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Announcing the 2020 Recipients of the Small Grants Program for Early Career Scholars

The Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD) recognizes the importance of capacity building for early career scholars seeking to establish their research programs, especially considering the limited funding available for conducting exploratory work and particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Small Grants Program for Early Career Scholars addresses this need within developmental science by supporting pilot or small-scale research projects proposed by members who completed their doctoral degree within the last five years.

The Small Grants Program celebrates its third year by awarding up to $7,500 USD to each of the thirteen selected projects, directly supporting an outstanding group of early career researchers from institutions in the United States and Australia. The 2020 grants were selected from a highly competitive pool of 116 applications and cover many research areas and topics, including: language acquisition and brokering in bilingual families, research-to-policy collaborations, and neurodevelopmental disorders. This year's cohort also highlights the diversity of populations involved across all projects, including those focusing on the health and resilience of Black, Aboriginal, Latinx, Asian American, and trans youth.

The grant recipients will be recognized at the 2021 SRCD Biennial Meeting.

SRCD thanks all 28 reviewers involved in the selection process and congratulates the 2020 Small Grant recipients:

Drs. Maria Arredondo, Beatriz de Diego-Lázaro, Morgan Firestein, Courtney Helfrecht, Seanna Leath, Leah M. Lessard, Elizabeth C. Long, Robert A. Marx, Yang Qu, Tennisha N. Riley, Yishan Shen, Bep Uink, and Tal Yatziv
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Read on to learn more about the 2020 Small Grant recipients!



Maria Arredondo, University of Texas at Austin

“Bilingual Bebé: Linking Cognitive and Cultural Mechanisms to Dual-Language Learning”

Dr. Maria Arredondo is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Sciences at the University of Texas at Austin. She obtained her Ph.D. in developmental psychology at the University of Michigan (under the supervision of Dr. Ioulia Kovelman). She then completed a National Science Foundation Postdoctoral Fellowship under the supervision of Dr. Janet F. Werker at the University of British Columbia’s Infant Studies Centre and Dr. Richard N. Aslin at Haskins Laboratories. Her research program seeks to understand the neuro-cognitive mechanisms that support how bilingual infants and young children acquire their languages. The 2020 SRCD Small Grant for Early Career Scholars will support a project investigating whether Spanish-English bilingual toddlers’ ability to acquire new words differs by the language (i.e., English vs. Spanish) used during testing, and whether it depends on the amount of language that they are exposed to at home.



Beatriz de Diego-Lázaro, Midwestern University

“Spaced-Word Retrieval as a Vocabulary Teaching Strategy for Children with Hearing Loss”

Beatriz de Diego-Lázaro is an Assistant Professor in the Speech-Language Pathology Program at Midwestern University. She completed her doctoral degree in Speech and Hearing Science at Arizona State University. Her research interests focus on word learning and vocabulary teaching strategies for children with hearing loss, especially those that come from bilingual families. Despite early identification, intervention, and advancement in hearing technology, children with hearing loss are behind hearing peers in language and subsequent literacy and academic outcomes. The 2020 Small Grant for Early Career Scholars will support her current study testing the effectiveness of spaced-word retrieval for word learning in children with hearing loss as compared to immediate and no retrieval practice. SRCD funds will be dedicated to buying the necessary equipment to pursue this project as well as to collect pilot data for an experimental task and a real-life intervention with preschoolers.



Morgan Firestein, Columbia University Medical Center

“Prenatal Biological Mechanisms Underlying the Association Between Gestational Diabetes Mellitus, Maternal Psychological Distress, and Autism Risk”

Morgan Firestein is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow with Dr. William Fifer in the Department of Psychiatry at Columbia University Medical Center. Supervised by Dr. Frances Champagne, she received her Ph.D. in Psychology from Columbia University in 2019. In collaboration with the Departments of Obstetrics & Gynecology and Pediatrics, her research spans the prenatal through early childhood periods to identify prenatal factors that contribute to the etiology of neurodevelopmental disorders. She studies how the placenta adapts in response to maternal cues and acts as a fetal barrier against maladaptive maternal physiological processes. The 2020 Small Grant for Early Career Scholars will support a project to explore whether prenatal extracellular vesicles and inflammatory cytokines account for the association between gestational diabetes and autism risk. An overarching goal of her research is to integrate the fields of psychiatry, obstetrics, and pediatrics to improve identification of and early intervention for individuals at neuropsychiatric risk.



Courtney Helfrecht, University of Alabama

“Effects of Stress on Child Development among Sidama Agropastoralists”

Courtney Helfrecht is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Alabama. She received her Ph.D. in Anthropology from Washington State University under the supervision of Dr. Courtney Meehan. The 2020 Small Grant for Early Career Scholars will support her investigation of Sidama agropastoralist (Ethiopian) children’s experience with stress and how it affects child health and development. Her previous work centered on adrenarche, the biological event underpinning the 5-to-7 transition, which is marked by rising production of the hormone dehydroepiandrosterone and its sulfate. Significant variation from Euro-American patterns was found, indicating the importance of the eco-cultural context in both physiological and sociocultural development. Dr. Helfrecht’s current project will extend this investigation in order to improve our understanding of the diversity of hormonal development in relation to culture, stress, and biology.



Seanna Leath, University of Virginia

“A Mixed Methods Pilot Study of Social Class Diversity and Conscious Parenting Practices among Black Mothers”

Dr. Seanna Leath is an Assistant Professor at the University of Virginia in the Community Psychology Department. She received her Ph.D. in Education and Psychology from the University of Michigan in 2019. She uses quantitative and qualitative methodologies to understand and address issues related to the holistic development of Black girls and women in the context of families, schools, and communities. In addition to her work on Black mothering practices, her current projects focus on how race and gender identity beliefs support academic persistence and psychological resilience among Black girls, as well as how institutional contexts promote or hinder the mental health and wellbeing of Black college women. The 2020 SRCD Small Grant for Early Career Scholars will support research on conscious parenting practices as one way that Black mothers integrate their sociopolitical awareness into their parenting practices and develop healthy relationships with their children.



Leah M. Lessard, University of Connecticut

“Harnessing Peer Influence as a Mechanism to Reduce Weight-Based Peer Victimization in Adolescence”

Leah Lessard is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Connecticut’s Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity. She received her Ph.D. in Developmental Psychology from the University of California, Los Angeles in 2019. Dr. Lessard’s research focuses on how social experiences contribute to stigma-based health and educational disparities during adolescence. By identifying mechanisms to facilitate inclusion and acceptance within the school setting, her work aims to improve marginalized adolescents’ access to the social resources critical for healthy and academically successful outcomes. The 2020 SRCD Small Grant for Early Career Scholars will support a novel social norm-based experiment that examines the role of peers in reducing weight stigma during adolescence. Capitalizing on adolescents’ heightened developmental susceptibility to peer influence, the study specifically tests whether the influence of popular peers can be harnessed to reduce negative attitudes and mistreatment towards adolescents with overweight.



Elizabeth C. Long, Pennsylvania State University, University Park

“Testing Strategies for Communicating Developmental Science Research to Federal Policymakers”

Elizabeth C. Long is a postdoctoral scholar with the Research-to-Policy Collaboration (RPC) at Penn State University. She earned her Ph.D. in Clinical and Translational Science from Virginia Commonwealth University. Her research involves evaluating the impact of the RPC model, which seeks to bridge research and policy by fostering researcher-policymaker partnerships. She also has been involved in evaluating communication strategies for disseminating research to policymakers, which is the focus of her project funded by the 2020 Small Grant for Early Career Scholars. Specifically, she will investigate the most effective way of communicating developmental science to federal policymakers by testing different subject lines of emails disseminating developmental science to federal policymakers.



Robert A. Marx, San José State University

“The Trans Resilience Project: Understanding Trans Youth Resilience in Communities of Color”

Robert A. Marx is an Assistant Professor of Child and Adolescent Development at San José State University. He earned his Ph.D. in Community Research and Action from the Peabody College of Education at Vanderbilt University. His community-engaged research and practice focus on reframing dominant visions of queer young people, so that they are no longer viewed as deviant, damaged, or at-risk, but rather as the gifted, complex people they are. The 2020 Small Grant for Early Career Scholars will support his current study that examines the support systems of trans and gender non-conforming youth of color and the nuanced ways that families, schools, and communities support these young people. The two-phase, mixed-methods study combines semi-structured interviews and quantitative surveys to better understand the prevalence of sources of strength for trans youth of color and their relationships to mental health and academic indicators.



Yang Qu, Northwestern University

“Parent-Child Gaps in Stereotypes of Teens in Asian American Immigrant Families”

Yang Qu is an Assistant Professor of Human Development and Social Policy in the School of Education and Social Policy at Northwestern University. He received Ph.D. in Developmental Psychology from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and completed postdoctoral training at Stanford University. Yang takes an interdisciplinary approach that combines developmental psychology, cultural psychology, and neuroscience to examine how sociocultural contexts shape adolescent development. He studies adolescents from diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds using a variety of methodological approaches, including longitudinal and experimental designs along with survey, observational, and biological (e.g., neuroimaging with fMRI) assessments. The 2020 Small Grant for Early Career Scholars will support him to examine whether Asian American parents and youth hold different stereotypes of teens, and whether the gaps between parents and youth’s teen stereotypes predict youth’s biopsychological adjustment as they navigate the early adolescent years.



Tennisha N. Riley, Indiana University

“Black Youth Peer Relationships: Examining Interpersonal Regulation and Prosocial Behaviors”

Tennisha N. Riley is a postdoctoral fellow at Indiana University’s Center for Research on Race and Ethnicity in Society. She earned her Ph.D. in Developmental Psychology from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2018 under the supervision of Dr. Zewelanji Serpell. Beginning in August 2020, Tennisha will join Indiana University’s Counseling and Educational Psychology faculty as an Assistant Professor of Human Development. Her research focuses on cognitive and emotional processes associated with the development of both risk-related and prosocial behaviors among Black youth. Funding from the 2020 Small Grant for Early Career Scholars will support research on Black adolescents’ peer relationships. Specifically, emotion expression, interpersonal emotion regulation, and shared racial identity and values are examined to assess whether peers support adaptive social-cognitive-affective processes, and in turn prosocial behaviors.



Yishan Shen, Texas State University

“Empowering Young Language Brokers to Reduce Mental Health Disparities: A Daily Diary Study of Feelings about Brokering”

Yishan Shen is an Assistant Professor in the School of Family and Consumer Sciences at Texas State University. She obtained her Ph.D. in Human Development and Family Sciences from the University of Texas at Austin. Her research centers on identifying the antecedents and consequences of culturally informed developmental processes in immigrant-origin and minoritized youth. The 2020 Small Grant for Early Career Scholars will support a pilot study aimed at identifying the real-time mechanism leading to the greater mental health risk of Latino child language brokers, or those who translate materials from English to Spanish for their English-limited parents. This goal will be achieved through a 14-day diary study with 5th grader Latino youth to examine the daily mechanism linking youth’s language brokering act to their daily mood. The pilot study will also investigate how youth’s everyday school experiences and individual or contextual factors may influence the mechanism.



Bep Uink, Kulbardi Aboriginal Centre, Murdoch University

“Feasibility of a Daily Diary Protocol for Examining Microaggressions in Aboriginal Adolescents: A pilot study”

Bep Uink is a Research Fellow at Kulbardi Aboriginal Centre, Murdoch University, Australia. She graduated with a Master of Applied Psychology (Clinical) and Ph.D. in Psychology from the School of Psychology & Exercise Science at Murdoch University. Her dissertation research used experience sampling methods to investigate daily affective dynamics and responses to stress among at-risk adolescents. Her current program of research expands this focus to examine the social emotional wellbeing of Australian Indigenous LGBTQA+ youth and the development and mental health of Australian Indigneous adolescents more broadly. As an Indigenous woman herself, she is particularly interested in the impacts of daily racism, or ‘microaggressions’, on Indigenous adolescents’ wellbeing. Her 2020 Small Grant for Early Career Scholars will combine her experience in Indigenous adolescent mental health and experience sampling methods to investigate the feasibility of daily dairy methodology for assessing daily racism and its impacts among Indigenous adolescents.



Tal Yatziv, Yale University

“Early Mechanisms in the Intergenerational Transmission of Anxiety: A Computational Approach to Understanding Maternal Biased Processing of Infant Cues”

Tal Yatziv is a Postdoctoral Associate at the Yale Child Study Center, working under the mentorship of Dr. Helena Rutherford. She received her Ph.D. in Psychology from Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel in 2019. Her research focuses on the interplay between cognitive and affective processes in shaping early parenting and socioemotional development. The 2020 Small Grant for Early Career Scholars will support her study investigating maternal cognitive biases in processing infant cues as potential mechanisms in the intergenerational transmission of anxiety. Despite the impact of postpartum anxiety on two generations’ well-being, there is a significant knowledge gap concerning how maternal anxiety exerts its effect on parenting and child anxiety. This study will utilize evidence accumulation modeling to tap into the impact of postpartum anxiety on the temporal dynamics of processing infant affective cues. Specifically, the contributions of biases in expecting, perceiving, or interpreting cues to maternal sensitivity and infancy precursors of anxiety will be examined.