# Wei Ji Ma Lab at New York University

# Statement on lab culture and expectations

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*This statement describes lab culture and expectations (both the ones that I have of you and the ones that you can have of me). It also describes what mentoring looks like in the lab, human aspects of our work, and what the lab can offer you in terms of professional development. In green, the parts that I believe are more “unique” to our lab or that I consider particularly important; you might want to read these parts extra carefully. I have incorporated great ideas from lab members, from other labs (including the writings of* [*Mariam Aly*](https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-018-06167-w) *and* [*Tony Ricci*](https://riccilab.stanford.edu/lab-life/#expectations)*), as well as from a mentoring course taught by Yael Niv and Laura Murray. This document will always be in progress and feedback is welcome. -- Weiji*

# The lab community

### Lab culture

* We strive for a welcoming space where people can bring their whole selves to work. Everyone in the lab should be kind, respectful, and supportive of each other.
* I see the work we do as collective. In the lab, we never compete with each other, but we try to lift each other up. I also think this is a good attitude in the broader scientific community, but it is sometimes hard to not get carried away by the many competitive elements of scientific careers.
* I expect everyone to participate in the lab’s academic events (lab meeting, interest group meetings, external presentations by lab members) to the best of their ability. Participation is not just attending but also paying attention and in internal events, asking questions and commenting.
* Show interest in and learn about your lab colleagues’ work. This can be done informally, such as stopping by someone’s desk and asking them what they are up to. This will also benefit yourself.
* I value open and direct communication. Please feel free to disagree with me at any time, and to bring up when you think that things I do are problematic.

### Social events

* We value social life as a part of a strong lab community. We organize many activities with the lab, and I encourage your participation. I commit to help fund social events, support those who organize them, and sometimes organize them myself. At the same time, participation is always optional and not participating will not reflect negatively on you in any way. If you have obstacles to participation, please let me know and we can see if we can address those obstacles.
* Please don’t wait for me to organize social events! Feel free to suggest something yourself, organize it, and ask me for funding.
* We have a lab retreat every year (outside of pandemics). We rent a house a couple hours away from the city and do a mix of work and social activities (beach, board games, teaching each other things, etc.). People take turns (in pairs) to cook breakfast and dinner. The lab pays for all expenses.

### Work-life balance

* Very important: I expect you **to not work all the time**. It is important to sleep and rest enough, take breaks during the day, take vacations, manage family responsibilities, have hobbies, and have a social life. Doing science should never be at the expense of everything else.
* Work hours are flexible and you are responsible for organizing your time such that your work gets done, but I can help you think about the organization.
* You are generally expected to be available for meetings scheduled in regular work hours, but exceptions will be respected.
* You are not expected to work or respond during evenings, weekends, or holidays; however, right before external deadlines (such as for conferences or grants), I might ask you to make an exception. You can still say no.
  + If I send you emails during evenings, weekends, or holidays, I do not expect you to reply until normal work hours. I will not text or call you about work outside normal work hours.
* As a lab, we highly value being active beyond our scientific work to improve the local or broader academic community, to communicate science to the general public, and to use science to help shape policy. I participate in many such activities myself, I encourage you to consider participating in such activities, and I am always happy to talk about them.  
  A few local organizations:
  + Outreach: [BraiNY](https://www.comebebrainy.com/), [NOGN](https://med.nyu.edu/departments-institutes/neuroscience/neuroscience-institute-the-community/public-outreach-science-education), [Neuwrite](https://www.neuwrite.org/neuwrite-nyu)
  + [Scientist Action and Advocacy Network](http://www.scaan.net)
  + [Graduate student union](https://makingabetternyu.org/)
  + [Neuroscience Predoctoral Interest League](https://nyu-neuropil.github.io/)
  + [March for Science NYC](https://marchforsciencenyc.com/)

### Holidays

Lab holidays will be a superset of federal and NYU holidays.

What does it mean for the lab to be on holiday?

1. All lab events are cancelled.
2. All individual meetings are cancelled.
3. I do not have any expectations that you will do work. Work includes replying to emails or Slack messages. Of course, you are not forbidden to do work.
4. I might still send you emails or Slack messages when I have thoughts or questions, but you should feel free to ignore those.
5. If you send me an email, Slack message, or text message, I will generally be delayed in responding.

### My weaknesses

I recognize certain weaknesses in myself that I am trying to work on and that might be useful for you to be aware of. You can help me improve by giving me feedback.

* I often set unrealistic timelines for projects, which can be very frustrating for others. This is in part due to hopeless optimism, in part because I am too far removed from the actual work. Please protest when you think this might be happening, so that we can set more realistic timelines.
* I don’t always speak my positive feedback out loud. I have a tendency to focus on next steps and what can be improved in a project, but I have the highest regard for the work of each of you.
* For deadlines (such as recommendation letters), I need lots of reminders. I am a huge procrastinator. Please don’t hesitate to give me those deadlines.
* Relatedly, I can take way too long to give you feedback on a paper draft. Please give me a concrete deadline (within two weeks) and remind me.
* I am often late to meetings. This is a scheduling problem; I schedule too little time in between meetings, or I have (in the pandemic) life things coming up during work. Please don’t take it personally.
* I have a tendency to micromanage, e.g. dictate the font sizes in your figures. When this happens, tell me to back off.
* Not necessarily a weakness but more a matter of style: in scientific discussions, you should consider my opinions to be temporary and open to change. I often take a position without being sure, just in order to advance the discussion. Sometimes, others will convince me that I am wrong, sometimes I change my mind myself, and sometimes I simply forget my earlier opinion. To me, this frequent changing of mind is an integral part of the scientific process, but I realize it can come across as inconsistent or volatile.

I encourage you to check out the following resources on “Mentoring up”, both in Ma Lab Resources/Professional Development/Mentorship:

* Handout by the McGraw Center for Teaching and Learning
* *Making the Most of Mentors: A Guide for Mentees* (2009)

### No-guilt policy

When you feel you don’t meet expectations (someone else’s or your own), it is easy to feel guilty. Sometimes, people fall into a vicious cycle of feeling guilty, avoiding the work that makes them feel guilty, getting less done, and feeling more guilty. I am personally very familiar with this and I still experience such feelings all the time. Guilt can make any suboptimal situation worse. As much as possible, we will enact a no-guilt policy: we will do everything we can to reduce the chances of you feeling guilty, and if you do, we will talk about the underlying causes. Why didn’t you manage to do everything that you wanted to do: were my or your own expectations too high/unrealistic? Did you have personal circumstances? Did you simply need a break? Are you struggling with procrastination (like me), and if so, what can we potentially do together to help with that? (E.g. daily 5-minute meetings, working-together arrangements.) Some potentially helpful resources on the topic of guilt:

* [Lab brainstorm on guilt (July 21, 2021)](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1m-KXyXDDolVaNQviOt6vV8WdTFkrykUaZhDFQXh4XXI/edit?usp=sharing): we did an inventory of what we feel guilty about, and why
* [Susan Krauss Whitbourne (2012), The definitive guide to guilt](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/fulfillment-any-age/201208/the-definitive-guide-guilt)
* [Edward Kubany and Susan Watson (2003), Guilt: elaboration of a multidimensional model](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Edward-Kubany-2/publication/265408861_Guilt_Elaboration_of_a_multidimensional_model/links/54b80ec50cf269d8cbf6c4f1/Guilt-Elaboration-of-a-multidimensional-model.pdf)

### Resolving conflicts and tensions

Despite our best efforts, conflicts or tensions can arise. Primarily, I hope that we can resolve conflicts and tensions directly with each other, by de-escalating, listening to each other, and taking a step back from what caused the conflict.

Problems in relationships tend to be easier to solve before they fester, and I am always available to listen, provide advice, and mediate if useful. I encourage you to talk to me if you have issues with a fellow lab member.

Outside of the lab, there are other resources, which are particularly useful if your conflict or tension is with me. If you are a PhD student, the members of your thesis committee and the Director of Graduate Studies are your main resources. They could advise you confidentially, and in some cases might mediate. If you are not a PhD student, your best bet is to seek out a trusted faculty member other than me. Sometimes, previous mentors can be very helpful in a consulting capacity, but if they don’t know me and are in a different institution, that limits what they can do. You could also approach the Director of Graduate Studies, who often cares about the lab environment more broadly, or the Department Chair (Marjorie Rhodes in Psychology and Andre Fenton in CNS).

# The flow of work

### Meetings

* Individual meetings have many purposes. In a meeting, we discuss how the project is going, but also how you are doing personally. The work part will often take the form of you presenting new results in figure form. But there are many reasons why you might have no new results - e.g. you didn’t feel well, you were struggling with debugging your code, or you didn’t feel motivated. That is ok. We can talk about any difficulties in the meeting if you want, and I will not judge you.
* The default individual meeting schedule right now is once every two weeks for 40 minutes. Additional meetings are as needed.
* As an alternative, we are trying an experimental meeting schedule of 5 minutes each day. You might benefit from this if you know more or less what to do and you just want frequent check-ins to keep the momentum.
* Meetings can be short! In fact, shorter meetings are generally better.
* *​​With an early-stage PhD student, I had the habit of checking in daily because they were new to computational modeling. One day, they just asked me to let them be "on a longer leash", i.e. give them more space to learn independently. It was a useful reminder that frequency of interactions needs to be customized to the individual mentee (and to the stage of the individual).*

### Project progress

* In a project, I will usually provide high-level supervision: my views on why we are doing the project, where we are heading, and how we get there. I will also discuss publication strategy, e.g. which journal to submit a paper to, or when to post it as a preprint to be in time for a talk or application.
* You can also expect me to know and care about the details of your project. I might, however, need a reminder, and I might not be able to give as useful feedback.
* I will generally not have time to check all your code or re-analyze your data. I will trust you that you do everything you can do to reduce the probability of bugs, such as checking the code line by line, clean programming, rewriting from scratch if needed, inserting assertions, and having someone else look at your code.
* As you have been part of the lab for longer, you are expected to gradually take ownership of your project and see it through to completion or to well-considered abandonment.
* Be prepared that projects can take a long time, with 2-3 years being typical.

### Dealing with mistakes

* Despite our best efforts, mistakes happen and we have to be open about them. Please tell me about any bugs in code or mistakes in analysis that you found. For me, it’s great to hear that you found it and we can think together about the possible consequences and strategies to prevent mistakes in the future. Mistakes are never the end of the world!

### Collaborations

* Collaboration within the lab is strongly encouraged. This can sometimes be in the form of extended consultation of each other’s projects, and sometimes a formal collaboration. Often, a PhD student or undergraduate will be co-supervised by a postdoc. I also strongly encourage you to think about explicit connections with the projects of your lab colleagues; this is a low-threshold way to take a broader perspective of your own project.
* You are welcome to propose new collaborations either inside or outside of the lab, but discuss them with me before you start them. We will take into account progress on other projects, timeline of other projects, your program expectations if you are a PhD student, your career trajectory, and my potential involvement.

### Finishing projects

* Authorship on papers is usually obvious, but the grey area is when smaller contributions warrant authorship. I expect that all authors contribute to the ideas in a project. As a concrete proxy for such contributions, I expect that for a lab member to be an author, they attend (and speak in) the project meetings from the moment they are brought onto the project. Sometimes, you ask someone (in or outside of the lab) for help several times and they are interested in the project; then, they can be brought on board as an author. If someone “only” assists with data collection without a broader intellectual input, then that is usually an acknowledgement in the paper, not authorship.
  + [CRediT](http://credit.niso.org/) is a system for recognizing contributions to a paper, and we can use it as a guide to discuss authorship. For lab members, some combination of conceptualization, formal analysis, methodology, and writing is usually required to be an author.
* When a project is finished can be a difficult question, and it depends on what journal we are aiming for. I will discuss this with you on a case-by-case basis, and you are welcome to bring it up yourself. *A previous PhD student thought that their project was done and the paper should be submitted as it was. To convince me, they brought up five arguments in a meeting. That worked. They then mentioned that they had figured out that I would certainly be convinced with five arguments, but not necessarily with fewer. They might have known me better than I did myself!*
* Your thesis should have enough material for 2-3 papers. Those papers do not have to be published or even submitted, but often, at least one is. Usually, the thesis has 3 content chapters, preceded by an introduction chapter and followed by a discussion chapter. If you have the contents in near-final form, count 2-3 months of full-time work to finish the thesis.

# Professional development

### Mentoring others

Postdocs will generally mentor graduate students. Graduate students will sometimes mentor undergraduates. Mentoring others is useful in many ways: often, you understand something better when you explain it to someone else; later in your career, you will often have to mentor, so it is good to get practice; mentoring practices listening to others and putting yourself in their shoes, which makes you a better collaborator (and human being). If you formally mentor someone in their project, you can be a co-author on papers and presentations that come out of that project. I commit to giving you guidance on how to develop as a mentor. You are never obligated to mentor others, but I would strongly encourage it.

### Conferences

The lab pays for PhD students and postdocs to attend up to two conferences a year if they present at those conferences. For research attendance and undergraduates, conference attendance is decided on a case-by-case basis.

### Seminars etc.

There are many seminar series and journal clubs that will help you feel part of the broader academic community and give you a bigger perspective on the field. You can impossibly attend all of them, so choose according to your interests. The only recurring event that I expect everyone to attend is the Concepts and Categories (ConCats) seminar.

### Growing up in Science

### If you want to explore the human side of doing science more, you might want to check out the [Growing up in Science](http://www.growingupinscience.org) series. In each event, one faculty member shares their life story, with a focus on struggles, failures, doubts, detours, and weaknesses. Common topics include dealing with expectations (your own and others), impostor syndrome, procrastination, the role of luck, rejection, and conflicts with advisors, but these topics are always embedded in the speaker's broader narrative. We also feature speakers who have left academia - e.g. academic editors, data scientists, and even a screenwriter. The series has themed events on mentorship, anti-racism, work-life balance, and other topics. Attendance is optional. Growing up in Science has many videos of past events on its [Youtube channel](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCgIzTiEODRtQWX6zEu_Y3fA/playlists).

### Your next career stage

You can expect me (and to a lesser extent, the rest of the lab) to help prepare you for your next career stage. Talk to me early and often about your next steps; this can already start the moment you join the lab. I can help you think about career paths and introduce you to others to talk to. Once it is time to take concrete steps, I will write a recommendation letter, discuss with you the application, interview, and negotiation process for your next position (especially if it is academic), listen to and give feedback on practice talks, and give feedback on written statements. I will also provide you with resources, such as Research Statements by previous lab members who applied for faculty positions, or Personal Statements by previous lab members who applied for graduate programs (shared with their permission, of course). Many of these resources are in the Ma Lab Resources/Professional Development Google Drive folder.

### Leaving the lab

For many reasons, you might consider leaving the lab. Maybe this type of research is not what you are looking for, maybe you are considering a career switch, maybe your interests have changed, or maybe you don’t like the lab culture. Don’t keep this to yourself but discuss it with me. I will not take it personally and I will do my best to help you. I might introduce you to others. I might help you reflect on the various options. If you decide to leave, we will discuss how you can potentially still get a paper out of your work in the lab.

### Lifelong mentorship

My role as a mentor does not end the moment you leave the lab. Recommendation letters aside, you should always feel free to ask me for advice or just let me know how you are doing. I am still in regular touch with my own past mentors. One circumstance in which I could be helpful is if you are in a difficult or sensitive situation in your new job, and you want an outside, confidential perspective.