



Victoria Arango, Ph.D.

An Interview with ACNP Fellow, Victoria Arango, Ph.D.

Q. Could you tell me a bit about yourself?

A. I grew up in Colombia, in South America, at a time when women were not supposed to study. In fact, most women were getting married right after high school. My father, who had 5 daughters, taught us the importance of being independent and never have to depend on anyone for financial support. He really was a key influence in my life. Then I came to the US, and I wanted to go to school. I always thought I wanted to study medicine, I was pre-med and had taken all the pre-med courses, the MCAT, and even had an interview already for medical school. But then in my last year of college, while completing my thesis, I realized what I really liked was the research aspect of medicine, the “why” of things. Guided by my thesis advisor, I decided to go to graduate school to complete a PhD in Neuroscience. I received my PhD in Neuroanatomy from Downstate Medical Center, then I did a postdoctoral fellowship at Cornell University Medical College. In 1985, because of my knowledge of neuroanatomy I was recruited to Cornell by John Mann, a psychiatrist who wanted to localize his research findings better in the brain. This showed a lot of foresight on his part, and we pioneered anatomical studies in the brain of people who die by suicide. Our collaboration has lasted through 3 institutions and 3 decades, and in fact he is still a close friend and colleague. In 1989, John Mann invited me to attend my first ACNP. I felt like a deer in the headlights: I was in the middle of all these famous scientists who were so generous with their advice, and it was an amazing experience! Once I went that first time, I always went back.

Q. When did you join the ACNP?

A. I became a member in 1993. At the time ACNP was very different, it was mostly men. Women were only 3% of the membership back then. Then the women’s movement and the Women’s Task Force started, and I was part of it. I have been very fortunate because I got into the ACNP when I first applied, and I have been part of the committees from the beginning (I

served 3 terms on the Membership Committee, I was on the Program Committee, the Latin America Task Force, the URM Task Force, I was a Council member, Chaired the Nominating Committee...). I have seen the college mature and become more aligned with society.

Q. *As a member of the ACNP, have you had the opportunity to interact with innovative thought leaders in the field of neuroscience?*

A. Yes! After attending enormous meetings like the Society for Neuroscience (SfN) annual meeting, it was really important for me to attend a small collegial meeting like ACNP. It showed me it was possible to collaborate with whomever you wanted. It offered me the opportunity to grow scientifically and to align myself with the top researchers and innovators. And it was at ACNP meetings that important career moves were hatched, for example all of the plans to move our group to Pittsburgh!

ACNP also made me realize the importance of mentorship. John Mann was very good about introducing me to people at the ACNP meetings and taking me along during his visits to the poster sessions. He modelled the questions one asks, the things one does, etc. Actually, I nominated John Mann for the ACNP Axelrod Mentorship Award, and I am thrilled to hear that he is one of the winners this year!

Q. *How has your membership in the ACNP put you in touch with the professionals who have shaped the field as it currently exists - and will enable you to be one of those who shape the various neuroscientific disciplines in the future?*

A. When I started working nobody was looking at the brain itself. PET and MRI were not available, and the only studies on brain samples used homogenates. Scientists would homogenize the brain and look for levels of chemicals. My contribution was to focus on the brain and try to understand, from an anatomical point of view, the location of any alterations that had been detected. We needed to understand what brain circuitry meant, and I was part of that initial movement. Through collaborations with top researchers like Stanley Watson and Huda Akil, many of which started at ACNP, we were able to incorporate new molecular biology techniques like in situ hybridization in our postmortem samples. When PET became available we started combining the findings of in vivo PET imaging of serious suicide attempters with our findings in the brains of people who had died by suicide. It was very unique to be able to link the in vivo, the postmortem/in vitro, and the clinical data. The brains we studied were of subjects that had been very well characterized psychiatrically. Before, others had studied the brain, but nothing was known about the decedents, so there was no link between the neurobiology and the clinical psychopathology.

Q. *The primary functions of the College are research and education. Do you feel the college offers investigators the opportunity for cross-disciplinary communication?*

A. Definitely. ACNP is a unique multidisciplinary college that allows for interaction between scientists and to share the best unpublished data at meetings. You meet other people within your same field and with the same research focus, and people who are doing other techniques or have different approaches. I think my experience in the College really prepared me for my work at the NIMH. Working at the NIMH I can see the gestalt of research, I can “see the forest” rather than focus only in my own field of research. Because of my experience I can help others

to succeed. This is similar to what the ACNP is doing: it is trying to make trainees and early career researchers succeed and offering mentorship. This was not available before and has grown tremendously since I first became a member. For example, there has been a growing number of travel awards, and the long-term commitment of the mentors has increased.

Q. I know you have been involved in the Diversity efforts of the College; can you tell us about that?

A. Since I became a member, I got involved with the URM Task Force (now the Diversity Task Force). I think we have come a very long way, we have been able to increase the diversity of the college, to provide a better cross-sectional representation of society. It has taken a life of its own, and the College now includes every possible type of diversity. But we still do not have parity, so it is still a work in progress.

Q. Anything else to say to the readers?

A. The one thing I have to tell them is: do not give up. Do not be afraid of applying, because you are not going to get in if you do not apply. Do not hesitate to attend using an invitation, to have the opportunity to be exposed to the ambience that exists at ACNP, the ease with which people interact, the ability to reach presidents and past presidents and famous scientists who just gave a keynote speech. They are all there, in a very informal setting. You can just come up to people, this is the atmosphere at ACNP. I would also tell them to not hesitate to ask for advice about their applications. I work with applicants to help them write the statement and advise them about what is the best way to prepare the application. Do not hesitate to call the office and ask for help. Also, I would tell them that the travel awards are one of the most competitive things these days, even more than an R01! But we don't want applicants to give up. We need young people and those from the newer disciplines, like Big Data and Computational Psychiatry, to form the consortia we need to advance science to help ameliorate the effects of mental illness and hopefully prevent it.