

Summer 2010, 9-11:30 am  
Instructor: Kathryn Young  
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Office Hours: MW 1-2:30 pm  
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## TOPICS IN PSYCHOLOGY

### COURSE DESCRIPTION

This highly interactive course is an introduction to psychological theory and methods, with a particular focus on social interaction and human cognition. We'll survey important areas in social psychology, including collective action, conformity, self-presentation, mass media and persuasion, authority and obedience, prejudice, stress, interpersonal influence, motivation, memory, and decision-making. Material will be drawn from a wide variety of sources, including key theoretical and empirical works, popular media, short lectures, class experiments, and hands-on research projects.

Research techniques, including experimental methods, participant-observation, ethics, and causal inference will be covered as well. Students will learn to formulate a research question, conduct a literature search, design a study, and write a compelling proposal. We'll also think about the ways in which psychology might be useful in understanding and improving the social world, including politics, education, law, art, sports, or other areas of particular interest to students.

### PARTICIPATION

Because this is such a short course, we will move quickly through the material. You should come to each class prepared to engage actively in discussion. Readings are due the day for which they are assigned—if a reading is listed under “July 2,” that means you need to read it prior to the July 2 class. Please pay attention to *which pages* are assigned. Sometimes you will only be required to read *part* of an article or chapter.

### CONTACTING THE INSTRUCTOR

I'll hold office hours on Mondays and Wednesdays, 1 to 2:30 pm. You can also make an appointment to see me another time. Feel free to drop by office hours just to chat, even if you don't have a specific question. If you need to reach me quickly, email is fastest. Additionally, I will organize (entirely optional) small-group coffee chats as a way of getting to know each other and discussing non-course topics that might interest you (college life, college admissions, where to get the best yogurt on campus, etc.).

### MATERIALS

The central text for this class, and the only one you'll need to buy, is Elliott Aronson's *The Social Animal* (10<sup>th</sup> Ed., 2007). We'll end up reading most of it by the time the course is over, although we'll skip around a bit. The other readings will be available online or handed out in class, and will include articles, studies, websites, advertisements, audio and video clips, and book excerpts. Some of these sources are listed in the working syllabus below.

# SYLLABUS

## I. INDIVIDUAL BEHAVIOR

### Class 1. Self- Presentation

- Intro and course overview: What is psychology?
- Understanding and constructing the self
  - Reading from Goffman's *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*
  - Impression management
- Intro to norms and conformity (a topic to which we'll return later in the course)
- Observation activity

### Class 2. Psychological Perception

- Parts of the brain
- Senses
  - Synesthesia video and simulation
- Memory
  - Recovered memory and eyewitness testimony (activity)
- Self-perception
  - Cognitive dissonance
  - Fundamental attribution error
    - Readings from *Mistakes Were Made, But Not By Me*
- Attention and its effects (readings from Winifred Gallagher's *Rapt*)

### Class 3. Decision-Making

- Role of the subconscious
  - Readings from *Blink* by Malcolm Gladwell
- Role of emotions
  - What is "intuition?"
  - Loss aversion
  - Readings from *How We Decide* by Jonah Lehrer
- Does more information lead to better decisions?
  - Jeans-buying simulation
  - Readings from *The Paradox of Choice* by Barry Schwartz

### Class 4. Social Cognition

- Social Schemas
  - Role schemas; event schemas, person schemas, self schemas
  - Schema activity
- Interpreting "success" and "failure"
  - Fixed and growth mindsets
  - Readings from *Mindset* by Carol Dweck
- Entitlement and agency
  - Social class and interaction style
  - Annette Lareau's "Invisible Inequality: Social Class and Childrearing"
- Role of personality in social cognition; personality test/activity

## II. SOCIAL SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH METHODS

### Class 5. Social Scientific Methods

- Quantitative methods
  - Independent and dependent variables
  - Basic stats—distribution of the mean, significance testing.
  - Hypothesis formation
  - Experimental design
- Qualitative methods
  - Participant-observation research (possible guest lecture from Monica McDermott)
  - Interview research
- How to choose a research method
  - Group activity

### Class 6. Social Scientific Methods, Continued

- Causal inference
  - Causation versus correlation
  - Using causal inference in qualitative research methods
- Research ethics and IRBs
- Explanation of final project for the class
- How to write a research proposal
  - Components of a proposal
  - Literature review (including overview of web and library resources)
  - Workshop activity

## III. GROUP BEHAVIOR

### Class 7. Social Status and Social Influence

- What is status? Where does it come from?
  - Status characteristics theory
  - Status and traits (Paul DiMaggio's work)
- Expectation states theory
  - Readings from Cecilia Ridgeway's work on small group interactions
  - Expectations' effect on behavior and perception
  - Influence within groups

### Class 8. Power and Persuasion

- Mass communication and propaganda
  - Readings from *Age of Propaganda* by Aronson and Pratkanis
  - Advertisement activity
- Power and Authority
  - Types of authority
  - Zimbardo's prison experiment video and field trip
- Obedience
  - Stanley Milgram's work; Tyler's "Why People Obey the Law"

### Class 9. Group behavior and decision-making

- Conformity:
  - The bystander effect
  - When is conformity good?
- Deviance
- Group versus individual decision-making and accuracy of estimates
- Collective action
  - Social movements video
  - Readings from *Smart Mobs*
- Group dynamics
- Jury simulation activity

## **IV. ATTITUDES AND BELIEFS**

### Class 10. Bias and Prejudice

- Individual bias
  - Video clip from “Crash”
  - Physical traits, perceptions of criminality, and the work of Jennifer Eberhardt and Larry Bobo
- Systemic bias
  - Gender and the wage gap
  - Race and criminal justice
  - *McCleskey v. Kemp* and the Baldus study
- Possibilities for change

### Class 11. Justice and Morality

- Perceptions of fairness and justice
  - Readings (and possible guest mini-lecture) from Karen Cook
  - Studies regarding monetary divisions (from *How We Decide*)
- Moral systems
- Altruism and prosocial behavior
- Cultural relativism
  - Rural versus urban life and social cohesion
  - International studies about justice and altruism

### Class 12. Love and Hate

- Attraction
  - Types of love
  - Romantic love; love as attachment; theories of love
  - Standards of beauty, readings from Sircello’s *A New Theory of Beauty*
- Aggression
  - Theories of aggression; biology of aggression; aggression and culture
- Presentation of preliminary research ideas for class feedback; written feedback on small group papers.

## V. HOW CAN PSYCHOLOGY IMPROVE OUR LIVES?

### Class 13. Psychology and Public Policy

- Guest speaker: Shelley Correll, social psychologist and advisor to President Obama on policy regarding women and girls
- Psychology and the public arena
  - When should social science be used to shape policy?
  - Excerpts from Tom Tyler, *Why People Obey the Law*
  - Psychology, lawmaking, and testimony
  - Using psychology to increase civic participation
- First half of research proposal presentations

### Class 14. Social Psychology and Everyday Life

- Class brunch
- Reflection on the course
- Using social psychology to improve decision-making
- Psychology, stress, health, and well-being
- Second half of research proposal presentations
- Going forward
  - Studying psychology in college
  - Careers in psychology

## SAMPLE ASSIGNMENTS

### **Course Blogs**

Students will be divided into groups of 3-4 at the beginning of the course based on their extracurricular interests (sports, music, etc). Each group will maintain a blog about how the ideas, covered in the course relate to their subject area. This website will remain a touchstone throughout the course, and will be the site of several small assignments.

In one assignment, students will be asked to blog about a social structure or institution within their chosen topic, and to speculate about how expectation states theory or status characteristics theory functions within that structure or institution. For example, a sports blog group might write about how age or batting averages operate as status characteristics on a baseball team, and how this effects team dynamics. Another assignment will require students to work in groups and formulate a research question related to their blog's topic. They will then collect and analyze two different kinds of data—one qualitative, one quantitative—related to the question. (This assignment will also function as a warm-up to the final paper.) Students from other groups will be assigned to comment.

Blogs can be a useful teaching tool because they allow students to work individually or collaboratively, to interact through a wide variety of media, to work at their own pace, to write informally about academic topics, and to comment on each others' ideas.

## Research Proposal

In their final paper for this course, students will write a research proposal of 5-7 pages (excluding citations). Detailed instructions for the proposal will be given in class, and students will have an opportunity to work on parts of the proposal with TAs during afternoon study periods, as well as to meet with me during office hours, and to discuss the project with their classmates. Components of the proposal include:

- Background and literature review
  - What studies have been done on this topic? What approaches have these scholars taken? What holes in the literature remain to be filled?
- Research question (explained in enough detail to get someone intelligent, but uninformed about your topic, up to speed)
- Justification/motivation
  - How does your project differ from the existing literature? How is your project suited to answer (or ask) a new question?
  - Why should anyone care about your project?
- Methodology
  - Detailed explanation of the methodology you intend to use. Include interview schedules, sample fieldnotes, surveys, etc., in an appendix if you'd like.
  - Justify your choice of methodology. Why did you choose this approach for your topic? What are some advantages and disadvantages of your choice?
  - What challenges does your methodology present? How will you overcome them?
  - Research timeline
- Initial results and discussion
  - We'll discuss this more in class, but some of you will be in a position to start collecting data. If so, discuss your initial findings.

## Teaching Assistants

I envision teaching assistants helping students during the afternoon sessions in a wide variety of ways. For one, students will use them as resources in developing topics for their research proposals. TAs can help students formulate and narrow down their topics, locate and use library and web resources, and talk through various methodologies. Additionally, they can assist with blogs, group facilitation, and help me lead field trips.

Because they work so closely with students, TAs are extraordinarily helpful sources of feedback for an instructor. I will rely on them to let me know how students are progressing, how challenging students find the reading and assignments, and so on.

In my own experience, working as a TA has often been a source of enjoyment and intellectual development; it's important to me that my TAs have a good experience. I'll meet with them regularly to see how they're doing, hear their ideas about the course, and talk with them about teaching techniques.