

*Syllabus*

**PSYC GU4498: Behavioral Epigenetics**

**Dr. Jennifer Blaze**

Fall 2019: Fridays, 2:10-4pm

**I. Bulletin description**

PSYC GU4498. Behavioral Epigenetics (seminar).

4 pts. Fridays 2:10 – 4 PM

Office hours: Fridays from 4-5 PM, *by request only*

Prerequisites: Basic background in neurobiology (for instance PSYC 1010, 2450, 2460, 2480, or GU4499) and the instructor's permission.

This course will provide an overview of the field of epigenetics, with an emphasis on epigenetic phenomena related to neurodevelopment, behavior and mental disorders. We will explore how the field of epigenetics provides a mechanistic bridge between early life experiences and enduring neurobiological and behavioral consequences. We will also discuss how epigenetics contribute to psychopathology throughout the life course, and the implications of behavioral epigenetic research for the development of novel pharmacotherapeutic approaches and preventive measures in psychiatry.

**II. Full course description:**

Epigenetics is the study of changes in gene expression and cellular phenotype through mechanisms that do not involve changes in DNA sequence. During development, epigenetic mechanisms are essential for the establishment of cell-specific gene expression patterns and cellular differentiation. In addition, epigenetic marks are responsive to environmental cues throughout the lifespan of an individual, and can be stably maintained leading to long-lasting effects of the environment on gene expression. In this course, we will explore the role of epigenetic mechanisms in regulating brain gene expression, brain development, and adult brain function. We will focus on the neuronal epigenome as a biological substrate through which environmental exposures can contribute to the development of altered behavior and psychiatric syndromes.

In the first part of the course, we will explore the major epigenetic mechanisms of gene regulation and the research tools that are used to study epigenetic modifications in different model systems, including humans. Following this introduction, we will discuss the most sensitive periods during which the epigenome can be disrupted by environmental factors, including prenatal and early-life development. We will further consider the role of epigenetic mechanisms in the dynamic regulation of the adult brain function, as well as epigenetic dysregulation that may underlie various psychiatric disorders. In addition, we will discuss the role of epigenetics in normal processes in post-mitotic neurons of the adult brain with a focus on learning and memory. Finally, we will discuss a more controversial topic in epigenetics: the hypothesis that

environmentally-induced epigenetic modifications can be heritable, contributing to disease susceptibility of multiple generations.

The topics of the course will be introduced through overview lectures given by the instructor, followed by journal article presentations by students. The readings will consist of review articles and primary research articles, and will draw upon examples from both human and experimental/animal research. In addition to several classic papers to lay the foundation for Behavioral Epigenetics, the readings emphasize the most contemporary research and understanding of each topic area. The whole class is expected to have read the journal articles in advance and participate in discussion.

Finally, students will have the opportunity to explore and demonstrate a detailed understanding of a topic of their choice relevant to Behavioral Epigenetics through a final paper.

### **III. Rationale for giving the course:**

This course is designed to familiarize the students with basic and more advanced concepts of an emerging and rapidly evolving field of behavioral epigenetics. Epigenetic research has recently been incorporated in the major neuroscience-related areas, such as studies of neurodevelopment, animal models of behavioral and psychiatric disorders, studies on learning and memory, neuroendocrinology, psychopharmacology, and psychiatric epidemiology. The first part of the course will cover basic epigenetic mechanisms of gene regulation and epigenetic techniques, and will prepare students for more specific topics as well as enable them to critically evaluate epigenetic literature. The second part of the course will provide a synthesis on the role of epigenetic mechanisms in regulating normal brain function and their contribution to the development of psychopathology. The readings will consist of both review articles and primary research articles. Throughout the course, we will explore the landmark studies that paved the way for the establishment of the field.

The primary goal of this course is to for students to gain in-depth understanding of Behavioral Epigenetics as it pertains to the fields of Psychology and Neuroscience, through introduction of twelve applied topics. In order to aid in *remembering*, *understanding*, and *applying* the knowledge gained from the readings and lectures, students will be encouraged to ask questions and participate in discussion throughout the lectures and journal article presentations. In-class small-group activities will give students further opportunity to discuss, *apply*, and *analyze* the topics. Through presentation of journal articles and leading class discussion, students will gain a detailed understanding of a topic, *draw connections* to other course topics, *evaluate* the research, and *create* their own framework for presenting it to the class. The final literature review paper on a topic of the student's choice will further enable students to *synthesize* information from multiple sources, critically *evaluate* it as a whole, and *author* their own review of the sub-field.

More broadly, students will learn how to read primary scientific research articles, think critically, synthesize information, and write organized, evaluative papers. These skills

are necessary to be informed citizens in our increasingly technological society, and in all chosen post-graduate disciplines and careers.

The Psychology Program Goals that will be advanced in this seminar (see <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/psychology/dept/ugrad/goals.html>) include 1. Knowledge preliminary syllabus base; 2. Research methods; 4. Critical thinking; 5. Values in psychology; 6. Application of psychology; 7. Communication skills—written; 8. Communication skills—oral; 9. Information and technological literacy.

PSYC GU4498 is an advanced seminar, designed particularly for graduate students, for advanced undergraduates who are majoring in Psychology or in Neuroscience and Behavior, and for students participating in the Psychology Postbac Certificate Program. These students will have priority in registration, followed by junior majors followed by non-majors. The seminar will be well suited to students who have completed two or more lecture courses beyond W1001, such as W1010 (Mind, Brain, and Behavior), W2215 (Cognition and the Brain), W2450 (Behavioral Neuroscience), W2460 (Drugs and Behavior), or W2480 (Developing Brain).

It fulfills the following degree requirements:

- For Psychology Graduate Students, PSYC GU4498 will apply toward the “two seriously graded seminars” requirement of the Master’s degree.
- For the Psychology major or concentration in the College and in G. S., for the Psychology minor in Engineering, and for the Psychology Postbac Certificate, GU4498 meets the Group II (Psychobiology and Neuroscience) distribution requirement.
- For the Neuroscience and Behavior joint major, GU4498 will fulfill the 5th Psychology requirement: “one advanced psychology seminar from a list approved by the Psychology Department advisor to the program.”
- For non-majors in the College and GS, GU4498 – by virtue of its numbering in the 4400's--will count as one term of the natural science requirement, provided that students obtain the necessary permission and have taken the prerequisite psychology courses. Graduate students, and students who are majoring in Psychology or in Neuroscience and Behavior, and postbac certificate students will have priority over students who are taking the course for the science requirement. For this reason, as well as because of the course prerequisites, we anticipate the course will rarely be used for the science requirement.
- For the Psychology Postbac certificate, PSYC GU4498 will fulfill the advanced seminar requirement.
- For the Barnard Psychology major, PSYC GU4498 will fulfill the senior seminar requirement.

**PDFs of all articles will be available through CourseWorks/Canvas**

**V. Course requirements and grading:**

Grades:

25% Participation in journal article discussions and in-class activities

25% Presentation of original research journal article

10% Topic and bibliographic citations for literature review

40% Literature review paper

Participation (25%): All students are expected to participate in weekly discussions. To effectively participate, it is expected that all students read the assigned articles in advance of the class. Each student should come prepared with at least one question for the original research article(s) being presented. If medical or other emergencies prevent students from attending a class, an email to Dr. Blaze is required *in advance of class* to explain the absence.

Presentation (25%): Each student will present 1-2 original research articles and lead the class discussion. Journal articles are pre-selected by the instructor. Students are expected to walk the class through the background/rationale, methods, results, and discussion, including what is novel, and potential pitfalls/misinterpretation, and possible future directions. Students should try to engage class in discussion through questions. Each presentation should be ~30m.

Topic and references (10%): All students are required to select a topic relevant to Behavioral Epigenetics for a final literature review paper. The topic may expand on a topic presented in the course, may be a relevant topic not covered within the course, or may synthesize information across areas of the course. The student will submit the topic/title, a short rationale for its selection, and at least 10 FULL citations for their proposed literature review paper on or before the class meeting of [REDACTED] with no exceptions. Topics will be approved by the instructor, and in some instances the instructor may suggest ways to broaden or focus the topic as appropriate. For the citations: review papers are acceptable but should be kept to a minimum.

Literature review paper (40%): All students will write a substantial, *original* 8-12 page paper (double spaced, not including references) on the chosen topic. At least 15 citations in APA format must be included. The paper will be submitted on the final day of class, with no exceptions.

## **VI: Other**

### **Academic honesty**

As members of this academic community, we are responsible for maintaining the highest level of personal and academic integrity: “[E]ach one of us bears the responsibility to participate in scholarly discourse and research in a manner characterized by intellectual honesty and scholarly integrity.... The exchange of ideas relies upon a mutual trust that sources, opinions, facts, and insights will be properly noted and carefully credited. In practical terms, this means that, as students, you must be responsible for the full citations of others’ ideas in all of your research papers and projects... [and] you must always submit your own work and not that of another student, scholar, or internet agent” (from the Columbia University Faculty Statement on Academic Integrity. All allegations of academic misconduct will be immediately referred to the office of Student Conduct and Community Standards.

<https://www.college.columbia.edu/faculty/resourcesforinstructors/academicintegrity/state-ment>).

Plagiarism – whether intentional or inadvertent – is a serious violation of academic integrity. If you have any questions about what constitutes plagiarism and/or how to properly cite sources, please come to me. I am more than happy to help. Similarly, if you put yourself in a situation, e.g., starting an assignment very late, in which you think your best option might be to cut some corners, see me. It is far better to have a few points deducted from a paper than to compromise your academic integrity and potentially put your academic standing in jeopardy.

### **Disability Services**

Students with special needs who may require classroom/test accommodations should make an appointment with me before or during the first week of class. You should also contact the Office of Disability Services (ODS) in Lerner Hall before the start of the course to register for these accommodations. The procedures for registering with ODS can be found at <http://health.columbia.edu/services/ods> or by calling (212) 854-2388.

### **Writing Center**

I encourage you to visit the Writing Center, where you can receive free individual consultations on your writing at any stage in the writing process, including brainstorming. Writing consultants work with all members of the Columbia community on any academic or nonacademic writing. You can make an appointment and view drop in hours on their website [[www.college.columbia.edu/core/uwp/writing-center](http://www.college.columbia.edu/core/uwp/writing-center)].