Fall 2025 ECON 339
Intro to Behavioral Economics

Time: Mon.Wed. 2:30–3:45
Classroom: KJ 102
Office Hours: Mon 4-4:50 pm, Tue 9-10:50, and by appointment

Instructor: Prof. Wei Zhan
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Course Description:

Behavioral Economics is a growing field in Economics that integrates insights from psychology and other social sciences into economics. This course covers recent advances in behavioral economics by reviewing some of the assumptions made in mainstream economics models, discussing how human behavior systematically depart from these standard assumptions, and examining a range of implications of behavioral economics to public policy. Topics include desires for altruism and reciprocity, the influence of social norms on decisions, framing and reference point effects, salience and emotional cues, problems of self-control, and more. Students participate in surveys and experiments in class, review evidence from lab and field experiments, examine how the results could be integrated into economics models, and apply what they've learned to everyday lives. The goal is to be able to understand the world through the lens of behavioral economics at the end of the course.

Readings:

Assigned readings include: chapters from Nudge, by Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein; chapters from Thinking, Fast and Slow, by Daniel Kahneman; and journal articles.

I have tried to limit the readings as much as possible, which was very painful given the number of fabulous papers I had to eliminate. All readings are required unless noted otherwise. I will post all readings on Blackboard. You are strongly encouraged to read the paper and book chapters prior to class.

Course Requirements:

This class is in person lecture-based. I expect students to come to all class meetings and to be on time. Please have the assigned reading finished prior to the class period that we will be discussing it. Some of the articles may be a bit on the technical side, and sometimes I will tell you to skip or skim certain sections. You will have two in-class exams, three one page thought pieces assignments, and a final research proposal. The research proposal will be an idea for an experiment incorporating concepts we have learned in class, though you do not necessarily have to carry out this research proposal. Late assignments are accepted only with prior approval.

Class Surveys and Experiments will be run using Moblab. You will be required to purchase a Moblab account (current cost is $25). You can find instructions for Moblab on Blackboard.

Laptop policy. You many use laptops/tablets/Cell Phones for note taking and class surveys/experiments only.

Students with Disabilities: Hamilton College will make reasonable accommodations for students with properly documented disabilities. If you are eligible to receive an accommodation(s) and would like to make a formal request for this course, please discuss it with me as soon as possible. You will need to provide Allen Harrison, Assistant Dean for Accessibility Resources (aharriso@hamilton.edu) with appropriate documentation of your disability.

Grading and Evaluation:

Assignments	10 %	three one-pager thought pieces
Participation	20 %	presentations, class experiments, class discussions, and pop quizzes
Exam 1	25 %	10/8, in class
Exam 2	25 %	11/19 in class
Final Research Proposal	20 %	Due 12/16 at 11:59 PM

Participation:

Engagement in the material and with your classmates is critical to the classroom experience. Please read the assigned papers and book chapters before class and be ready to discuss them. Your participation grade will be determined by attendance, participation in class experiments, participation in classroom discussions, presentations, and pop quizzes.

Students will present one 5 minute news presentation on a current news or article. The goal is to add breadth and real-world context to the course. The topics need not match the current topic being discussed in class but should be related to behavioral economics. I will ask students to end with one thoughtful discussion question. These presentations will be graded. A signup sheet will be circulated in the first week of class.

Final Paper/Project:

In lieu of a final exam, you will do a policy proposal on a topic of your choice in which you identify a problem of interest to you and then write up a discussion of potential policy solutions that informed by behavioral economics. This can be done individually or as a small group (2-3 individuals). More details will be given in class at a later date.

Tentative Seminar Schedule: Topics and readings are subject to revision.

Week 1 **Introduction**	9/1: Syllabus and Introduction (No readings for the first class) 9/3: A perspective on psychology and economics (Rabin 2002); Optional: The impact of computer usage on academic performance (Carter et al. 2017); Laptops Are Great...(Dynarski 2017)
Week 2 **Present-Bias, Self-Control and Procrastination**	9/8,9/10: Intertemporal Choice (Chabris et al. 2008)
Week 3 **Inter-temporal Choice**	9/15: Saving and Future Self (Hershfield et al., 2011) 9/17: Resisting Temptation (Chapter 2, Nudge); Procrastination (Ariely and Wertenbroch 2003)
Week 4 **Social Preferences**	9/22: Camerer and Fehr (2003) 9/24: Intrinsic Motivation (Kreps 1997)
Week 5 **Social Preferences and Risk Preferences**	9/29: Fine is Price (Gneezy and Rustichini 2000) 10/1: No readings assigned

Week 6 **Exam 1 and review**	10/6: Review 10/8: **Exam I, in class**
Week 7 **Prospect Theory Endowment Effect**	10/13: Prospect Theory (Chapter 25 and 26, Thinking, Fast and Slow) 10/15: Endowment Effect
Week 8 **Framing**	10/20: class canceled (conference) 10/22: Framing and Insurance Decisions (Johnson et al. 1993)
Week 9 **Choice Under Uncertainty Defaults**	10/27: Heuristics (no readings assigned) 10/29: Defaults and organ donation (Johnson and Goldstein 2003); Defaults for retirement saving (Beshears et al. 2009)
Week 10 **Complexity**	11/3: Complexity 11/5: Complexity (EIEC Field Experiment Bhargava and Manoli 2015)
Week 11 **Choice Architecture**	11/10: No class (Conference). You can meet with your group to work on your final policy proposal 11/13: Choice Architecture (Nudge, Chapter 4 and 5)
Week 12 **Exam II**	11/17: Review 11/19: **Exam II** (in class)
Week 13 **Applying Behavioral Economics in Policy Making**	12/1, 12/3: Duarte and Hastings (2012); Behavioral Informed Regulation (Barr et.al., 2012)
Week 14 **Other topics**	12/8: TBA (Gender Study or Scarcity) 12/10: In class group project
Week 15	12/16: **Final paper due at 11:59 PM**