

After staring at my computer screen for what felt like an eternity, I finally made the *big decision*. Mind racing and palms sweating, I endured the online process that would allow me to become a Psychology major at Brooklyn College. Surrounded only by the four walls of my bedroom and my anxious thoughts, I was excited, but also terrified about what I had just done. I completed the first step in joining a lineage of scholars that have dedicated their careers to better understanding human behavior! Unfortunately, my excitement was soon met with tremendous doubt. “*What do I do now?*” I thought as my celebratory moment turned into one of immense uncertainty. I knew that getting a PhD was next on my to-do list, but *how* I was actually going to achieve this goal was unclear. Being the only member of my immediate family to graduate college and the first to even think about pursuing a PhD, I was very aware that making it to graduate school would be nothing short of an arduous journey. It is solely because of the mentors that I have met along the way, who not only saw potential in me, but encouraged me to strive for my goals, that I am applying for the NSF GRFP. It may take a village to raise a child, but it also takes a village to get one to graduate school.

### **Intellectual Merit**

My village came in the form of the **NIH Research Initiative for Scientific Enhancement (RISE)** program, which assists underrepresented students in STEM throughout their journey to graduate school. Born to a Grenadian mother and a Trinidadian father and growing up in a neighborhood with a predominantly immigrant community, most people I knew only had a high school diploma and virtually no one, to my knowledge, possessed a degree higher than a Bachelor’s. Thus, the idea of attending graduate school not only seemed far-fetched, but nearly impossible. Initially mentioned to me in my sophomore year by the director of the program and my former professor, Dr. Louise Hainline, it was in RISE that I learned about “conducting research” for the first time. As a requirement for the program, students were expected to join a research lab. Unsure of my interests, this proved to be a challenging task. However, that completely changed when I took a Psychology of Adolescence course with Dr. Erika Niwa in the fall of 2016; it was in this class that I became fascinated by the complexities of adolescent development. I particularly enjoyed learning about identity formation and gender socialization and how these processes are shaped during adolescence and grew eager to learn more once the class ended. This drove me to join Dr. Niwa’s adolescent development lab a year later.

In the summer of 2017, I was accepted into the **NSF Psychology Research Experience Program (PREP) REU at the University of Wisconsin-Madison**. It was here that I designed an original project with Dr. Karl Rosengren that examined death portrayals in children’s animated films and whether watching these films together may initiate parent-child conversations about death. This three-part study consisted of a content analysis and two parental surveys. The content analysis was done on 50 top-grossing animated films from 1970 to 2016, while the two parental surveys involved asking parents about whether their children have ever asked them questions about death in general and death in animated films. I was given a great deal of autonomy with this project in that I not only assisted my graduate student mentor in selecting the 50 films we used, but I also analyzed 25 of these films myself and coded over 400 parental survey responses. This study may have started off as just a summer project, but over time, it became much more than that to me. It became kind of like my child; witnessing its development from a small idea to a full-blown study felt like a proud parent watching their son or daughter go off to college. We not only found that most of the films we analyzed (76%) contained death

scenes, we also learned from the parents in our sample, that young children (i.e., those between the ages of 3 and 10) *are* asking questions and seeking answers about death, both in general and in animated films, indicating a need for death-related conversations with parents and their children. Participating in the PREP REU program showed me that despite this being my first exposure to empirical research, I was capable of creating a project that could serve as a meaningful contribution to the extant body of literature on this topic.

At the culmination of the program, I gave an oral presentation at the final symposium on the results of our content analysis and later disseminated these findings in a poster presentation supported by a Student Travel Award at the **2017 Annual Biomedical Research Conference for Minority Students**.<sup>1</sup> This project also resulted in my first first-author manuscript that we recently submitted for publication to a peer-reviewed journal.<sup>2</sup> By exploring the ways that films can influence children's beliefs about death and the afterlife, I became really interested in the role that the media plays in the lives of children, young people, and emerging adults and how this influence may lead to negative outcomes such as low self-esteem. Diving into the world of death in animated films (as morbid as that may sound) with Dr. Rosengren gave me a sense of joy and accomplishment that I never thought I would experience conducting research. I was excited for what was to come.

My next research opportunity came in the fall of 2017, when I completed an independent honors research project and honors thesis with Dr. Niwa that examined how age-related changes during adolescence, such as puberty, may affect the self-esteem and emotion regulation of middle and high school students. Self-report questionnaires were administered to youth enrolled in a Brooklyn College Community Partnership (BCCP) after school program. We hypothesized that high school students would have higher self-esteem and be able to manage their emotions better than middle school students, and that there would be a significant relationship between self-esteem and emotion regulation (e.g., high self-esteem may reflect more advanced emotion regulation skills). Our results supported our hypotheses in that older adolescents were more likely to have a positive view of themselves and be satisfied with who they are and there was a positive association between self-esteem and emotion regulation for both groups. We later traveled to Baltimore, MD where I presented a poster at the **2019 Society for Research in Child Development Biennial Meeting**.<sup>3</sup>

While working on this project, I realized that I still had remaining questions surrounding how one's identity can impact self-esteem and emotion regulation. As a result, once I graduated, I continued to work with Dr. Niwa on an independent research project that focused on the relationship between identity (i.e., age, gender, race/ethnicity, and ethnic identity), self-esteem and emotion regulation in BCCP youth. Through self-report questionnaires, we found that for the young people in our sample, those who strongly identified with their ethnic/racial group were more likely to have higher self-esteem than those who did not. I shared our findings at the **2019 Eastern Psychological Association Annual Meeting** in Manhattan, NY.<sup>4</sup> I later conducted another independent research project with Dr. Niwa that explored the effects that the Gender-Role Discrepancy Strain (i.e., a mismatch between how a man believes that men "should" act and how he lives up to these expectations in his own life) can have on the self-esteem of male and female Brooklyn College undergraduates through an online survey. Our findings suggested that this relationship was positively correlated for women, but not men. I served as the co-principal investigator on this project and not only wrote the IRB proposal, but also designed the research plan, collected, entered, and analyzed the data, and presented our results at this year's **Brooklyn College Science Day and Science Retreat**.<sup>5,6</sup>

### Future Goals

Through my various research experiences, I have fostered a deep appreciation for how media representations in television and film can affect the ways that minority youth feel about themselves and others. As a graduate student, I would like to explore this topic further by working with professors such as Dr. L. Monique Ward and Dr. Kristen Harrison at the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, whose work focuses on the psychological approaches to media and identity. After graduate school, I hope to lead my own lab at a governmental research agency and also collaborate with policymakers, lawmakers, and film executives to not only help shift the lens that young people are seen through and thought about both on and off-screen, but to also disseminate my research in non-academic settings to make the social sciences more accessible to the general public. I intend to do so by partnering with researchers in the U.S. and abroad that share my goals such as Dr. Yalda Uhls, founder of the UCLA Center for Scholars and Storytellers, whose mission is to “bridge the gap between scholars and storytellers to support positive youth development.”<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, I hope to one day create graphic novels for children and young adult novels for adolescents about topics related to human behavior to foster an interest in the social sciences early in their development. I believe that the true value of research is not what we keep to ourselves, but what we share with the world.

### Broader Impacts

As a first-generation college graduate, I am very familiar with the challenges that come with navigating spaces where it feels as though everyone else knows what to do, except you. That is why I believe it is important to encourage young people, in particular, to pursue their goals, especially those that seem unreachable. I have seen firsthand how “planting this seed” early on can have profound effects on minority youth through my position at **Brooklyn College Community Partnership (BCCP)**, a non-profit organization that offers enrichment opportunities for underrepresented youth in STEM in the form of after school programs across Brooklyn, New York. Since December of last year, I have served as the organization’s first Data Entry Assistant. Although most of my work is done behind the scenes (e.g., compiling a central database to keep track of over 400 students), I will soon be transitioning into a new role as a College Access Mentor, where I will be working one-on-one with middle and high school students, serving as a college graduate “model” to show them that attending college is feasible. I am also currently working on a report with a doctoral student in Dr. Niwa’s lab that will be shared with the BCCP staff, to highlight the positive impact that the organization has been having on the students and where we can improve. I plan to continue my outreach efforts in the future by creating and working with programs like BCCP, RISE, and PREP to assist underrepresented and low-income youth in accomplishing their goals and provide them with the encouragement and resources to do so. Winning an NSF Graduate Research Fellowship would not only allow me to nurture my research interests on a broader scale, but more importantly, provide me with the support that I need to begin a fruitful career in graduate school and beyond.

**References:** 1 **Bridgewater et al.** (2017 Nov). Poster presented at ABRCMS, Phoenix, AZ. 2 **Bridgewater et al.** (submitted). 3 **Bridgewater et al.** (2019, Mar). Poster presented at SRCD Biennial Meeting, Baltimore, MD. 4 **Bridgewater et al.** (2019, Mar). Poster presented at EPA Annual Meeting, Manhattan, NY. 5 and 6 **Bridgewater & Niwa** (2019 May). Poster presented at BC Science Day and BC Science Retreat, Brooklyn, NY. 7 Uhls (2018) “Center for Scholars and Storytellers”.