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International Affairs Committee Member Spotlight: Dr. Supriya Bhavnani

AUTHOR

Dr. Supriya Bhavnani

Research Scientist

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Q: What interested you in becoming a developmental scientist?

A: My interest in developmental science comes from the belief that a person's experiences in the early years can shape outcomes throughout their life.

Understanding these influences, creating evidence to inform changes at scale, and supporting families to give their children the best start in life is something I feel passionately about.

Q: Do you have a mentor or mentors who have been instrumental to your career and, if so, whom and how?

A: A mentor who has been instrumental to my career is Professor Vikram Patel. He gave me an opportunity to make a large leap in my career when I moved from basic to translational health research.

He demonstrated a faith in my abilities that I myself did not know I had. He has patiently guided me through the last decade, motivating me to write papers, lead execution of large research projects and most recently, lead large grant applications with national and international consortia partners.

His dedication towards global mental health has inspired me to prioritize the well-being of the communities we serve, and to strive to learn from, and do better for, them.

Q: How does your cultural context influence your research perspective or approach?

A: My cultural context is a collectivist one, with importance given to grandparents and extended family. This context makes its way into my research as I delve deeper into understanding what makes children resilient despite the often dire circumstances in which they are raised. I believe caregiving is done within a family and community and that shared values can positively influence children. My interest thus has shifted from 'learning best practices' from other societies to really protecting and promoting things that work within our culture.

Q: How do you see your research contributing to the global understanding of child development?

A: The context of most children living in low and middle income countries is quite similar, be it Africa, Asia or Latin America. I strongly believe that learnings from any of these settings are easier to adapt for use in others and am an advocate of collaborations between researchers in the global south. More directly, one of my research areas, in which we have developed and validated a scalable digital tool for cognition, has already demonstrated promise and is being used by researchers in 4 countries in independent projects. We are working towards expanding its reach to support children globally.

Q: Can you share a recent publication?

A: Bhavnani S, Ranjan A, Mukherjee D, Divan G, Prakash A, Yadav A, et al. (2025) A non-specialist worker delivered digital assessment of cognitive development (DEEP) in young children: A longitudinal validation study in rural India. PLOS Digit Health 4(5):e0000824. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pdig.0000824

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