



psychology

THE ENEMY NEXT DOOR

A NEW STUDY PROVES THAT FEAR DISTORTS OUR PERCEIVED DISTANCE TO DANGER

by Sally Lauckner / GSAS '10

Keep your friends close and your enemies closer. The adage is most often attributed to Chinese philosopher and general Sun Tzu, but it's been repeated throughout history by strategists from Niccolò Machiavelli to "godfather" Michael Corleone. And while most understand the logic of keeping tabs on a potential threat, few consider how close we perceive dangers to actually be. Impressions of the "enemy"

are just what Jay Van Bavel, assistant professor of psychology in the Graduate School of Arts and Science, and doctoral candidate Jenny Xiao (GSAS '13) set out to explore. Their research, published in June in the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, focused specifically on how far away people imagine their opponents to be compared to their true distance. Van Bavel believes that a better understanding of our biological adaptation to what scares us might play a role in curtailing discrimination and other negative fear

responses. The analysis considered the competition between two local universities, as well as the debate over immigration. But there may have been no better place to begin a study on perceptions of danger than in the Bronx, looking at one of the fiercest rivalries in sports. Van Bavel and Xiao headed north on the subway in June 2010 to speak with New York Yankees fans as they poured out of the stadium after a game. At the time, the Bombers sat atop the American League East, while archrivals

ILLUSTRATION © LARS LEE TARU

the Boston Red Sox were one game behind in second, and the Baltimore Orioles wallowed in dead last, 23 games out. That night, a majority of Yankees fans incorrectly guessed that Boston's Fenway Park is closer to Yankee Stadium than Baltimore's Camden Yards. Because the Red Sox were on the Yankees' heels in the pennant race, most fans imagined them to be geographically nearer—even though Fenway is 20 miles farther from River Avenue than Camden Yards. "We found that a group that you don't like can seem a lot closer when they're threatening," Van Bavel says. This flawed perception, Van Bavel adds, may simply be a method of addressing fear. He cites Joseph LeDoux, a professor at NYU's Center for Neural Science, who draws the analogy of walking in the woods and seeing what may be an animal or a twig. "The advantageous thing to do is to jump," Van Bavel says. "If you're wrong and it was just a twig, it only cost you a few calories. But if you didn't jump and it was a poisonous snake, then you could die." Continuing the study, the co-

actually is. Another study measured the perceived distance between NYU and Columbia University, located in northern Manhattan's Morningside Heights. For this survey, researchers aimed to manipulate the response. They offered some NYU participants articles that focused on positive comparisons of the two schools; in turn, these participants estimated that the distance between the universities was greater than it is. But other NYU participants who read material that presented Columbia as superior—as an older or more selective institution—presumed that the two schools were physically closer than in reality. "These issues have come up over and over throughout human history," Van Bavel says. "There have been forms of discrimination that manifest themselves in putting up barriers and segregating groups to certain water fountains. By understanding how perception plays a role in this, we may understand more about the ways to deal with it." Van Bavel plans to do more research using this manipulative approach, which foretells that it may be possible to change hos-

"A group that you don't like can seem a lot closer when they're threatening," psychologist Jay Van Bavel says.

authors turned from baseball to a more serious policy debate. They asked more than 300 NYU undergraduates how threatening they believed Mexican immigration was to American identity. Participants who strongly identified with American pride and who felt that Mexican immigrants were detrimental to the country were more likely to propose that Mexico City is closer to New York City than it

tile attitudes or misperceptions toward groups that people view as dangerous. "You can heighten a threat by making Columbia seem more [competitive with] NYU," he says, "or you can remove that threat by making it clear that Columbia and NYU are two world-class universities in the same city. So we think people are quite susceptible in the way that these things are framed, which is encouraging."

campus initiatives Urban Evolution

TWO MAJOR PROJECTS WILL HELP TRANSFORM NYU AND NYC

by Eileen Reynolds / GSAS '11

NYU has been busy this past year—and things are likely to get even busier since two vital projects were recently green-lighted by the city. With more than half the world's population living in urban areas, the future of cities is more relevant than ever. With that in mind, Mayor Michael Bloomberg and NYU announced last spring the launch of the Center for Urban Science

and Progress, or CUSP, a research institute that includes a consortium of universities and industry partners. The center, which will be located in Downtown Brooklyn adjacent to MetroTech Center and NYU-Poly, will be led by NYU and answers the mayor's call for a science institute that will make the city a bigger player in the tech industry, while helping address the many challenges posed by a rapidly urbanizing world.

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USING RECYCLED AND LOCALLY SOURCED MATERIALS, AN EXISTING DOWNTOWN BROOKLYN SITE WILL BE OVERHAULED TO HOUSE THE NEW CENTER.

PHOTO © DBOX

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Of course a center this innovative needs a cutting-edge home. An existing building at 370 Jay Street will be redesigned using recycled and locally sourced materials, with renovations completed around 2017. Under director Steven E. Koonin, a Brooklyn-born theoretical physicist who has served as U.S. undersecretary of energy for science as well as provost of the California Institute of Technology, CUSP will be home to approximately 50 principal investigators, 400 master's students, 100 PhD students, and 30 post-docs. "I am extraordinarily energized to be returning to New York City to work with CUSP's partners and other stakeholders," Koonin says. "There is no place better to be doing this work."

One major issue inherent in every city—but especially New York—is space. To deal with an ever-tightening campus crunch, the university sought and received approvals for its first-ever, long-term space growth plan, called NYU 2031. This blueprint for citywide growth will allow NYU much-needed expansions in Greenwich Village, Downtown Brooklyn, and near its health facilities on Manhattan's east side. This is a vital path to satisfying the need for science, research, teaching, and performance facilities—as well as housing—in the future. NYU is at a significant disadvantage when it comes to space; the 2031 plan will help ensure the university can meet the needs of its students and faculty for decades to come. “While other sectors of New York’s economy have been shrinking, education has been expanding,” President John Sexton says. “Keeping our universities strong keeps New York strong, and will ensure [the city] remains a world capital in the years ahead.” ■

the insider

BEST OF NEW YORK

NYU FACULTY, STAFF, AND ALUMNI OFFER UP THEIR FAVORITES

by Renée Alfuso / CAS '06

WHETHER YOU'VE GOT A GREEN THUMB OR JUST WANT TO SEE THE LEAVES CHANGE, THERE ARE PLENTY OF WAYS TO ENJOY FALL IN THE BIG APPLE

HORSING AROUND

Brooklyn's last native forest lies in Prospect Park, where perhaps the best way to experience autumn's vibrant hues is on horseback along the 3.5-mile bridle path. Riders of all levels can trot to **KENSINGTON STABLES** for classes, pony rides, and guided tours of the 150-year-old park. The riding trail begins at the Park Circle entrance and travels along the edge of a lake, past the iconic Nethermead Arches, and through the peaceful Midwood, filled with mossy logs and towering trees—the tallest being a 127-foot pin oak. "There are few things better than a meandering ride through the woods," says Katie Young (GAL '12), who's been saddling up since age 8. As captain of the NYU Equestrian Club, which competes in Intercollegiate Horse Show

Association competitions, she led her team to victory in regionals last year. "Riding is a thrill like nothing else, so you immediately feel an extreme gratitude for your horse, even if it's your first ride together," she says. Before heading to the park, Young suggests wearing long pants, boots with a sturdy heel, and a certified riding helmet for safety. And she advises city slickers: "If your first [time] isn't as great as you'd hoped, find another barn, another horse, and give it another try!"

51 CATON PLACE IN BROOKLYN,
718-972-4588;
WWW.KENSINGTONSTABLES.COM

MULTIMEDIA MECCA

In a city filled with exhibits and galleries, the **MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE** still manages to be one of a kind, with the na-

tion's largest collection of artifacts—130,000 in all—showcasing the history, technology, and artistry behind the moving image. "It's not a stuffy old museum—it's much more fun," promises Ben Moskowitz (TSOA '08), the preservation media unit lab supervisor for NYU Libraries. The museum has been a pioneer in collecting video arcade and console games, and visitors can play classics like *Space Invaders* and *Donkey Kong*. Interactive computer stations allow guests to create their own stop-motion animations, view themselves dressed in famous movie costumes, or record their own movements to print out as a flipbook. The core exhibition in the recently expanded museum is "Behind the Screen," which spans the evolution of the moving image, from 19th-century optical toys and Thomas Edison's Kinetoscopes through film cameras, television sets, and digital editing

tools. The educational side is balanced with pure entertainment: movie posters, vintage lunch boxes, *Star Wars* figurines, and a TV lounge that re-creates a 1960s living room. Moskowitz especially enjoyed the collection of *Cosby Show* sweaters and the exhibit on Jim Henson's Muppets. "[The museum] brings back that sense of wonderment from your childhood," he says.

36-01 35TH AVENUE IN ASTORIA,
QUEENS, 718-777-6888;
WWW.MOVINGIMAGE.US

STOP AND SMELL THE ROSES

“The great landscape architect Roberto Burle Marx said that plants bring dignity to an urban space,” explains landscaping supervisor George Reis (CAS ’10), who’s worked at NYU for 17 years. He admits that gardening in the big city can be difficult, “but the rewards are also really great because people gush with gratitude when they see some greenery in the con-

crete jungle.” So when Reis needs a few last-minute toad lilies or hot-house hydrangeas, NYC’s **FLOWER DISTRICT** offers a horticultural haven. The area has survived more than a century of change; today, the shops still overflow with tropical plants and giant palm trees, transporting passersby to a lush forest, if only for a few blocks. The flower mongers offer accessories for outdoor and container gardening, and even apartment dwellers can find decorative accents, such as potted topiaries, sea glass, and rainbow-colored bamboo bundles—plus holiday garlands, ornaments, and wreaths starting in autumn. Reis says that it’s a great place to discover exotic flowers and plant life that come into the city first thing each morning: “The best way to describe it is eclectic—you’ll just see a little bit of everything there and you never really know what to expect.”

MANHATTAN'S FLOWER DISTRICT IS
PRIMARILY LOCATED ON WEST 28TH

STREET BETWEEN SEVENTH AVENUE
AND BROADWAY

EDITORS' PICK: DINNER AND A MOVIE

Food and film are two of our favorite things here at *NYU Alumni Magazine*, and luckily the like-minded staff at **NITEHAWK CINEMA** serves them up side by side. The independent gastro-theater opened last summer in Williamsburg and screens both digital and 35mm films with table service during the show. While the VHS Vault in the lobby bar offers free “guilty pleasure” movies, new releases play upstairs, alongside curated classics with monthly themes such as the “Late Night Lynch” and “Monsters of Summer” series, featuring 1980s throwbacks *Predator* and *Poltergeist*. “There’s a huge difference in attitude—we’re not just there to take your ticket,” says Nitehawk server Aiden Arata (CAS ’13) of the theater’s passion for celluloid. “We’re

all really into making this an experience, not just a movie.” Seated viewers can order specialty cocktails inspired by the screenings, such as the Girl on Fire with house-infused jalapeño tequila, which pays homage to *The Hunger Games*. The Facehugger, named for the extraterrestrial baddie in the sci-fi blockbuster *Prometheus*, is a mix of Baileys Irish Cream with green streaks of crème de menthe and looks both alien and irresistible at once. There’s a full menu of entrées, desserts, and elevated movie concessions, such as mushroom croquettes, fried pickles, and popcorn with lime, cotija cheese, and cilantro. They even serve brunch on weekends: The \$14 Breakfast Club prix fixe menu comes with either a mimosa or a Carrie—Nitehawk’s wicked version of a Bloody Mary. Anyone who gets that reference is sure to feel right at home.

**136 METROPOLITAN AVENUE IN
BROOKLYN, 718-384-3980;
WWW.NITEHAWKCINEMA.COM**

KENSINGTON STABLES

FLOWER DISTRICT

MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE

NITEHAWK CINEMA

PHOTOS CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: MARIE VILJOEN; © OPTO DESIGN; PETER AARON/ESTO, COURTESY MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE; COURTESY NITEHAWK CINEMA