.pankow@tcu.edu](mailto:j.pankow@tcu.edu) or [Daisha Sipho](mailto:daisha.d.sipho@tcu.edu) at [daisha.d.sipho@tcu.edu](mailto:daisha.d.sipho@tcu.edu).





## *Q&A with Audrey Armstrong*

Audrey joined the IBR in August of 2019, with a master's in psychology from Stephen F. Austin University. Previously, she worked as a licensed specialist in school psychology, serving special education students in the public school setting. Currently, Audrey is our Research Support Specialist and works on various projects, managing publication and manuscript submission, maintaining a bibliographic database for all of the research scientists, and assisting with software support.

### **What experiences led you to work at the IBR?**

I feel like I've always been a student of psychology and human behavior. I graduated with Majors Honors from the Psychology program at Missouri Western State University where I served as president of the psychology club and founded their first Psi Chi chapter. It was a great experience! I was fortunate to have the opportunity to do research theses at both MWSU and SFA in learning styles and selective attention. My educational goal upon arriving in Texas in 1991 was to get an EDS degree (Education Specialist) to work as a school psychologist. Texas did not offer that license at that time, and there were only two graduate programs in the state that offered degrees in School Psychology. While at SFA, I also worked towards a second masters in special education and graduated 3 classes shy of the double masters to begin working as a school psychologist in Longview, Texas.

After 22 years and 4 school districts, I decided it was time to take a break from psychological assessments, related services counseling, parent training, CPI

training, Crisis Teams, and leading staff development. I still enjoy teaching and tutoring when I can. Since moving to the DFW area in 2005, I have visited the TCU area frequently and developed a genuine affinity for the community here. The opportunity to work at the IBR was a natural fit for me, and I have truly enjoyed getting to know the people and the research work of this place.

### **How does this fit with your professional and educational goals?**

I consider myself pseudo-semi-retired from my chosen profession – ha ha ha. I have plans to re-tool and return to the field at some point. However, in the meantime, I am enjoying the quality of a lower stress work environment and the opportunity to help my 19-year-old through the tuition benefit program.

### **What do you enjoy most about working at the IBR?**

I most enjoy the people here! You all know how to have fun and work hard! Even though it's not as direct as it was before, I love that the work I do still has some connection to helping people. That is really important to me.

### **What are past-time activities do you enjoy outside of the IBR?**

I love music! I enjoy singing when I can and playing the piano (for myself and anyone within earshot). I love going to live music performances from rock concerts to the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra. I also like to stay active and exercise by walking and running (more walking than running – lol). I also enjoy relaxing with an adult beverage with my friends.

## ***ACTION Grant***

Recently, the IBR along with Yale University and UT Southwestern received NIDA funding for a new 5-year project - Addressing risk through Community Treatment for Infectious disease and Opioid use disorder Now (**ACTION**) among justice-involved populations.

The ACTION Grant focuses on the need to improve linkage to HIV prevention and treatment and Opioid Use Disorder services for criminal justice-involved individuals. This is being done by comparing the effectiveness and implementation of Peer Navigation (PN and Mobile Health Unit (MHU) intervention models for service delivery in four highly at-risk geographic territories in Connecticut and Texas.

Providing the evidence base to support effective implementation approaches that improve linkage to and engagement in integrated community services is critical to preventing new HIV infections among persons who inject drugs and those with opioid use disorders who are being released from prison and jail to the community.

Multiple PIs Kevin Knight (TCU), Sandra Springer (Yale), and Ank Nijhawan (UTSW) will be leading this project.

***Bravo***

## **Achievements**

We would like to celebrate our faculty and staff members' service at the IBR - [Mandy Soto](#), [Justin Jones](#) & [Daisha Sipho](#) are celebrating 1 year at the IBR. Thank you for your hard work and dedication!

