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Ten Scholars Recognized for the 17th Annual Student and Early Career Council Dissertation Research Funding Awards

SRCD congratulates the 2025 Student and Early Career Council Dissertation Funding Awardees.

Established in 2008 by the SRCD Student and Early Career Council (SECC), the Dissertation Research Funding Awards (DFAs) are given to dissertation research proposals that are exceptionally noteworthy and display a strong potential to contribute to the field of child development. Each recipient is awarded $2,000 USD to use for research costs related to the proposed dissertation project.

SRCD is pleased to recognize the following ten scholars as the 2025 awardees: *Yihui Gong Zoe Mao, Peter McCauley, Diamonde McCollum, Yuhang Shu, Allie Spiekerman, Crystal Thinzar, Victoria Vezaldenos, Taylor Wycoff, Yibin Yang*

Given the strength and quality of their applications, SRCD would also like to recognize the following four 2025 Honorable Mentions: *Brandon Dull, Lauren Giles, Nayen Lee, Javier Omar*



Yihui Gong, Ohio State University

“Mother-Child Physiological Synchrony: Behavioral, Cultural, and Developmental Pathways in the Context of Maternal Depression”

Yihui (Yvonne) Gong is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Human Development and Family Science at The Ohio State University, mentored by Dr. Xin Feng. Her research examines how parent-child behavioral, physiological, and neural synchrony, observed across both laboratory settings and daily life, operates as a foundational mechanism of emotion co-regulation and shapes children's emotional and behavioral development. Her dissertation investigates mother-child respiratory sinus arrhythmia (RSA) synchrony within a comprehensive biopsychosocial framework that integrates behavioral regulation, emotion socialization practices, and cultural contexts, with a particular focus on families in which mothers experience depression. Across three integrated studies, she explores whether behavioral regulation serves as a protective factor amid risk, how cultural values and emotional contexts shape mother-child synchrony patterns across U.S. and Chinese families, and whether synchrony predicts children's long-term socioemotional outcomes. Notably, her research incorporates neural synchrony assessments using functional near-infrared spectroscopy (fNIRS) during dyadic interactive tasks, capturing real-time interbrain coupling between mothers and children. This multimodal approach provides innovative insights into how

maternal depression disrupts the coherence and integration of biological co-regulatory processes during mother-child interactions. By clarifying these dynamic pathways, her work aims to inform culturally sensitive, relationship-centered interventions that support parent-child interactions in high-risk contexts.



Zoe Mao

“Understanding and Supporting Children’s Executive Function and Self-Regulation: A Multi-Method Study of Child Factors and Educator Influences”

Xinyi Zoe Mao is a doctoral candidate at UCLA School of Education and Information Studies, where she is mentored by Dr. Jennie Grammer. Her research focuses on children’s attention, executive functions, and self-regulation in classroom settings. Zoe’s dissertation, composed of three integrated studies, investigates both children’s skill development and teachers’ development of knowledge and practices related to these skills. Study 1 uses secondary data analysis to explore how instructional contexts and student characteristics influence elementary-aged children’s attention. Study 2 employs a cross-cultural qualitative design to examine early childhood educators’ knowledge of executive functions and self-regulation, and how professional factors influence their understanding. Building on these findings, Study 3 involves the design and pilot evaluation of online professional learning modules for pre-service teachers to enhance their

knowledge and practices, while also testing the effectiveness of integrating neuroscience into teacher professional learning. Through this work, Zoe seeks to strengthen communication between researchers and practitioners to better support developmentally informed learning opportunities for all children.



Peter McCauley

“Identity-Based Harassment and Academic Engagement: School Factors Offsetting Disparities”

Peter McCauley is a doctoral candidate in Human Development and Family Sciences at the University of Connecticut, working under the mentorship of Dr. Ryan J. Watson. His research leverages bioecological models of human development and demand-resource theories to understand the heterogeneity in the relationships between exposure to school-based stressors, emotional health, and academic engagement among sexual and gender diverse youth. He specifically researches how features of the school context and student differences jointly influence the relationships between stress exposure, health, and academic engagement. For his dissertation, Peter will leverage three large-scale datasets to 1) identify intersectional differences in academic achievement and aspirations at the intersection of sexual identity, gender identity, ethnoracial identity, socioeconomic status, and victimization exposure; and 2) understand how distinct features of anti-bullying school climates and student differences can work together to disrupt the

development of maladaptive motivation and academic disengagement in the face of peer victimization among sexual and gender diverse students. Peter aims for his dissertation to provide actionable insights that guide school systems in identifying which student populations are most in need of targeted academic support, the “active ingredients” of bullying prevention, and student assets that can strengthen academic engagement under stress.



Diamonde McCollum, University of South Carolina

“Intergenerational Pathways: The Influence of Parental ACEs, Alcohol Use, and Emotion Regulation on Parenting and Child Behavior”

Diamonde C. McCollum is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Psychology at the University of South Carolina. She is mentored by Dr. Nada Goodrum. Her research examines how protective factors (i.e., emotion regulation strategies, social support) may buffer against the intergenerational effects of childhood trauma on risky health behaviors within marginalized families. Her overarching goal is to translate her research into prevention and intervention methods that foster resilience and strengthen families navigating adversity.

Diamonde's dissertation investigates how parents' adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) influence their emotion regulation, alcohol use, parenting strategies, and child externalizing behaviors. Using a mixed-methods, demi-longitudinal design, she integrates quantitative community-based data with qualitative parent-child interviews to explore the intergenerational effects of ACEs. Her work explores emotion regulation as a potential protective factor that supports positive parenting and child well-being, extending beyond its traditional role as a mediator.

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Yuhang Shu, University of Virginia

"Who Is Trustworthy? The Impact of Inequality on Children's Social Trust"

Yuhang Shu is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Psychology at the University of Virginia, working with Dr. Amrisha Vaish. Her research examines how children respond to inequality, including their socioemotional reactions and moral reasoning. She is broadly interested in using empirical methods to explore the causal effects of inequality on children's social functioning and to inform early interventions that

help buffer against these effects. Her dissertation investigates: (1) whether experiencing inequality undermines 5- to 9-year-old children's social trust; (2) the boundaries of this potential mistrust; (3) whether mistrust manifests both psychologically and behaviorally; and (4) whether fairness perceptions serve as a mechanism underlying these effects. Findings from this work will test whether trust functions as a developmental mechanism through which inequality may shape children's social functioning and reinforce broader disparities over time. Clarifying this process can inform the developmental timing and social contexts most effective for strengthening trust and promoting resilience. This work lays the foundation for Yuhang's long-term goal of conducting translational developmental research that bridges psychology and public policy to promote social equity from early childhood.



Allie Spiekerman, University of Missouri

"Teenagers and texting: A Multi-Method Examination of Social Support in Adolescent Friends' Text Messages and Associations with Adjustment"

Allie Spiekerman is a doctoral candidate in Developmental Psychology at the University of Missouri, working with Dr. Amanda Rose. Her research examines social support processes in peer relationships and their implications for adolescents' social and emotional adjustment. Although her previous research has largely focused on social support in adolescent friends' in-person interactions, her dissertation is expanding this work to examine how the content of adolescent friends' text message conversations relates to friends' emotional adjustment. In particular, she is applying a coding system previously used for in-person observations of dyadic social support interactions to adolescent friend dyads' text message conversations. Additional codes specific to digital communication (e.g., emojis, time to reply) will be added to this original coding system. Her dissertation addresses the following aims: 1) examine the associations between the types of responses (i.e., positive responses, negative responses, emojis, and time to reply) adolescents receive from their friends following problem disclosures in text messages and adolescents' friendship quality and depressive symptoms; 2) assess whether receiving more negative responses from friends after texting about a problem attenuates associations between receiving positive responses and adjustment; and 3) whether gender and age moderate these associations. This study seeks to gain insight into how online peer interactions are associated with adjustment and to identify behaviors that promote positive peer relationships and well-being.



Crystal Thinzar

“When Little Moments Crystallize: Understanding Moment-to-moment Effects of Parental Emotion Socialization Behaviors on Toddler Distress in Everyday Life”

Crystal Ei Thinzar is a doctoral candidate in Clinical Psychology at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, where she is mentored by Dr. Megan Fields-Olivieri. Crystal is passionate about advancing our understanding of parent-child emotion socialization and communication processes in everyday life and enjoys working with ‘messy’ yet meaningful naturalistic data. Providing a glimpse into highly distressing moments within families’ everyday lives using ambulatory recordings, her dissertation seeks to examine the dynamic regulatory effects of parental emotion socialization strategies on toddler emotion expression at home. Through her research, she hopes to help parents better understand the power of micro-moments in everyday life, composed of immediate regulatory successes and failures as families navigate ordinary stressors, in shaping young children’s self-regulatory development. Beyond her dissertation, Crystal aims to extend her line of research to investigate dynamic socialization processes in daily lives of culturally and linguistically diverse families, seeking to better understand the unique mechanisms that underlie real-world parenting behaviors when emotions, language and culture intersect.



Victoria Vezaldenos, University of Michigan

“Conceptualizing and Measuring Critical Multiracial Identity: An Exploratory Sequential Mixed-Method Study”

Victoria Vezaldenos is a PhD candidate in the Combined Program in Education and Psychology at the University of Michigan. Her program of research is motivated by a commitment to achieve a more socially just world for the diverse youth that inhabit it. Drawing on critical race theories, cultural and ecological models of youth development, and theories of Multiracial development, she addresses three interrelated questions: 1) *How do youth come to understand their racial group boundaries and identities?* 2) *What contexts support youth in developing a critical understanding of systemic issues?* and 3) *How can we leverage quantitative methods to accurately study Multiracial populations?*

For her dissertation work she aims to develop a measure assessing how Multiracial youth’s understandings of their multiple racial backgrounds and systemic oppression may be inextricably linked. Using an exploratory sequential mixed-method design, the study first explores how Multiracial young people make qualitative connections between their racialized experiences and systemic oppression. These insights will then spur later phases of measure development, refinement, and validation. The resulting Critical Multiracial Identity measure is an important step towards equitably addressing the lived experiences of Multiracial young people as they develop competencies to challenge the monoracist society in which they live.



Taylor Wycoff

“Culturally Responsive Practices in Out-of-School-Time Learning: Conceptualization, Measurement, and Application in an After-School STEM Enrichment Activity”

Taylor Michelle Wycoff is a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at the University of California, Irvine, under the mentorship of Dr. Sandra D. Simpkins. Her research focuses on access and inclusion in out-of-school-time (OST) learning environments, examining how programs can foster equitable, inclusive spaces that empower historically marginalized youth. Her dissertation investigates culturally responsive practices in organized after-school activities through a three-study, mixed-methods design: (1) a conceptual review and framework of culturally responsive practices in organized after-school activities, (2) the development and validation of parallel student and mentor measures of these practices specifically in organized after-school activities, and (3) an empirical test linking culturally responsive practices to adolescents’ STEM career beliefs and educational expectations over time. Beyond her dissertation, Taylor partners with national and community organizations—including the American Camp Association, UC Irvine’s LIFTED Program, and the UC Irvine DREAM Center—to co-design practitioner training, program evaluation, and capacity-building efforts that promote belonging and opportunity across learning settings. As a scholar-practitioner, she is committed to bridging theory and practice to strengthen educational systems that affirm diverse identities

and expand pathways to thriving for all youth.



Yibin Yang, Boston University

“Advancing the Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH) Workforce Development for Practitioners across Massachusetts: An Impact and Implementation Evaluation”

Yibin Yang is a doctoral candidate in the School of Social Work at Boston University, mentored by Dr. Ruth Paris. Drawing on prior work as a social worker, early childhood educator, and social and emotional learning curriculum designer, Yibin’s primary research focuses on the design, implementation, and evaluation of culturally sensitive child mental health programs and services. He is particularly interested in examining facilitators and barriers influencing the uptake and sustainability of these approaches among practitioners. His overarching goal is to bridge the research–practice gap within the field of Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH) to better support practitioners, young children, and families. Yibin’s dissertation is a community-engaged, mixed-methods study evaluating the longitudinal impact and implementation of a statewide IECMH workforce development initiative in Massachusetts. Using quantitative and qualitative

approaches, it examines how the initiative shapes practitioners' reflective capacities, cultural humility, and perceived growth in working with diverse children and families, as well as their experiences adopting and sustaining newly learned approaches within primary work settings. Findings will inform the advancement of equitable IECMH workforce development initiatives nationwide and enhance the practice of child mental health to support the wellbeing and development of young children from diverse backgrounds.