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## Interview with Faculty

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## Interview with Faculty

Interviews by Peter Clayson, Samuel Purdy, and Monica Shipp  
 Edited by Jennifer Christian and Julianne Dana

**ABSTRACT** *Psych Intuition interviewed Drs. Kirwan, Larson, Miller, Slife and Yamawaki in order to inform BYU students about their personal research interests. They gave advice on how to get involved in research and what they expect in a research assistant in order to disprove the notion of the "impossible research position."*

### Research Focuses:

**Dr. Kirwan:** My research focuses on learning and memory. I'm particularly interested in what determines what we'll remember and what we'll forget. I use EEG, fMRI, studies with patients with brain damage, and cognitive studies with healthy younger adults (undergrads) as well as with healthy older adults.

**Dr. Larson:** The lab primarily looks at how people process their environment, like how you react when you make an error, how you react when someone else makes an error and you are watching them and then how you change your behavior. We look at everything from Obsessive Compulsive Disorder to Traumatic Brain Injury to help determine how people process their environment better.

**Dr. Miller:** I have several emphases in my research. In pigeon research, I am focusing on relative value of gains or losses in choice procedures. I investigate multiple procedures and various parameters in order to create a mathematical module of choice. I am hoping to soon begin work with rats that will focus on choice as well, but more subtly – in the sense of local effects within a pattern of behavior. The focus in our human research is twofold: first, choice that is distributed over time in uncertain contexts and the relative values of gains and losses therein. The other emphasis is on assessment and the way the format of assessment items affects preparation for the assessment and performance on this assessment.

**Dr. Slife:** I do mostly theoretical research, meaning I answer questions that have to do with assumptions underlying psychotherapy. Right now, I'm working on two lines of thought. One is "what would psychology be if it was based on the assumption that God really matters?". If we made a different assumption, how would psychotherapy be different? How would our research be different? How would our study of human behavior be different if we made different assumptions that are more consistent with Christianity? The other line of thought I do is called 'relationality,' which is the notion that our relationships are more important than anything else. If we made that assumption, how would that change psychology? My work is to look at the foundations of the discipline and to compare them with things that a lot of us care about, like Christianity, and to say psychology is on the right track.

**Dr. Yamawaki:** I am conducting research about perceptions of attitudes towards victims of violence against women, such as domestic violence and rape; and I do that research cross-culturally. Another topic that I research is "attitudes towards mental health services" because a lot of victims tend not to seek help, I also do it cross-culturally. I am also very interested in individualism and collectivism; I am creating a scale and from now on I will use that scale and use archival data and analyze how they are related to collectivism and individualism.

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### How can students get involved with research on campus?

**Dr. Kirwan:** Talk to me. It's usually that simple. If you have an interest in cognition and cognitive neuroscience, we can usually find something for you to do in the lab.

**Dr. Miller:** I endorse the three steps recommended in the text books I use in my section of psychology 101. First, try to identify the interests that one has in research. Next, identify one or more members of the full-time faculty who are conducting research approximate to one's primary interest and approach those individuals by appointment. Having done some homework in terms of determining what research is underway, be prepared in advance with questions to learn more about what's taking place. Finally, apply to be part of a research team.

**Dr. Slife:** It would help if people could take a course or two from me, or at least have a course from somebody like Dr. Gantt or Dr. Reber. It helps to get a little bit of training before I could probably use you. But, if you have that training, what would matter is coming up and saying "hey could you use me, I'd love to get involved, and I'd love to volunteer".

**Dr. Larson:** Easiest way is to just to go ask professors. For my lab I like it when students have the initiative to come and talk to me and say "I'm interested, I like what you're doing". And then we interview them and go from there.

**Dr. Yamawaki:** The best way is to work with professors. Some of the classes that the psychology department offers make you do research; for example 302 and my gender class. That is the starting point but at the same time get involved with professors by being a research assistant and then do research with them and learn from them.

### Why is it important for students to get research experience?

**Dr. Larson:** You won't get into graduate school without it. You have to have research experience and all the grad schools are looking for it. They kind of expect it out of BYU students quite honestly, just because BYU students have gained a reputation of being research savvy.

**Dr. Slife:** For lots of reasons. Number one, it helps to be conducting that kind of research just to know what it is. It's one thing to read about it in a text or maybe to be a participant in it, but it's another thing to actually conduct the studies. Number two, if you can get some good experience with a research professor who's publishing regularly, you can have a presentation on your resume or vita and that will help you get into graduate schools. You can have that on there forever for any kind of application for a job. Just getting the experience [prepares you] for graduate work [and] the kinds of things that psychologists do.

**Dr. Yamawaki:** By conducting research, you will be able to have updated information because most of the time, you are the one that is going to have to do literature reviews. The more practical part comes when you are applying to graduate school. You need to have research experience not as a participant, but rather as part of a research group. It is almost necessary for you to get into graduate school. Some people may get into graduate school without having that research experience, however, they still have to do research for their thesis or dissertation and knowing research methodology and statistics makes a huge difference.

### How early in a student's academic career should they start getting involved with professors?

**Dr. Kirwan:** [The] more contact with your research advisor [the] better, and the more time you're involved in a project, the more likely you will be to see it all the way through (i.e., to publication). If you need a strong letter of recommendation for grad school from your research advisor, they need to know more about you than can be learned in one semester of your senior year.

**Dr. Slife:** Given that sometimes the work you do doesn't come to fruition for six months maybe to a year, it would be nice at the very minimum to start at the end of your junior year. I think the earlier the better, if you could start

working with someone when you were a sophomore you have more of a probability [of publishing].

### What do you look for in a research assistant?

**Dr. Kirwan:** An interest in the basic research questions in the lab is essential. A pleasant, professional demeanor is also essential. Most of what undergraduate RAs do in my lab is run research subjects. You have to be able to communicate with people.

**Dr. Larson:** The biggest thing for me is reliability. I don't stress that you have research experience before; I'll teach you what I want you to learn. But I really want to make sure that you are reliable and diligent, that if I ask something of you you'll get it done, and you'll get it done when you say you'll get it done.

**Dr. Miller:** What I'm looking for is a student who can profit from the experience. But I don't place strict requirements or have some well defined expectations necessarily. I'm happy to join with any undergraduate student who is reliable, curious, and has a passion--or at least a potential passion--for the research that is taking place and is also sufficiently skilled socially to be a team player.

**Dr. Slife:** It would be nice if they can write, are bright, and are diligent and conscientious. I have so many projects in so many different areas that sometimes it's hard for me to know whether I'm coming or going. [I'm interested in] someone who is conscientious, someone who would say "Dr. Slife, we need to do this". Basically [I'm interested in] someone who takes responsibility and takes charge-- Someone who's organized and willing to organize.

**Dr. Yamawaki:** One, I look for motivation and two, why do they want to get involved? Three, maybe experience-- whether they have taken 301 and 302, but sometimes I take RAs who don't have the coursework but they have a lot of motivation. Another thing that is very important to me is GPA; I want to get the best students.

### What are the biggest mistakes students make when approaching you?

**Dr. Larson:** Don't assume I have a spot for you, know that you are being interviewed for that spot. And don't assume you'll be paid for that spot because you have to work your way up to be paid. Come in excited and willing to do research but don't assume much.

**Dr. Yamawaki:** Not knowing what they are getting into. For example, they don't know what I'm researching or doing, they don't know themselves what they want to do. These are very big no-no's because they tend not to last.

### What are you planning for the near future?

**Dr. Kirwan:** It looks like we'll soon start collecting fMRI and EEG data. I recently received a grant from the College of Family, Home and Social Sciences to do a pilot study looking at the correlation between brain volume and performance on certain memory tasks as people's age.

**Dr. Larson:** We've got several projects looking at people who have had traumatic brain injuries. We've got a couple projects looking at how the brain processes stimuli when you're obese. We've got some things going on looking at how the brain changes with pregnancy. We have a lot of studies we are excited about, a lot of things going on. I plan to teach a lot of classes and party on.

**Dr. Miller:** I'll be working with a new doctoral student come fall, and he may very well have some interest that will take us in a new direction. I'm working now with an ORCA grant student whose interest is in personal rules and due correspondence.

**Dr. Slife:** I'm headed for China [in May] for research along the theism line. I'm part of the delegation going to China to teach [their] faculty how to study religion. Five of us will each have five or six Chinese academics assigned to us. We'll go over there two or three times and they'll come over to the States two or three times. We'll end up with

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a text written in Chinese on the psychology of religion. Religion has been very oppressed there and it's beginning to come out, so there's a lot of need to study it and make sense of it.

**Dr. Yamawaki:** I am suggesting to other researchers to consider ecological factors [that] may influence the concept of collectivism-individualism. So I ask, why don't we measure these ecological factors and use them to find differences in attitudes of perceptions? I want to pursue more within and between cultural variations, especially when it comes to attitudes toward mental health and violence against women. Within cultural variation may be able to tell us more than between-group differences without really measuring.

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