Stony Brook University
Psychology MA Students
2025 - 2026

Meet Our New Psychology MA Students!

Keren Cruz
(Keren; she/her)
Stony Brook University, 2025
Psychology (Minor: Health, Medicine, and Society)

Previous experience: As an undergraduate research assistant, I volunteered in Dr. Kristin Bernard's Developmental Stress and Prevention Lab, examining how early attachment, parenting sensitivity, and stress regulation influence children's cellular aging. I was involved in coding parent-child interactions and EEG recording, which sparked my interest in understanding barriers to sensitive parenting, particularly how parents' own adverse childhood experiences—such as abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction—can impact their ability to provide nurturing care. My experience as a research assistant deepened my interest in early childhood intervention and trauma prevention within marginalized communities.

Research interests and career goals: My research interests center on childhood trauma, and how early experiences shape children's behavioral, socioemotional, and neurobiological development. Specifically, I am interested in how childhood adversities within marginalized communities impact children's mental health and physiological development into adulthood. I aspire to pursue a Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology and further explore my interest in childhood trauma to provide culturally sensitive interventions, and trauma-informed care for vulnerable children and families.

Research keywords: Childhood trauma; Neurobiological development; Intervention

Zeynep Girdap
(Zeynep; she/her)
Stony Brook University, 2025
Psychology, B.S.

Previous experience: As an undergraduate research assistant, I contributed to a biopsychosocial study investigating how chronic stress and racial disparities affect perinatal and postnatal outcomes, particularly among marginalized populations. I also assisted with a linguistic relativity research project exploring how bilingualism influences the thinking process and interpretation of evidential utterances. These experiences have strengthened my skills in data collection, literature synthesis, and critical thinking. I presented my linguistic relativity research at the EPA conference, which enhanced my academic communication skills and affirmed my passion for research. These opportunities deepened my commitment to studying psychological health and inspired my pursuit of clinical psychology.

Research interests and career goals: I am drawn to clinical psychology because I have always been fascinated by how the mind works—how people think, feel, and make sense of the world. I am especially interested in studying how emotional, cognitive, and social processes contribute to the development and maintenance of conditions like depression, anxiety, and trauma-related severe disorders. My long-term goal is to pursue a Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology so I can conduct research that informs practice and provide care that is culturally responsive and grounded in people's lived experiences.

Research keywords: Mental health disparities; Trauma; Behavioral analysis

Gwenalyn Gominiak
(Gwen; she/her)
University of Buffalo, 2024
Psychology (Minor: Public Health)

Previous experience: At University of Buffalo, I was a research assistant in the Child and Adolescent Relationships Lab. I assisted with the NSF-funded Teen Relationships in Place project. This project examined how adolescent friendships shift across different contexts (e.g., at school, online). Additionally, I presented a poster at the Western New York Undergraduate Psychology Conference. I analyzed how coping strategies (i.e., vengeful and avoidant responses) in hypothetical stressful scenarios varied with close friends compared to unfamiliar peers in adolescence. Using the findings from this project, I co-authored a manuscript that received an invitation for revision from the Journal of Early Adolescence.

Research interests and career goals: I am interested in exploring how interpersonal relationships influence emotional and psychological outcomes in adolescents. Also, I am interested in how risk factors (e.g., attachment style, social determinants) impact these relationships. I am particularly drawn to this developmental stage because of its sensitivity and potential for long-term influence. I immensely enjoyed my time as an undergraduate research assistant and I am eager to have similar opportunities to further develop my research skills. My long-term goal is to earn a Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology, with the goal of contributing to the psychology field through continued research and education.

Research keywords: Interpersonal relationships; Adolescent development; Early risk factors; Interventions

August Harlow
(August; he/him)
West Chester University, 2025
Psychology (Minors: Biology, Chemistry)

Previous experience: During my undergraduate career, I worked as the Research and Development Lead for West Chester University's Center for Trans and Queer Advocacy, where I researched and presented psychologically-informed trainings on issues in and with LGBTQ+ advocacy at multiple academic conferences, covering implicit bias against binary transgender people in feminist spaces and liberatory gender abolition. Additionally, I pioneered a role as an undergraduate intern at my campus Student Health Services, where I demystified and compiled accessible gender-affirming care resources for transgender patients. Between these two roles, I developed a passion for psychology-informed advocacy, especially in health-related fields.

Research interests and career goals: I hope to research the well-being and medical decision-making of marginalized groups, particularly the LGBTQ+ community. More specifically, I want to explore health disparities (with a focus on disability), medical misinformation, and implicit biases—as well as use an understanding of these phenomena to prioritize more effective care for marginalized communities. Ultimately, I wish to pursue a Ph.D. in Social and Health Psychology and foster my academic interests as a researcher, professor, and change maker.

Research keywords: Marginalization; Resilience; Medical decision-making

Thomas Harten

(Tommy/Thomas; he/him)
Georgetown University, 2023
Neurobiology B.S.
Stony Brook University, 2024
Neuroscience, M.S.

Previous experience: In 2023, I graduated from Georgetown University with a B.S. in Neurobiology, where I gained early research experience in Dr. Ted Nelson's lab, studying the roles of TRPV channel-forming proteins in the context of chemosensation in *C. elegans*. In 2024, I graduated from Stony Brook University with an M.S. in Neuroscience, where I honed my molecular and cellular biology skills in Dr. Roger Sher's lab. My thesis project assessed the de-repression of LINE-1 retrotransposons in cells adjacent to mouse primary cortical neurons expressing the TDP-43 Q331K mutant, providing insights into the mechanisms underlying the spread of retrotransposition in neurodegenerative disease pathology.

Research interests and career goals: With continued education in psychology, I aim to conduct research into the physiological basis of meditation and its potential to inform more effective clinical intervention strategies for patients struggling with anxiety or depression. I am interested in understanding how recurring thoughts and belief systems modulate neural circuits involved in self-referential thinking and emotional regulation, and how meditation can help patients develop more adaptive patterns of thought, emotion, and behavior. I intend to contribute to ongoing work on the biological effects of meditation on the brain and body, and to understand how these changes relate directly to the resulting psychological benefits.

Research keywords: Meditation; Anxiety/Depression; Belief

Sarah Meredith

(Sarah; she/her)
Binghamton University, 2024
Psychology & Creative Writing

Previous experience: As a research intern at the Columbia Schizophrenia Research Center, I contributed to a clinical study on novel treatments for the negative symptoms of schizophrenia. I supported research procedures including sample collection, EKGs, vital signs, and medication compliance, while also coordinating participant tracking, IRB submissions, and regulatory adherence. Currently, I work as a Recovery Coach at Monte Nido Clementine Northshore, a residential program for female-identifying adolescents with eating disorders. I provide individualized support, facilitate therapeutic group activities, supervise meals, and help foster a supportive environment for recovery. These experiences have strengthened both my clinical and research insight.

Research interests and career goals: My research interests center on the onset, progression, and treatment of schizophrenia. I aim to explore risk factors, including genetic vulnerability and environmental triggers, and investigate whether early intervention can reduce long-term severity. I'm particularly interested in how treatments targeting positive symptoms affect negative and cognitive dimensions of the disorder. I hope to earn my Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology and work in emergency or inpatient psychiatric settings, where I can provide care to adults experiencing acute mental health crises. I'm eager to continue exploring unanswered questions about schizophrenia and contribute to advancing care for those living with severe mental illness.

Research keywords: Schizophrenia; Psychotic disorders; Severe mental illness in adults

Spencer Morenko
(Spencer; he/him)
Pitzer College, 2018
Cognitive Science & Linguistics

Previous experience: At the Child Mind Institute's Healthy Brain Network, I spent four years supporting the mission to provide children with no-cost comprehensive neuropsychological evaluations. As a research assistant, I led participants and their guardians through the informed consent process, collected phenotypic and neuroimaging (EEG) data, conducted mental health interviews and academic evaluations (WIAT-IV, CTOPP-2, TOWRE, CELF), and managed participant data in accordance with HIPAA and IRB requirements. As a Research Coordinator, I served on the management team where I supervised and trained our team of research assistants, implemented new research tasks, improved study procedures, and coordinated with governmental and third-party agencies.

Research interests and career goals: My experiences working in mental health care have solidified my commitment to a career in child development, mental health research, and direct clinical care. I aim to pursue a Ph.D in Clinical Psychology with a focus on adolescent and young adult men who struggle with mood disorders and externalizing behaviors. Patterns of emotional withdrawal, aggressive behaviors, and increasing suicide rates in this population highlight the need for evidence-based interventions and treatment during development. I hope to contribute to research and clinical practice that helps adolescents build resilience, process their emotions, and foster meaningful relationships.

Research keywords: Mood disorders; Suicide ideation; Child development

Lauren Rothburd
(Lauren; she/her)
University at Albany, 2021
Psychology & Business Administration
(Concentration: Marketing)

Previous experience: As a Research Assistant, I recruited families at North Shore Hospital and Long Island Jewish Medical Center for a pilot newborn screening study. Then, as a Research Coordinator, I collected disease tissue samples for surgical biobanking studies. I continued my career at Good Samaritan Hospital facilitating level I trauma center accreditation by establishing an interdisciplinary research and grant portfolio–with highlights in grant-writing, publication, and data analysis. I've held two volunteer positions at Stony Brook (e.g., PIGMENT Lab, Child Consumer Behavior Lab) where I gained knowledge into child and adolescent development and behavior, both contributing to my current psychology-related interests.

Research interests and career goals: I am largely interested in better understanding the interplay of factors–genetic, social, and environmental–affecting mental health. I am drawn toward exploring areas of emotion, personality, cognition, and social behavior and their influence on internalizing disorders. Additionally, I aim to investigate mixed-method techniques in measuring neuroplasticity as a function of mental illness progression and treatment. In the future, I hope to apply my skills and knowledge to a career in fostering mental wellbeing using an evidence-based, personalized, and holistic approach.

Research keywords: Emotion; Personality; Biopsychosocial approach

John Stallings
(John; he/him)
Notre Dame, 2014
Economics

Previous experience: During my time at the University of Notre Dame, I performed research with Dr. Lee Anna Clark to optimize definitions of personality disorders and with Dr. Andriy Bodnaruk to examine how investors make decisions in the face of heavy risk. For the past 10 years, I've been working as a consultant in technology at McKinsey & Company as an associate partner, specifically AI and financially modeling. In addition, I've complimented my work in consulting with Harvard's Business Analytics Program, where I strengthened my statistical coding skills and studied core applications of advanced technologies, like AI.

Research interests and career goals: My primary reason for returning to academia and studying psychology is to leverage new-age tools including GenAI for mental health intervention, such as examining the efficacy and ethics of GenAI psychotherapy. I would like to test intervention methodologies using large language models (LLMs). Overall, I'm interested in continuing to conduct research at the intersection between computer science and psychology. I envision this work advancing the field's understanding of how human-centered technologies can be applied to real-world mental health challenges.

Research keywords: AI; LLM; Intervention leveraging technology

Kayli Villalta
(Kayli; she her)
SUNY Farmingdale State College, 2025
Applied Psychology

Previous experience: From 2024–2025, I was a Biochemistry Intern at Estée Lauder under Mr. Kenneth Miller, conducting OTC and raw material testing using microscopy, GC, IR spectroscopy, ICP-MS, DSC, rheology, and particle size analysis. Simultaneously, I held two Research Fellowships in Psychology at Farmingdale State College, cleaning and analyzing large survey datasets using Excel and R. My EEG research focused on creating standardized protocols to study growth mindset in higher education. I developed procedures for setup, data acquisition, and training, and analyzed EEG patterns linked to resilience and academic effort, supporting equitable, reliable neuroscience aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 17.18.

Research interests and career goals: My research interests center on understanding brain plasticity and mental health disorders through imaging modalities such as EEG and fMRI. I aim to investigate how neural adaptability interacts with pharmacological treatments to influence resilience, cognitive functioning, and recovery. My goal is to integrate neuroimaging and pharmaceutical research to develop more targeted, evidence-based interventions for mental health. Long-term, I aspire to pursue a career advancing our knowledge of brain-behavior relationships and improving treatment outcomes through innovative, inclusive neuroscientific and pharmacological approaches.

Research keywords: Brain plasticity; Mental health disorders; Imaging modalities (EEG & fMRI)