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Member Spotlight: Gigliana Melzi, Ph.D.

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Gigliana Melzi, Ph.D.

Faculty Page

Why did you decide to choose Developmental Science as a course of study or career?

As a double major in Spanish literature and psychology, I was torn between pursuing a PhD in Latin American Literature or Clinical Psychology. As a senior, I began to explore different options. I took an internship course as part of my Spanish Lit major where I volunteered as a classroom teaching assistant in a local Head Start, serving mostly bilingual Latine children. I also took two courses whose content was at the intersection of language and psychology. One focused on using psychological theory to analyze literature and the other was a language development course taught by Nancy Budwig and Michael Bamberg. That dev psych course made everything click for me! It gave me the opportunity to build connections across knowledge sources: what I was learning as a student in their course and my hands-on experience as a classroom teaching assistant in the Head Start. In short, the course opened a new world for me where I could integrate my diverse interests and experiences, leading me to developmental science.

What or Who inspired you to go into Child Development Research?

The language development course that I took with Nancy Budwig and Michael Bamberg as an undergraduate led me to seek a research assistantship with David Dickinson who was investigating classroom language interactions. I became deeply interested in children's language development in context.

Do you have a mentor or mentors who have been instrumental in your career and, if so, who and how?

Aside from key professors as an undergraduate, my graduate school mentors, and generous colleagues who have readily shared their wisdom with me throughout my career, I have been deeply inspired by the work of Barbara Rogoff, Cynthia García Coll, Bambi Schieffelin and Elinor Ochs. Each of these scholars I see as trailblazers, who have expanded knowledge beyond the boundaries of established perspectives and who have amplified the voices of those who have been traditionally marginalized and silenced. Through their extensive and inspiring body of work they have taught me how to think about child development in context and to move beyond psychology to appreciate the depth and nuance of linguistic and cultural practices. On a personal level, I am particularly appreciative of Cynthia García Coll's unapologetic latinidad. She was and continues to be my role model.

What advice would you give to a Graduate student beginning their Ph.D. studies in Developmental Science or related?

My first piece of advice would be to engage in self-reflection. Learn about your strengths and be honest about which areas and skills need more work. A good mentor creates a safe space for students to show their vulnerabilities and encourages them to ask for help. So, I would say learn to communicate with your mentor about your needs; don't be hesitant or afraid to ask for help. My second piece of advice is that being successful in doctoral studies is largely a result of initiative, perseverance, and persistence. So, know this: you will fall, just get up and try again.

What is something you learned in the last month outside of your field?

You said outside your field, so here it goes. I was at the Galapagos Islands this past July while my teenage daughter was doing a service trip in an Andean community in Ecuador. I had never thought about how other mammalian species weaned their young until I saw it happen in Santa Cruz, one of the islands we visited. A baby lobo marino (sea lion) cried loudly while it chased its mother, who swam around the port until she

climbed on the dock and walked up the ramp. The baby continued to pursue the mother around the port, up the dock and the ramp while vocalizing desperately. The mother gave in and nursed it. OOPS! I just realized it's not so unrelated!

What is your best SRCD memory?

It has to be the first SRCD conference I attended as a graduate student. It was exhilarating to cross paths with scholars whom I had only read, such as Peggy Miller, Katherine Nelson, and Barbara Rogoff. When I met Barbara, I was so nervous that I made no sense at all. I hope she doesn't remember [insert horrified emoji]!

How do you relax when you are not teaching or conducting research?

I enjoy going for morning runs, long walks, and reading fiction. I also love traveling with my family, visiting new places, and learning about its history, people, and customs.

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