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Seren Snow

Social psychologist, alum Wendy Berry Mendes to deliver inaugural Major-Blascovich Lecture

When Wendy Berry Mendes Ph.D. '03 designs a study, she imagines [Jim Blascovich](#) asking whether participants will become fully absorbed in the experience. When she prepares to explain the results, she imagines [Brenda Major](#) pressing her on how the findings work, why they matter and where they might not apply.

More than two decades after her graduate training at UC Santa Barbara, under both Blascovich and Major, those questions remain part of her research.

"These questions make me, and my students, better researchers," Mendes said.

Now the Chris Argyris Professor of Psychology at Yale University, Mendes will return to UCSB to deliver the inaugural [Major-Blascovich Lecture in Psychological Science](#), connecting her research on how people influence one another's physiological responses with the intellectual and mentoring traditions that helped shape her career.

Mendes' talk, "Affect contagion: Physiologic synchrony among strangers and close others," begins at 11 a.m., Thursday, Oct. 9, in the Sage Room, Psych 1312. It is free and open to the public.

The lecture is supported by the Brenda Major and Jim Blascovich Fund for Social Psychology, established by the Department of Psychological & Brain Sciences to honor the two longtime faculty members and support research, mentoring and community-building in UCSB's social psychology program.

Both scholars are now emeriti. Major's research examines stigma, discrimination and resilience, while Blascovich has focused on the relationship between social experiences and physiological responses to challenge and threat.

Mendes earned her doctorate in social psychology at UCSB in 2003, working with Blascovich as her primary adviser and also with Major.

"The combination of working with Jim and Brenda was a psychology graduate student's 'dream team,'" Mendes said, describing Blascovich's creativity in designing experiences that evoke strong emotions, and Major's ability to identify and test the social processes underlying a finding.

Mendes called Major a "master theoretician," adding, "She forced us to question the why and the how of our studies."

That attention to experience and explanation runs through the research Mendes will discuss in her lecture.

In one laboratory study, researchers separated mothers from their 12- to 14-month-old infants while the mothers completed either stressful tasks or a nonstressful comparison condition. The infants were then reunited with their mothers and placed on their laps. Within minutes, infants whose mothers had completed the stressful tasks showed increased activation of the sympathetic nervous system, part of the body's stress response. Infants in the comparison group remained at their typical level, Mendes said.

The mother-infant pairs in the stress condition also showed more synchronized physiological responses during the remainder of the study. The infants of stressed mothers subsequently showed more avoidance of unfamiliar people entering the room. Mendes said one possible explanation is that this "stress contagion" helps signal potential social threats in the environment.

Mendes' lecture will explore these connections among close others and people who have recently met, examining when physiological responses become linked and

what those connections may mean.

“We’re thrilled to have Wendy Berry Mendes as the inaugural speaker for this series,” said David Sherman, a professor in the Department of Psychological & Brain Sciences who is helping organize the event. Mendes has maintained her connection to UCSB through the department’s Alumni Council, he said, and helped mentor current students.

“In addition to the major scientific advances that she has made while a professor at Harvard, UC San Francisco, and now Yale, Wendy exemplifies being a wonderful scientific citizen,” Major said.

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