

ABSTRACTS for LIHA Seed Grant Awards (2009-2010):

Nicole Rosa (PhD student in psychology, Advisor- Angela Gutches): Understanding of the mechanisms that lead to false memory

While the self-reference effect provides a benefit to memory for young and old, the fact that the effect is robust and easily induced in everyday situations may lead to errors in information related to the self. Research has shown that self-descriptive words are more likely to be misremembered as having been previously studied than non-self descriptive words (Rogers et al., 1979). Additionally, false memory is increased through associations and familiarity, both factors that explain the benefit observed in the self reference effect. The proposed study seeks to further examine the role of self-referencing in false memory. Participants will be asked to rate 120 adjectives for self-descriptiveness and then complete a recognition test consisting of 120 old and 120 lures. Following completion of the recognition test, participants will rate the 120 lures for self descriptiveness. It is expected that participants will misremember new self-descriptive words more frequently than adjectives that are not self-descriptive and that this effect will be magnified for older adults who typically commit more memory errors and are more susceptible to false memory.

Sarita Bhalotra (Associate professor at the Heller School): Living Long, Dying Well: The Desired Outcome of Healthy Aging

Having gained thirty years of life expectancy in a century, Americans today struggle with approaches to aging that optimize the experience. This is particularly so as one approaches the end of life. I argue that a healthy aging agenda must incorporate a healthy approach to dying. Current policy and program approaches offer little beyond bio-medical options. Most persons have a vision about an ideal death experience that incorporate psycho-social concepts, yet few will achieve it under current conditions. The aims of this project are three-fold: to bring scholars from various disciplines at Brandeis together to create an interdisciplinary course tentatively titled "Dying and Death: Desire, Dread, and Denouement"; to create a bibliography on this topic; and to prepare a short paper that will set the stage for a qualitative exploration of "desired deaths" among a sample of Massachusetts community-dwelling middle and older residents. The latter can be instrumental in beginning a conversation to inform policy recommendations and programs that address this most universal and inescapable of human experiences.

Cadge, Wendy (Associate professor in sociology): How Does Religion / Spirituality Shape Aging Experiences? A Pilot Study

This project inductively explores narratives gathered as part of the "Spiritual Narratives in Everyday Life" project (Nancy Ammerman, PI) that address themes of religion / spirituality and aging. While this project did not directly investigate how religion / spirituality shapes experiences of aging, numerous respondents spoke of these themes when asked about difficult times and when describing the aging of their parents. We aim to: 1.) identify the range of ways respondents spoke about the relationships between religion / spirituality and aging in these data 2.) compare these themes to what is known in existing qualitative literature on this topic 3.) with a Brandeis Sociology graduate student draft an article for a social science journal based on one or more of the substantive themes we identify. In addition to our empirical findings, these aims enable us to explore future collaborations by investigating research questions of mutual interest and brainstorming about potential future grant proposals

Nichola Rice Cohen (Postdoctoral fellow in psychology- Advisor- Robert Sekuler): The effects of sleep loss on the spatial and temporal dynamics of movement control in older adults

Sleep duration shortens with aging, and sleep disorders are common in older adults. However, we know very little about the effects of sleep loss in the elderly. In this proposal, older adults will undergo 64 hours of sleep deprivation and we will assess how sleep loss influences the temporal and spatial dynamics of movements. Before sleep deprivation, after deprivation, and following recovery sleep, subjects will view and reproduce sequences of hand movements that vary in the temporal and spatial domain. A data glove will capture subjects' hand movements and the temporal and spatial characteristics of the movements will be analyzed. It is predicted that sleep loss in the elderly will have a profound effect on the temporal but not the spatial characteristics of movements, because it is thought that the temporal information is stored in the prefrontal cortex, which is known to be influenced by both aging and sleep loss. This work will have important implications for developing guidelines and recommendations to ensure the safety of the elderly in the home and the workplace.