VNOP

Jury report VNOP Dissertation Award 2020

COVID-19 struck the world and the Netherlands went into an intelligent lockdown. The Dutch government issued a 1.5 meters social distance rule and prevented all multiple-person gatherings. Scientists closed their labs, moved to the virtual world, and stopped human testing in order to restraint the spread of the virus. In line with these unfortunate developments, the board of the Dutch Society for Developmental Psychology (VNOP) decided to postpone the 2020 meeting to a later date but determined that the virus should not hinder the presentation of the best dissertation award.

The board invited members to submit eligible dissertations for the VNOP 2020 award. Eligible dissertations are dissertations written by a VNOP student member, supervised by at least one VNOP member, and are completed within the two-year period before the 1st of March of the conference year. The board received ten dissertations (Radboud university, 1; University of Leiden, 3; University of Tilburg, 2; University of Utrecht, 2; University of Amsterdam, 2). The board installed a committee for the evaluation of the dissertations consisting of prof. Anneloes van Baar (UU), prof. Paul van Geert (RUG), prof. Maurits van der Molen, chair (UvA), prof. Maartje Raijmakers (VU/UvA), and prof. Carolina de Weerth (RU).

The committee evaluated the ten dissertations adopting a two-step evaluation procedure. The first step consisted of a quick scan by each committee member of each dissertation and the accompanying recommendation letters. The quick scan converged on the conclusion that the submitted dissertations were all of high quality. It would be difficult to select an award winner. Nonetheless, the committee members unanimously agreed that four theses qualified for the second step in the evaluation procedure.

The second step consisted of an evaluation against three criteria: Originality, Quality and Readability. Originality relates to an affirmative answer to the question of whether the dissertation has something new to offer. This may refer to novel insights provided by the data, the use of new methods to address the questions posed, or a new theoretical perspective. Quality refers to the development of research questions, the use of state-of-the art methods to address these questions, and the breadth and depth of the interpretation of the findings that emerged from the research. Readability concerns a clear structuring of the text, the relation between text, tables and figures and accessible writing.

The selection of the winner out of the four candidate dissertations proved to be very difficult. The second step in the procedure resulted in two potential winners. It took another round of deliberations, guided by the three evaluation criteria, to select the final candidate.

The final and unanimous outcome is:

The best dissertation comes from the Radboud University. The dissertation has been written by Lorijn Zaadnoordijk and the title of the dissertation is:

"Discovering structure in the confusion: An interdisciplinary approach to studying the sense of agency and its development"

The dissertation addressed a highly interesting topic—'sense of agency'—that has wide ramifications for several domains of study, including developmental psychology, clinical (neuro-) psychology, and philosophy. The committee was particularly impressed by the scholarly treatment of the concept 'sense of agency' and the development of procedures for making this concept accessible for empirical research. A major issue addressed in the dissertation concerns the question of whether we already have a sense of agency at birth. Answering this question implicates research in infants. But how to investigate an intricate construct as 'sense of agency' in a population that is, almost by definition, difficult to research? The dissertation demonstrates that this can be done successfully. A notable feature of the dissertation concerns the attempt to bridge philosophical and neuroscientific notions of 'sense of agency' and the use of electrocortical methods to assess whether infants develop expectations relating to the outcome of their actions. Another attractive aspect of the dissertation refers to the use of simulations to assess the evidence recruited in support for the existence of the 'sense of agency' in infants. Most importantly, however, the dissertation developed a methodological framework that goes far beyond the study of 'sense of agency' *per se*. The framework will be useful to investigate a wide range of phenomena relating to the inner world of pre-verbal infants. In brief, the committee found this dissertation highly interesting, illuminating and a pleasure to read.

On behalf of the committee members I congratulate the laureate with the winning of the VNOP 2020 Dissertation Award and I wish her success in her future work—she will be an asset in each Developmental Psychology laboratory.

Maurits van der Molen, Chair 2020 VNOP Dissertation Award Committee
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