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University Psychology Department

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Psych NUWS

The Newsletter of the Northeastern University Psychology Department

Vol. 15, Number 1
(September 2008)

From the Editor

To the new Freshmen, and to all others who might not know, *Psych NUWS* is our department's collective effort to inform and, sometimes, to entertain. It is intended for all members of the department—faculty, students, and staff—but most of all for the undergraduate students. Each issue should have at least something of interest to you, whether it is a posting of opportunities, announcements about Co-op, summaries of interesting new research, or insights into what kind of future might lie ahead of you in psychology. We love participation from the undergraduate students—so please come see the Editor to ask how you can contribute!

And speaking of contributing to the public good, there is one contribution that's more important than any other in the coming season: VOTING. Young voters have enormous, history-making potential in the upcoming election. Don't fail to take advantage of your strength in numbers! Whatever your political persuasion is, you must vote. First, you must register if you have not already. Then, if you are not from Massachusetts you must get an absentee ballot. Your hometown election commission will send you one, or perhaps your parents would get one for you. Voting is a precious gift that we should never take for granted. And every vote counts! This election year, there are many important issues at stake that will affect the U.S. and the whole world. VOTE!!

--Prof. Hall

From the Chair

Greetings, and welcome to a new year in the Psychology Department. Last year was another exciting and productive one in the department, and we expect more of the same this year.

New Faculty Member

Professor Iris Berent, our newest faculty member, came to Northeastern from Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton, in July. Dr. Berent earned her PhD in Cognitive Psychology from the University of Pittsburg, and had a post-doctoral fellowship at Arizona State University. She is an internationally known psycholinguist, whose work focuses on the role of linguistic knowledge on the processing of language. Here's an example: most of us have trouble saying "lbiɸ" (and understanding it, when we hear it), and less trouble with "bnif", even though neither sort of syllable is present in English. Is this because we have grammatical

knowledge built into our brains that favors “*bnif*”? Or is it simply that our vocal apparatus has more difficulty producing “*lbif*”? (can you say “*lbif*” ten times fast?!?). Can you think of a way Dr. Berent might test which explanation is best? (hint: think about reading). Dr. Berent will be studying questions like this in college students, and also in children and infants. She is getting her research program at Northeastern underway now – and I happen to know she’s looking for some dedicated students to volunteer as Directed Studies in her laboratory... (See the Interview with Prof. Berent later in this issue.)

Psychology Club

The Psych Club meets every other Wednesday, at least six times a semester. The Psychology Club lets you directly influence your academic life during your undergraduate career. You can meet other students who have interests similar to yours and get to know future colleagues. You will learn ways to easily deal with Departmental and University requirements, and get information about careers in psychology, applying to graduate school, psychology coops and much more. Interesting and fun extracurricular activities along with a yearly road trip to the Eastern Psychological Association meeting are also important benefits of membership. Lunch (free!) and conversation are provided at all Psych Club meetings.

The Psych Club is a great way to find out about the many opportunities available to you in our Department. Your membership in the Psych Club is free and an integral part of majoring in Psychology at Northeastern.

As last year, the Club meetings will take place at noon in 215 Shillman, with the first meeting scheduled for September 24. I’ll be there, along with other faculty members

including the Psych Club advisor Dr. Quinn, to meet you and hear how things are going as the year starts. Don’t miss it!

Department Website

Don’t forget to visit www.psych.neu.edu, where you can find more information about the faculty and their research interests, the courses offered by the department and our graduation requirements, and much more. We are in the process of revising and improving the website, so check back often for new and improved features.

There is a tremendous range of opportunities available to you in our Department. Take advantage of them!

--Prof. Eskew

Have You Heard of N.E.W.C.O.P.E.?

N.E.W.C.O.P.E. is an organization on campus not many people know about. What does N.E.W.C.O.P.E. stand for? It is Northeastern’s Eating and Weight Concerns Project, dedicated to helping the students of Northeastern find support about body image and eating disorders through its staff and resources. N.E.W.C.O.P.E. was started in 1995 as an outgrowth of a project in Prof. Emily Kale’s eating disorders and human feeding behavior course. Now we are one of the “longest running” peer support organizations for weight and eating problems among Boston Universities.

N.E.W.C.O.P.E. is here to help students; whether it’s providing someone to talk to, or information on where to seek outside help, we are here. Eating disorders is a taboo subject to talk about and the media’s depiction of the idealized thin woman and buff man is something that affects us all. We

should not feel ashamed or embarrassed to talk about it. While our perception of ourselves is something private, remember you are not alone. If you look around, there is always someone who is feeling or thinking the same way you do, but won't discuss it because of the same fears you may have.

Do not feel hesitant to approach N.E.W.C.O.P.E. You do not need to have an eating disorder to talk to us. If you have problems with your body image, about the way you look, come by. If you feel down one day because a favorite shirt or pair of jeans no longer fits, tell us about it. Talk to us. Coping with a negative body image is something we all deal with and we all understand. You might just need someone to see what it is that you miss about yourself, something about you that is beautiful or striking that you haven't realized.

If you want to learn more about such things as nutrition, what you should be eating, how much you should be exercising and more, stop on by. There are ways to lose weight without having to give up all the foods you enjoy and without being held up in the gym for hours trying to burn those calories from making a bad choice on what food you ate. The staff at N.E.W.C.O.P.E. is made up of students just like you who can help you figure these things out. Everything you say to us is confidential. If you don't feel comfortable stopping by, go to our website; <http://www.atsweb.neu.edu/newcope/index.htm>.

There you can find an online forum where you can post your thoughts or concerns about yourself or questions you may have. Anything and everything is anonymous. Or you can e-mail us at newcope@neu.edu. Send us your questions, concerns, fears, whatever the case. It will be read

confidentially and you will get a response. You can even call us at **(617) 373-3173**. You don't even have to give your name. You can just talk. Don't hesitate to take advantage of what Northeastern has to offer all of its students.

Our new office is located at **313 Ell Hall**. Drop-in hours are from 4:00-6:00 p.m. every Tuesday.

--Deirdre Fuller, '08

Too Many Choices Can Be Mentally Exhausting!

New research in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* finds that even though people in our society love to have many choices in foods, coffees, entertainments, clothing, and so forth, in fact this plethora of choices may lead to fatigue and lowered productivity. Researchers asked participants (e.g., shoppers in a mall or students in the laboratory) to either make choices—about consumer products or courses, or simply to consider the options. Then they were asked to perform experimental tasks such as drinking a healthy but bad-tasting drink or keeping their hand in ice water. Participants in the choice condition had trouble staying focused on the task and sticking with it. The authors concluded that choice is a surprisingly taxing cognitive activity.

New Faculty Interview: Prof. Iris Berent

Psych NUws recently asked Prof. Berent a few penetrating questions. Here are her answers:

What was your background before coming to NU?

I was born in Israel, and I obtained my graduate training at the University of Pittsburgh. My interest in music and the mind led me to pursue two undergraduate degrees (in performance and in musicology) and MA's (in music theory and cognitive psychology). After earning my PhD in cognitive psychology, I spent two years as a post-doc at Arizona State University and then took a faculty position at Florida Atlantic University. In my recent sabbatical, I taught at Johns Hopkins.

How did you get interested in psychology?

My interest in psychology was sparked by longstanding philosophical questions regarding the nature and origins of knowledge in specific domains. Although I was initially interested in people's knowledge regarding music, my attempt to understand music cognition was shaped by how linguists and psychologists have addressed similar questions regarding linguistic knowledge. The knowledge I refer to does not necessarily concern expert musicians or great literary figures. In fact, what I find most amazing is the knowledge normal people acquire without any special training or instruction. Many people can immediately detect a "wrong note" in a tune even if they have never heard that particular piece before. Likewise, people can produce and comprehend many new sentences. And, although like the world's diverse languages, musical styles differ, those different styles share common structural characteristics, and so do languages. It is intriguing to find out what allows the human mind to develop distinct knowledge systems in these domains.

Can you briefly explain your research interests?

My research addresses one particular aspect of linguistic knowledge—what people know

about the sound structure of their language. I examine whether speakers of various languages—adults, children and infants—share knowledge of universal linguistic principles which they bring with them to the process of language acquisition, whether such knowledge is modulated by experience, and whether it is unique to human beings. A related line of research concerns the interaction between such knowledge and reading. There is a lot of evidence that skilled readers are sensitive to the sound structure of printed language, whereas people who are insensitive to sound-structure often don't attain reading skill. My work attempts to illuminate the link between reading ability and the language system by investigating how people's linguistic knowledge affects reading.

Will you be interested in having NU undergrads as research assistants in your lab?

I have always had an active group of undergraduates involved in my research, and I'm very excited about creating such a group here at Northeastern. Undergraduates are critical to my work. Of course, we can always use some help in the lab, but beyond that, it's a unique opportunity to share the adventure of research. My best lab groups have turned into a second family. We meet every week to discuss "what's cooking"—what have the data told us this week, and what puzzles we still need to solve. Some of the students in my lab have moved to pursue graduate work in psycholinguistics and a research career of their own, and I find this very gratifying. I strongly believe that work in a lab is crucial for one's education. Glossy textbooks sometimes make one forget that even the greatest science is fraught with indeterminacy, serendipity, and trial and error. Research assistantship provides students with a window into how one can

pursue important questions despite the pervasive uncertainty that is inherent to experimental research. Once they realize there are no hard and fast answers, students might figure that, with the right training, they, too, can address questions of their own. This is a real incentive to get into research.

Anything else you'd like to communicate to our students?

Good luck with the new academic year, and please do not hesitate to e-mail (i.berent@neu.edu) or stop by the Phonology and Reading lab and meet me in person.

Why Do Teens Get Hooked on Cocaine More Easily Than Adults? Maybe the Rats Will Tell Us

How do you know how hooked a rat is on cocaine? Obviously you cannot ask the rat this question. But, you can use established psychological methods based on learning theory to find this out. Researchers at McLean Hospital reported in the journal *Behavioral Neuroscience* that adolescent rats given cocaine were more likely than adult rats to prefer the place where they got it. The more time they spent in that place, the more their assumed attachment to the drug. This learned association endured even after experimenters extinguished the drug-linked preference, because a small reinstating dose of cocaine appeared to rekindle that preference. However, this was only in the adolescent rats. Evidence that younger brains get stuck on drug-related stimuli reinforces real-world data based on epidemiological studies. Of various age groups who experiment with drugs, teens are by far the most likely to become

addicted. This research could eventually help researchers with new treatments for youthful addiction.

One additionally exciting feature of this research: It was conducted by a recent PhD from our department, Heather Brenhouse.

Two Exciting Options for Graduate Study

If you feel you need to polish up your credentials before applying for a PhD, or if you want to go for a PhD but are not quite sure what your interests are within psychology, or if you want to be prepared for a good job, you should seriously consider earning a master's degree in psychology. Students with master's degrees are highly competitive applicants for PhD programs. The two programs described below are in experimental psychology and would be excellent pathways to many further options. (FYI: There are also master's degree programs in experimental psychology at Boston University and Brandeis University, among other places.)

Towson University, just outside of Baltimore, has a very well regarded master's degree program in experimental psychology. It is designed to prepare students for subsequent enrollment in PhD programs or research jobs in industry, hospitals, or private consulting settings. Students receive training in research design, statistics, computer applications, and specific topics within psychology (biological, cognitive, and social psychology). To learn more, go to <http://grad.towson.edu> and <http://pages.towson.edu/jbuckingham/experimetal> or send an email to Prof. Justin Buckingham, jbuckingham@towson.edu.

Also, Mount Holyoke College in central Massachusetts has a master's degree in psychology. This one is really special because it provides a stipend of \$11,000 and the program is tuition-free! Stipends and tuition remission are usually available only for PhD studies. Students engage in research, teaching, and course work. For more information, contact Janet Crosby, (413) 538-2422, or go to: <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/psych/grad/prog.html>.

21st Birthday Binge Drinking Documented as Seriously Hazardous to Your Health

Research just published in the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* shows that people turning 21 often engage in very dangerous amounts of drinking. In a survey of 2,518 current and former college students, it was found that 34% of men and 24% of women reported consuming 21 drinks or more, with the maximum for women being about 30 drinks (on this one occasion!) and the maximum for men being about 50 drinks. These figures translated to a rate of drinking of 7 to 9 drinks per hour in women and 10 to 12 drinks per hour in men. Drinking at this rate puts one at significant risk of disorientation, coma, and even death.

Interested in Being a Therapist?

There are many, many routes to becoming a practicing therapist. One way is to attend the Massachusetts School of Professional Psychology (MSPP). MSPP provides training for mental health professionals at different levels and in different specialties (school

psychology, forensic psychology, business psychology, and clinical and counseling psychology). Aside from the usual application criterion, the Admissions Committee especially weighs personal qualities such as social responsibility, capacity to form relationships with others, and self-reflection. There is also a Latino Mental Health Training Program. For further information, contact Nicholas Covino at ncovino@mspp.edu.

APA's Careers Website: A Must for Thinking About Your Future

PsycCareers is the American Psychological Association's online career center. It has something for everyone! You can investigate many job paths and even apply for jobs online. Go to www.psyccareers.com.

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***Psych NUws*** is produced by members of the Northeastern University Psychology Department. All contributions are welcome!  
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