

February 12, 2018

Dear NIDA Summer Research Internship Program Committee:

It is with great pleasure that I provide Yanina Chepura with a recommendation to the National Institute on Drug Abuse Summer Research Internship Program. I am a tenure-track Assistant Professor in the doctoral program in Clinical Psychology at Rutgers University, New Brunswick. I have known Yanina as a research assistant in my *Affective and Biological Underpinnings of Substance use and Anxiety* (ABUSA) lab since the spring of 2017, and feel highly qualified to provide a letter in support of her admission.

I met Yanina when she applied for the position as a research assistant on my team during her junior year at Rutgers. As soon as she left the interview, my graduate students and I concurred that she was exceptionally mature and bright, and would be a fantastic addition to our team. We had just begun recruitment for a NIDA-funded R03 study examining cognitive appraisal and cardiovascular reactivity as predictors of stress-precipitated smoking. Needing to recruit quickly and efficiently, we were delighted when Yanina quickly learned the protocol and mastered complex physiological hook-up procedures during training. Ultimately, she was one of the first two women in her cohort of  $n=8$  approved for the experimenter role.

The study we run is complex in the sense that an experimenter such as Yanina needs to maintain a professional demeanor with the participant while efficiently and expertly applying electrodes to continuously measure a range of physiological parameters. The confidence with which Yanina works influenced the participant's ability to relax and engage in the study, which is critical to controlling for possible confounds that arise due to the sensitivity of our physiological indices to social context. In addition to being efficient, the signals collected when Yanina is experimenter are of the highest quality. In cases where it was necessary to troubleshoot during the participant's data, Yanina has made quick decisions in the moment to resolve issues for the purpose of getting good quality data. This has included repositioning electrodes, ensuring full cortisol samples are acquired, and recalibrating our blood pressure monitor. Doing this role effectively requires incredible intuition, that cannot necessarily be taught.

The multi-method study involves various additional assessments, including paper and pencil questionnaires, computerized tasks, smoking puff topography, and carbon monoxide analysis of breath sample. Because there are many moving parts, we rely upon our experimenters to ensure that there is no missing data, which requires simultaneously administering study measures and checking for their completion, continuing seamlessly with the flow of the protocol. Moreover, Yanina has excelled in working with our target population, daily smokers, many of whom are disadvantaged by their low SES and education. She is incredibly comfortable with them, and they with her. This has been demonstrated by her ability to treat each individual with dignity and respect, managing their confidentiality thoroughly, and asking questions about sensitive information in a way which encourages them to provide honest answers. In sum, she has always been able to obtain data in a reliable manner.

Yanina exhibits extremely impressive time management skills. For the entire year she has managed to maintain an exceptional GPA while taking 20 credits both semesters, managing her part-time job outside the lab, and working in the lab on average  $> 10$  hours a week. It is also notable that Yanina functions more independently than most college students, fully supporting herself. Beyond accomplishments detailed above, Yanina was one of our experimenters who ran the largest number of participants, averaging at least 2 people per week. She always arrived early to setup the equipment and study tasks before the participant showed up for the 4-hour in-person lab visit, during which she had to attend to the participant the whole time. After the lab visit was over she would be the last one to leave after she filed all of the data and stored the saliva samples. This demonstrates her ability to accept the high level of responsibility the lab placed on her, for if the experimenter messed up the data study would be compromised as a whole.



Despite her heavy role as experimenter, Yanina was determined to gain additional experience with hand-entering study data into SPSS for further analysis. Knowing that accurate data entry is critical for data analysis, Yanina has shown incredible attention to detail, frequently asking me questions to ensure accuracy, and aptly noticing when variables needed to be added to the data set or relabeled. Finally, Yanina also had the task of conducting clinical phone screens to gather our participant pool. For this she had to learn a variety of medical and psychological conditions, their symptoms, and the associated medications for each so that she could quickly screen participants for their eligibility.

Overall, Yanina has been an incredible asset to our lab for her technological competence and her ability to develop comfortable repertoire with the participants in order to make the experiment be seamless. She and I have frequently discussed her interest in pursuing a career as a researcher and narrowing down her ideal course of study (i.e., clinical, cognitive, or neuroscience). I am confident that here admittance into the NIDA summer research internship program will provide her with an unparalleled opportunity to further develop her skills and narrow her focus prior to applying to graduate school. I hope that you strongly consider her application, and of course, do not hesitate to reach out if I may provide you with additional information.

Warmly,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Teresa M. Leyro, Ph.D.".

Teresa M. Leyro, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor of Psychology  
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey – New Brunswick