



BOSTON COLLEGE

BOSTON COLLEGE PROF. LISA FELDMAN BARRETT WINS NIH "PIONEER" AWARD FOR EXCEPTIONAL INNOVATION

\$2.5 MILLION AWARD WILL SUPPORT HER GROUNDBREAKING APPROACH TO STUDY OF EMOTION IN THE BRAIN



CHESTNUT HILL, MA (9-19-07) -- Boston College Psychology Prof. Lisa Feldman Barrett, a leader in the field of emotion research, has been awarded a five-year \$2.5 million grant from the National Institutes of Health to fund her groundbreaking work on the psychology and neuroscience of emotion -- in particular her development of a "conceptual act" model that offers a new view of emotions and their role in mental and physical health.

Barrett is one of only 12 recipients in the U.S. to receive the NIH Director's Pioneer Award, which recognizes "exceptionally innovative investigators" whose work holds the promise of conceptual and technological breakthroughs in science, according to an NIH release.

This is the fourth set of Pioneer Awards to be given, and Barrett is only the second psychologist ever to have earned the honor.

Barrett said the grant in particular will allow her to continue building evidence for her "conceptual act" model, thereby shaping a new paradigm to guide the scientific study of emotion.

Much of the previous work on emotion has been guided "by a scientific paradigm that is grounded in human experience," explains Barrett. Because people "experience fear and see it in others," she said, scientists have assumed there must be "a literal circuit for fear in the mammalian brain"; a threatening situation triggers the circuit and fear is the result.

For example, Barrett said, "rats freeze when they hear a tone paired with a foot shock, so they are presumed to be in a state of fear -- versus surprise, anger, or even a general state of alarm -- and undergoing 'fear learning.' Scientists also presume that a map of the neural circuitry of freezing behavior will yield a neural mechanism for fear that is largely preserved in humans, and a decade of neuroimaging studies have focused on locating a similar neural circuit in the human brain."

But Barrett said her studies found this "natural kind" model to be an insufficient explanation of emotion and its effects. In response, she developed the conceptual act model, which incorporates psychological and neuroscience findings from rats, primates and humans, and explains "the mechanisms that produce the range and variety of behavioral and introspective instances that we call 'emotion.'"

Her studies include focus on the processes by which language and conceptual knowledge for emotion leads people to categorize their own or other people's affective responses as anger, sadness, fear and so on -- emotions as conceptual acts.

"The conceptual act model asks different – and perhaps better – questions about what emotions are and how they function in mental and physical health," she said.

Boston College Psychology Department chairman Prof. James Russell called the NIH award a "fabulous achievement" for Barrett. "It reflects her many accomplishments," he said, as well as the excellence of the lab she has established at BC and on the general environment at the University in which major research can take place.

Barrett joined the BC faculty in 1996 and is director of the Interdisciplinary Affective Science Laboratory. She earned a Distinguished Faculty Research Award from the University in 2001. She is a fellow of the American Psychological Association, the Association for Psychological Science, and the Society for Personality and Social Psychology. Her other honors include the Society for Experimental Social Psychology Career Trajectory Award and fellowships from the American Philosophical Society and the Association for Psychological Science. Barrett also holds appointments at Harvard Medical School and Massachusetts General Hospital.

In 2002, she was awarded an Independent Scientist Research (K02) Award from the National Institute of Mental Health. In addition to the Pioneer Award, Barrett's lab is currently funded by the National Institute of Aging and the National Science Foundation.

More information on Barrett is available via her Web site:
www.bc.edu/schools/cas/psych/faculty_staff/barrett.html

More information on the NIH Director's Pioneer Awards:
<http://nihroadmap.nih.gov/pioneer>

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