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Researcher Profile: Derek Lawson

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RESEARCHER PROFILE

An Interview with Derek Lawson, Ph.D.

Derek Lawson, Ph.D., CFP®, is an Assistant Professor of Personal Financial Planning at Kansas State University and a partner and financial planner at Priority Financial Partners, based in Durango, CO. His research is practitioner-focused, allowing him to combine his past and present experience as a financial planner with his research interests. Lawson's research focuses on relationship dynamics, physiological stressors, financial therapy, behavioral finance, and consumption decisions, with a primary focus on younger adults and those further from retirement. His work has been published in the Journal of Financial Planning, Journal of Financial Counseling and Planning, Financial Services Review, and the Journal of Financial Therapy. He has also co-authored a few book chapters.

One of his research pieces, "Integrating Behavioral Finance, Financial Psychology, and Financial Therapy Theory and Techniques into the Financial Planning Process", was recognized by the Journal of Financial Planning and the Financial Planning Association as the 2018 Montgomery-Warschauer award-winning article. Derek has previously served as the Secretary for FPA® NexGen, the Director of NexGen for FPA® of Greater Kansas City, the Treasurer of the Financial Therapy Association (2015-2017), and the marketing coordinator for NAPFA Genesis®. Derek earned a B.B.A. in Finance from the University of Iowa, his M.S. in Family Studies and Human Services with an emphasis in Personal Financial Planning from Kansas State University, and his Ph.D. in Financial Planning from Kansas State University.



When not teaching, working on research, or working with clients, Derek enjoys playing ice hockey and being outdoors with his wife, Ashley, and their two dogs. They are expecting their first child in February 2020!

Q. Define what you do professionally.

A. I like to say that I do a triangle of interconnected activities focused on helping people better understand the world of finances and how relationships are impacted by money. That is, I teach, conduct research, and practice financial planning. They are all connected, with the practice side of things being the backbone. Practice informs the research I do, and helps ensure I continually work on practice-related research endeavors. It also informs the way in which I structure my lectures by

allowing me to bring in real life examples to the classroom, and affords me the ability to showcase the differences between the textbook and the “real world”. My research informs the way in which we work with clients at the firm, always looking to use empirical-based processes and tools, rather than ad hoc procedures that we are not really sure help or hurt clients. The focus at our firm is on utilizing aspects of the research and work done in a myriad of areas such as couple and family therapy, psychological sciences, and behavioral finance. Teaching helps me be able to continually break down complex topics into easier, more digestible segments, and allows for me to stay up-to-date on what’s going on academically, which is certainly a benefit to the practice side of things.

Q. What activities encompass your professional responsibilities?

A. As an Assistant Professor, my responsibilities are to teach, conduct research, and provide service. Specifically, I teach Advanced Personal Financial Planning both semesters at the undergraduate level. It is the course that exposes students to all aspects of financial planning before they really dive into the rest of the coursework for the major. I also conduct a research cluster for graduate students in the fall focused on learning Structural Equation Modeling. My spring graduate class is yet to be determined, but will either be teaching doctoral students SAS (a statistical program) coding or Research Methods II, which is focused on helping students prepare and hone their dissertation ideas so that they are ready to run with their dissertation proposal upon conclusion of the course.

My service role right now consists of serving as the faculty advisor for the student-led K-State Financial Planning Association (FPA) chapter, as well as on the undergraduate committee for the program, which helps make decisions about the direction of our undergrad program.

From a research perspective, now that the dissertation is complete, it’s time to start getting those three papers publication ready. Beyond that, I’m committed to finishing a few papers with Dr. Kristy Archuleta at the University of Georgia (UGA). Most of that work is centered on the use of Money Habitudes® or implementing solution-focused financial therapy into the financial planning process. I also continue to work in the areas of couples and relationships, savings and spending decisions of those not near retirement, and financial planning methods and modalities (i.e., bridging work from other fields into that of financial planning).

Q. How long have you been engaged in your professional activity?

A. I’ve been a practicing financial planner since 2012, but part-time since August 2015 given the Ph.D. studies and transition into full-time academia. I was a Visiting Instructor at Texas

Tech's financial planning program in 2018-19, and am in my first year now as an Assistant Professor at K-State. I guess you could say it all equates to about two years of teaching and about seven years of working with financial planning clients.

Q. What led you to your professional calling?

A. Initially I was drawn to financial planning because my family had not been financially savvy, especially that of extended family. My mom's side of the family had severe gambling issues and most of her side of the family lives paycheck-to-paycheck, hoping to strike it big at the slots. I've seen how communication issues, gambling, and debts have torn my extended family apart and how good communication can lead to great financial, relational, and emotional health, too. I got into financial planning because I wanted to help people and because personal finances have always been fun and interesting to me. I found that I was good at research and liked it while enrolled in the Master's program at K-State. Dr. Sonya Lutter (formerly, Britt) and Dr. Brad Klontz came to me and asked for some help on some research and then eventually encouraged me to do the Ph.D. program. From there, the rest was history.

Q. How are you paid?

A. On the practice side of things, our firm is a fee-only financial planning firm. We work with clients on an hourly basis, a six-month retainer basis, and recently added Assets Under Management (AUM) fees for clients that do want to have us manager their assets.

Q. Do you work alone or do you have a team?

A. Team for both settings. In academia, I find the best research is done with a team to help broaden the way in which you think about the question(s) in which you are attempting to research. Further, a team approach allows for interdisciplinary work and a more diverse set of applied outcomes. In practice, we work as a team in that our paraplanner reviews the notes and starts every plan. I then review the work and add in my suggestions. The plan flows to our managing partner who finalizes everything before I or the paraplanner take another final look. In the end, all three of us have had our eyes on every deliverable to our clients and have all made suggestions on what the best course of action is. It allows for a diverse set of ways of thinking about how to go about each client's situation and action plan.

Q. What theoretical framework guides your work when dealing with clients?

A. I'd say family systems theory is at the root of our work with clients. We don't work with only one spouse, we require both spouses to be present. Regardless of number of marriages

(because we find that many clients that get remarried later in life like to manage assets separately), we require both have an active role in their household financials and understand the other's commitments and wishes to their own family. We find that there is no reason to manage separately, simply that we plan for what each client wants individually and what they want jointly.

Solution-focused (financial) therapy (SFFT) and motivational interviewing (MI) are the heart of our work with clients. It drives our meeting processes and allows us to focus on the future and increasing client intrinsic motivation so that they feel empowered to move forward, rather than us telling them to. We tend to meet without an agenda, only having an outline of the framework we've developed via SFFT and MI, and instead allow the client to drive their agenda... it's their life and goals, after all. We like to "lead from behind". We do, however, do a little bit of historical exploration early on through the use of the Klontz Money Script Inventory to start our early conversations with clients and get them thinking about how they think about money, allowing for conversations among each partner and often an "aha" moment.

Q. What needs to happen so that 10 years from now we can say that financial therapy is a respected field of study?

A. I think we need much more empirical research to call it a field of study, as well as an educational program at colleges and universities. I know it is a wonderful mix of professions, but without research and formal education, how can we call it a field of study? We need more research done jointly with financial planners and therapists doing financial therapy, both individually (for those qualified) and jointly. It'll take time and money, but I do think it's doable.

Q. What benefits can the financial therapy association provide to others doing work that is similar to your professional activities?

A. I think the conference is a great benefit, as well as the *Journal of Financial Therapy*, since it is open access and provides people of all areas with practical research that is employable in practice and repeatable in research. The FTA provides excellent webinars too, and perhaps the most beneficial thing is the connections to other likeminded professionals interested in doing the best thing they possible can for clients.

Q. If others are interested in finding out more about you personally and professionally, where can they obtain this information?

A. You can find me on either [K-State's website](#) or my [firm's website](#). [LinkedIn](#) is also a good place. I have a website, [derekrlawson.com](#), but I'm a true academic... it hasn't been updated in a few years (my wife is working on a renovation, she's a graphic designer for financial planners, but my website is not top priority for her!).

Q. Could you give advice to practitioners' wanting to get involved in doing their own research or writing on financial therapy?

I'd love to work with practitioners on research! I think the best tandem is a mix between practitioners and researchers working together to do meaningful and excellent research that moves the profession forward and in which is useful to those who work directly with clients.