

Neuroscientist Vikram Gadagkar of Columbia's Zuckerman Institute Named Searle Scholar

~ Research on the female zebra finch promises new insights into how we judge the actions of others. ~

News Release

Contact: news@zi.columbia.edu

NEW YORK – To understand how we learn language, neuroscientists have increasingly [turned to songbirds](#), which learn their tunes from their fathers when young. But this body of research, like many others in biology, focuses primarily on male animals – typically ignoring the females.

Today, the [Searle Scholars Program](#) recognizes a young scientist who hopes to gain new insights that may have been overlooked because of this bias. [Vikram Gadagkar](#), PhD, has spent years studying how male zebra finches practice and perform their songs. Now he hopes to break new ground by investigating what happens in the brains of the female finches evaluating these ditties.

“In this field, research has mostly focused on the males and neglected the females,” says Dr. Gadagkar, a principal investigator at [Columbia's Zuckerman Institute](#). “Exploring how female birds judge the songs of males could be a new way to study something we can all relate to: how we evaluate the actions of others.”

The recipient of \$300,000 in flexible funding over three years, Dr. Gadagkar joins a group of other “exceptional young scholars” supported this year by the Searle family.

“These fifteen young chemists and biomedical scientists, who were selected by our Scientific Advisory Board in a highly competitive process, will pursue bold programs that will change the directions of their respective fields,” said Milan Mrksich, scientific director for the Searle Scholars Program.

Originally a physicist who studied [exotic states of matter](#), Dr. Gadagkar cut his teeth in neuroscience by investigating how zebra finches correct errors in their songs. As a postdoc, he discovered that certain cells in the brain [release dopamine](#) during the trial-and-error process, helping the brain to learn.

Less than a year ago, Dr. Gadagkar founded his own lab at Columbia's Zuckerman Institute, where he collaborates with other biologists in his field and with computational biologists in the Institute's [Center for Theoretical Neuroscience](#).

COLUMBIA | Zuckerman Institute

MORTIMER B. ZUCKERMAN MIND BRAIN BEHAVIOR INSTITUTE

"As an early career researcher, Dr. Gadagkar has undertaken an audacious research program," said Zuckerman Institute Director and CEO [Rui Costa](#), DVM, PhD. "His investigations of how the brain evaluates the actions of others — and compares those assessments to its expectations — have the potential to transform our understanding of ourselves and how we relate to others."

The early career researcher is excited to join the Searle Scholars Program community.

"Being a part of this group of amazing young scientists, who gather every year to talk about their work, is a great privilege," says Dr. Gadagkar, who is also an assistant professor of neuroscience at Columbia's [Vagelos College of Physicians and Surgeons](#). "I'm excited to see what new doors this community will open."

###