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Aldemaro Romero Jr.
CUNY Bernard M Baruch College

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Mangels analyzes and teaches human behavior

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. *College Talk*

“I didn’t always want to become a psychologist.” That is the way Dr. Jennifer Mangels began her interview. For someone who was not sure what career path to follow while in college, she has not done badly at all.

A native of Morristown, New Jersey, she obtained her bachelor’s degree from the University of Delaware and a doctorate in psychology from the University of California, Berkeley. Today she is a professor and chair in the Department of Psychology of the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College.

Mangels saw the light, so to speak, after taking a course in psychology in college and participating in an experiment with herself as a subject. “They put an electrode on my scalp and put me in a dark room and told me to stare at a red light, and I thought this was very odd. You just need to close your eyes, as I learned, but it shows that it actually changed my brain state. My behavior is actually related to my brain and vice versa, and it was this epiphany about the mind-brain connection,” she says.

When it comes to what psychology means to students, she is very clear. “We often think of psychology as talk therapy, who you talk to when you’re down or going through a stressful period, and that’s a very critical component of psychology. But psychology is a science, and even the work that’s being done in the clinic is based on work that’s researched, whether or not these therapies are effective. I hope that some of the students who take my courses go to these experiments to learn something about themselves,” says Mangels.

One of the areas that she has studied has been how our environment influences our sense of empowerment. “If we feel that the environment is supportive of us, if we feel that the people around us are not judging us and saying ‘you can’t do it,’ then there’s certainly some empowerment one can get from that. It can help people enter into areas where



Dr. Mangels at the lectern.

they might not naturally think that they can do something, and if that sense of belonging is there, it helps to reinforce that, yes, you can,” she says.

Thus, the question is, to what extent does that kind of environment influence the participation of women in certain scientific disciplines such as psychology itself? “More women are getting into the field,” she explains. “There are fewer barriers to prevent women from having a work-life balance, which I think is important to women; more support from their spouses; and expectations that they can succeed from all angles, from their families, from their institution. But there are still definitely barriers and stereotypes that can interfere; especially in areas that have not historically had many women, there are fewer role models.”

That does not mean that in her studies she has

seen everybody responding the same to identical circumstances. “One of the things we’ve been finding in our studies at Baruch is that females and males respond differently to different types of goals and respond well or seem to struggle more with different types of things that undermine learning.”

She illustrates her point with an example. “I don’t know whether it’s just that I can relate better to females, so I know the kinds of things that help and hurt them, but it’s interesting, males have been a little bit less penetrable for me. But we have found a number of things, like rumination, reward, social learning—these kinds of things that do influence females a little bit differently.”

She also believes that having specific goals improves motivation. “What we’re looking at is that there are different goals people have when they’re

in an academic situation, and some of the research suggests that having the goal of learning and developing their knowledge is better than aiming to prove their knowledge, but there’s also this idea that being in a place where your goals match the goals of the instructor or the environment is key for motivating you,” says Mangels.

She has also looked at the way stereotyping can impede the professional advancement of individuals. “Nowadays you don’t hear people saying, ‘yeah, I think women are terrible at math’; but they may do subtle things, such as not responding to women’s questions, saying derogatory things if a woman asks a question or doesn’t get something right, or betraying the assumption that if a woman does something well, it must be because somebody helped her, whereas if she made a mistake, it’s because she’s a woman,” Mangels explains. That is what is known as unconscious bias.

Another area that she has studied is our ability to correlate names and faces, and that is something that happens in the classroom. “This is a problem that affects us in many different environments in our social life. One of the reasons it’s very difficult is that names and the relationship to faces is very arbitrary. The study I did looked at what is called mass repetition, where you repeat something over and over again in a row rather than spaced out over many minutes,” she says.

Among the many things Mangels has done research on is phobias. “I actually worked on arachnophobia (fear of spiders), and what arachnophobia may lack is the ability to control their reactions to these types of stimuli. They become so fixated on this stimulus, the spider or the potential for there to be spiders in an environment, that they are unable to organize their thoughts around other things.”

*Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College of the City University of New York. The radio show on which these articles are based can be watched at: <https://vimeo.com/204004305>
He can be contacted via Aldemaro.Romero@baruch.cuny.edu*

Photo by Yulia Rock