

Dennielle Kronenberg, LCSW, PPSC

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RAMS (Richmond Area Multi-Services Inc.)

Interviewed by Jonathan Zhang

Edited for length and clarity

Dennielle Kronenberg is a seasoned clinical social worker, educator, and leader with over 15 years of experience in behavioral health, clinical supervision, and workforce development. As Director of the RAMS Training Institute, she oversees clinician-in-training programs, staff development, and public training opportunities, partnering with universities and professional organizations to support the next generation of mental health professionals. Dennielle has an extensive background in school-based mental health services, program management, and community collaboration. She is passionate about family therapy and committed to promoting culturally responsive, trauma-informed care in all aspects of her work. Dennielle holds a Master of Social Work from San Francisco State University and a Pupil Personnel Services Credential for School Social Work. She currently serves on the California Chapter Ethics Committee of the National Association of Social Workers.

Please share a little about yourself. What keeps you motivated to continue to expand RAMS' community involvement?

I am originally from the East Coast, grew up in New York. New York City is a place with rich immigration history and both sides of my family have their immigration stories, from islands to the mainland. My father is Irish, and my mother – was Puerto Rican. My family used to really identify with the story of Maria and Tony in Westside Story, I think because it spoke about some of the tensions between groups that they experienced. Growing up, having a mixed identity was my frame of reference, but I could see how it caused stress for the grown ups sometimes. From a young age, I noticed differences between my Irish family and my Puerto Rican family. Puerto Rico has a centuries long history of colonization and these days it is a territory—I would say colony—of the US. Back in the day, my maternal ancestors would have been born as Spanish citizens. My grandparents were the first generation born after the US colonized, so technically, they were born American, but identified culturally as Spanish and Boricua (the indigenous peoples of the island called it Borinken and so its people refer to themselves as Boricua). They came to the mainland, New York City, in the 50s when there was a huge migration of Puerto Ricans from the island related to economic instability. My mother was around 8 years old at that time and didn't speak English. There was a lot of stigma for her around speaking Spanish and identifying as Puerto Rican. As a result, she chose to speak to me only in English, so I wouldn't have to share that experience. All this is to say my lifelong interests have been culture, identity and specifically languages because of the differences I noticed as a young person. It is interesting

because being separated from the language in that way has always drawn me closer to it instead of away from it, which I think was my mother's intent. Ultimately, I found my way to community mental health and to RAMS because of that intent, as a way to reclaim with pride the experiences my mother was shameful of. When I went to college and got my undergrad, I started out as an anthropology major interested in culture and linguistics. I ended up graduating with a sociology degree. Eventually, I went back and got my master's in social work, which was sort of anticipated. I was helped by social workers as a young person and had a really positive experience. My first job out of grad school was working for La Casa de Las Madres, providing services to survivors of domestic violence experiences. I worked at their shelter. After a year of doing that, I found my way to RAMS and was drawn to the organization because of their lens on culture, identity, and the intersections. I got my start working in the high school-based wellness centers program, providing services to Latinx families. I moved through many phases of my professional development here at RAMS, from getting started as an Associate Clinical Social Worker, to becoming licensed, becoming a supervisor, the program director of the Wellness Centers Program. I think this has been a primary motivator for me to spread the word about RAMS, its programs, and its mission. It has been a very supportive place to grow and develop and its values align with my own.

What does your work as the Director of Training Institute entail?

RAMS has been around for 50 plus years at this point and really got started providing mental health services, but particularly in language to individuals who otherwise would not be able to access services. This inclusive aspect of RAMS and specifically providing services and language has always been at the forefront here. In the late 70's, early 80's, we started our National Asian American Psychology Training Program. That was our flagship training program, and this was training psychologists, marriage and family therapists, social workers to provide individual services. RAMS has developed this history and legacy for training over the years: there's training that's happened in other programs at RAMS. For instance, Wellness Centers or at CAAP or CalWORKs. Never, though, had it happened in a cohesive manner. It always happened at the program level by the different program directors. When RAMS went through strategic planning a couple years ago, they decided they wanted to have this training institute where training could be offered across the organization. Yes, it continues at the program level, but that there could be some overarching themes and supports. So one of the main responsibilities is to oversee the recruitment, training and support of our 30 annual clinical interns across programs. I provide administrative support to the National Asian American Psychology Training Center and the Wellness Centers Program. But I also do direct work with interns at CalWORKs, CAAP, Broderick Street, FuYau Project and Peer, offering group supervision, bringing in trainers, and offering training myself. So that's a core piece of the work. Another piece of the work is training staff. So, there are regular initiatives, whether it's because of our partners at the school district or through the city and county that we are required to train all of our staff. And so, I often offer all

staff training and customize them and accommodate their schedules. Another thing that I do is leadership development for staff. For much of the leadership at RAMS, people (like myself) started out as direct service providers, and then did their jobs really well, then got promoted to the supervisor and manager roles. But we didn't actually come in with skills or training to do supervisory roles. So, I offer a leadership development cohort to coordinators, managers, supervisors, who are all making that transition, to help them develop their skills. The last piece of the role is offering training externally to the community. RAMS gets requests to offer training based on our expertise and experience on various subjects. I either coordinate with our staff or I offer the training myself to these external organizations, community members. I think ultimately how I see all the different roles under this title are really about helping the helpers to do their roles well and to offer the best service that they can in this community mental health domain.

Do you speak another language? If so, what do you speak? How did you learn the language?

So, I learned Spanish in school. Because of the stigma my mom felt after she moved to the mainland, she spoke to me in English. But I heard it all growing up at family events. When I ended up learning it in high school, I completed the courses so rapidly that I was actually able to learn French as well. And these days I'm learning Korean. My interest in languages has always been so keen. I've continued my learning and use of Spanish, in college, postgrad, through my postgrad travels, and experiences with work. These days, I speak to my kid only in Spanish. He will pick up the English easily since it is all around him. I would say unfortunately related to stigma, I wasn't really able to connect with my family as a young person in Spanish. I think that there is internalized stigma and there's external stigma. I think as a younger person, I felt very much othered and outsiders in a way like 'you're not Puerto Rican enough' or 'you're not Irish enough', and so I think that was a challenge to overcome. I'm pleased to say, though, in adulthood, I absolutely have, and it's lovely to be able to connect with my family members in Spanish.

Despite there being a stigma in the community around speaking Spanish, the school system still offered Spanish language classes?

Our school did. It's interesting to think about how certain sets of people are interested in connecting with others. And then, where I grew up in sort of a suburban setting in New York, there was a lot of in-grouping, and so in this major urban area, some people were less educated and less interested in being outside of the group.

How does bilingualism support your organization or your work?

I would say that primarily I lean into my bicultural identity at this point in my development. So, part of the strategy I hold, or the stance I hold for recruitment at RAMS for students, is we are looking to promote people who are bilingual, bicultural in their development. That's not to say that we don't work with monolingual English speakers. But I think it can be really empowering and emboldening to somebody who does speak Spanish and identify as Latinx to see someone in the role that I'm in. Having worked and provided services directly to the community, there's many levels of opportunity in career development. I appreciate being able to offer spaces for bilingual, bicultural students of any background to reflect on their personal experiences, develop their professional identities in a way that is true to their lived experience. Often, as the children of immigrants or immigrants themselves, the space the students have to process these experiences together is an invaluable support that allows them to offer services in language to the communities they identify with.

Are there specific challenges or hurdles for Spanish speaking families or Latinx identifying families when they seek out RAMS or mental health services in general?

Definitely. Language is one of the main barriers, I would say. So in my time at the high school-based wellness center, it was an ongoing challenge to find staff and recruit staff who spoke Spanish. Because in the San Francisco Unified School District we have a large population subset that speaks Cantonese, Taishanese, Mandarin, and Chinese languages and dialects. RAMS has that expertise. But the other main group of students who we served in wellness centers are Latinx identifying, many of whom spoke Spanish at home, even if they spoke English in school. So, when you're working with teenagers and young people, working with their families is a big part of it. Having clinicians and staff who could communicate with families was hugely important. I noticed in my time, not only offering services in Spanish, but again, in my role as director of the Wellness Centers program, in my communications with the San Francisco Unified School District staff, they were ever interested and hopeful that I could recruit bilingual staff. There was also a great need for Arabic and Tagalog language speakers. These were 2 of the other language needs that showed up quite a lot and presented barriers to treatment access.

Are there cultural or societal stigmas around mental health in the Latinx community?

Yeah, there are. I would say that the idea of airing your dirty laundry for everybody to see is frowned upon. I would also say in my contact with clients, I noticed a lot of spirituality. I counseled many folks in engaging with the services, of course with me, but also like, "okay, let's talk about your spiritual network, your spiritual community, and how you can leverage them to have support during these challenging times?" was also culturally appropriate and spoke to some of the stigma. I'm thinking about a client who was referred to me by another provider working in the community. That provider saw the client's religious and spiritual practice, didn't understand

it, and they were maybe even prone to stigmatize it. There's a concept of like, it's called “una limpieza”, like a spiritual cleaning. The provider who didn't identify with the culture (or was working with an interpreter or the client was communicating in broken English), really misunderstood this and thought like there was a harm to the child. So, I think back to this idea of barriers, if someone very well intentioned or well-meaning doesn't have a connection to the culture or identity, they could misunderstand and misinterpret what's happening, and sort of move the case in a direction that is not helpful or less helpful to the family. So, when I connected with this family, I think they experienced it as a relief to know I didn't view this as something that is taboo or dangerous. This is something that actually is helpful and valuable. It serves as a parallel support, a complementary support.

Do you think families tend to rely or listen more to spiritual or more mental health types of guidance? Is there any

I would say this idea of leaning more towards spirituality or mental health, it's obviously individual. Like certain people will be more inclined one way or the other. But I think as a professional, and I'm thinking about my role as a Training Director and supporting the next generation of clinicians, how to position yourself is not an either/or. It's not a ‘one perspective is the winner and the right one’. It's about how to hold both and think about how both can elevate the clients or shift the client's experience. And I think there's an aspect of humility that comes with it. I think sometimes, especially when students are in school, they're learning skills: interventions, knowledge that are a valuable part of a professional experience. But sometimes I think there can be sort of looking down on where people came from and what actually helped them along the way. So, it's remembering not to privilege education over the lived experience.

Are there any takeaways you would like our readers to come away with?

For those of you who are interested in this type of conversation around language and identity, I think connecting with an organization that really supports that growth and development, as RAMS has for me, is key. RAMS is not the only one. There are other organizations and entities, but really finding a way to have your personal experience connect with your professional experience has really been a game changer for me. I think about the meaningfulness of that: sometimes people come to this work as a 2nd career. People who have come from tech and really want to help people and tech just didn't feel like it was meaningful to them at that moment. And so, I think about those students and learners and again, I think about my own professional journey and offering them guidance. It's about sitting and leaning into your own values. So, if this is a value of readers: language, development, literacy, bilingualism, find the places and the spaces where you can have that personal value embodied in the professional environment.

What are your goals or vision for RAMS in the coming years?

I love that question because I think it is the whole, like, a piece of the crux of the training institute idea. Because again, there's the things we have been doing, like training students, that we have a long history in. We obviously have staff needs that need to be addressed. We have community partners that we want to continue to offer our expertise to, but what else can RAMS do? I think personally, I'm very interested and have been exploring and having conversations with our leadership, Christina Shea and Angela [Tang], about having international training experiences. RAMS leverages its cultures and language skills, and we have really done an amazing job of offering training here within San Francisco to folks: international students to local students with a bicultural background. I would really like to see us learning from other cultures and having more of an exchange. For example, last year we hosted an organization called VIA, Volunteers in Asia. They brought over a group of medical students, primarily from Japan, and they engaged in a multi-day, maybe a week or 2 learning experience throughout the Bay Area. One of their stops was at RAMS, where they learned about how mental health service delivery looks like in a community mental health setting. And we also inquired from them, what is it like in Japan and the countries that they came from? So, I would like to see more cross-cultural, international exchange, if possible. But that's still in the works. I think funding is always a consideration. And, truthfully, I'm really open to ideas. I've been looking at other training institutes across San Francisco: what is their niche? What are they doing? And I think when it comes down to it, oftentimes a common thread for RAMS is that we are helping the helper. And so how can we expand that capacity? These are my kind of curiosities.