

Career Focus Groups Interview 1: Dr. Rajeev Ramchand, Epidemiologist



1. Tell us about yourself!

I'm 43 years old and I am an epidemiologist currently working at the RAND Corporation. Most of my research involves mental health. When I'm not working, I love going to the theatre, baking, exercising and doing yoga, and spending time with my husband and our Tibetan Terrier, Parker.

2. What is an epidemiologist? How would you define your job?

Epidemiology is basically the study of who gets sick and why, and what can help make them better. My job entails lots of reading, mostly reading research done by other epidemiologists, to generate hypotheses and then using data and statistics to test these hypotheses. For example, for my dissertation, I hypothesized that teenagers who got jobs between the 10th and 11th grade would be more likely to start smoking cigarettes than kids who did not start working. My hypothesis was correct!

3. What's your favorite part about your job? Least favorite?

I hope that the research I conduct is helping people live better and more fulfilling lives - and I love that about my job. But in order to test my hypotheses, I have to convince people that my scientific question is important and that they should invest money so that I can do the research. There are lots of epidemiologists with lots of hypotheses, but only a limited amount of money to invest, so convincing people to fund the research is the most difficult part of the job.

4. When was the moment that you decided you wanted to be an epidemiologist? /5.
What courses/classes did you take in college to prepare for your career?

I studied economics in college, but never really loved it - especially compared to the courses I took in anthropology when I was well into my economics degree and unfortunately too late for me to switch. But then I took a required course in statistics and it really resonated with me, and I also took a course in econometrics that I really enjoyed. I then decided to take a basic epidemiology course and I was hooked. I worked for a few years after college before applying to grad school to make sure that epidemiology was the right path, and after a few years I knew that it was. I then went to Johns Hopkins in Baltimore to get my PhD.

6. We heard that you co-authored some books. Would you mind describing them?

I have! All the books I have co-authored are quite academic, but at least I think they are very interesting. My first one was called "The War Within: Preventing Suicide in the U.S. Military." I wrote it to help the US Military address rising rates of suicide among servicemembers. I am currently writing two books with my colleagues: one is on homelessness among veterans and one is on people who have joined violent extremist organizations.

7. What advice would you have for a young person who is considering going into STEM or epidemiology?

My best piece of advice is to explore! I think the best scientists, writers, teachers, and businesspeople are those who are well-rounded, who are experts in one field but know lots about many other areas. Don't focus all your intellectual curiosity into one specific area - be open to taking classes outside of your focus area and challenge yourself to take classes outside of your comfort zone. For example, in college I took an acting class that has helped me with giving research presentations in front of crowds and teaching.

8. Could you describe how the field of epidemiology connects with the COVID-19 pandemic? Has the pandemic had an effect on your job as an epidemiologist?

Epidemiology has been crucial during COVID-19. Epidemiologists were responsible for identifying the virus, tracking its spread, testing treatments and vaccines, and figuring out how we can prevent people from getting it. My own work has involved thinking about the mental health effects of the virus, from people's anxiety about becoming sick to loneliness they feel staying at home. I am most proud of my involvement on the National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Response to COVID-19, which you can read more about here: www.nationalmentalhealthresponse.org.

9. Anything else you would like to share?

I'm so thrilled that you've created Astudia and are asking these questions. It's so important to learn about what people are doing in the world to figure out the best ways for you to contribute and hopefully make the world a more peaceful, loving, and safe place for everyone!