

# PSYD15H3: Current topics in Social Psychology - The Psychology of Empathy.

Fall 2012

## **Course**

PSYD15H3: Current Topics in Social Psychology

Class Time and Location: Monday 11:00am – 13:00pm, AA208

Website: <https://portal.utoronto.ca/webapps/portal/frameset.jsp>

## **Instructors**

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Office Hours: Thursday 1pm-2pm or by appt

## **Course Description**

Questions like “Are humans inherently selfish or are we born to love each other?” “Do we help others for personal gain or for altruistic reasons?” and “How do we understand other’s intentions and feelings?” were asked and debated by philosophers and lay people for centuries. Recently, however, new psychological methodologies and techniques have allowed researchers to empirically explore the answers to these questions. In this class, we will discuss psychological research that addresses questions related to empathy – the natural capacity to share, understand and respond to the inner states of others. Assignments will focus on critical thinking about research findings and applying knowledge in a writing assignment.

The **general goals and objectives** of the course are to help students:

1. Learn and gain mastery over basic facts, research findings, terminology, principles, and theories important in the social psychology of empathy.
2. Practice and develop critical thinking skills, written and oral communications skills.
3. Analyze current issues and controversies in the field of social psychology.

Given the upper level and seminar format of this course, the main objective will be to expose you to new ideas, and to encourage you to develop and expand the way you think about and express your own ideas. In pursuit of these goals, a large portion of class time will be spent discussing ideas with your classmates. These discussions will be supplemented by in-class videos, demonstrations, and activities to promote the learning and application of course material. You should read the assigned papers prior to coming to class and give the material careful thought, as doing so will facilitate our class discussions and your understanding of the material. Asking questions and making comments during class is highly encouraged.

**Class Website:** Blackboard will be the course website. Here, you can obtain copies of the syllabus, assigned readings, relevant articles and web links. Although any changes in the course schedule or class location will be announced in class, they will also be posted as

announcements on Blackboard, and therefore I recommend you check this website frequently, especially if you must miss a class.

**Assigned Reading:** The readings for this class will be comprised of journal articles, book chapters or news articles that are related to course topics. I will post these articles on the course Blackboard website.

**Writing:** A goal of this course is to build on students' competency in academic writing skills and to extend those skills through the instruction of normal writing standards in the discipline of psychology. Written assignments will require coherent, logical, and carefully edited prose. In order to do well in the writing assignment you will have to demonstrate higher-level critical thinking skills such as analysis and synthesis. Your writing will be graded and commented upon and become part of the assigned grade. I will provide evaluation criteria for the writing assignment during class and on blackboard later in the term. There will be ample time for questions about the evaluation criteria prior to the due date. If you have concerns about your preparedness for the writing demands of this course, please see me during office hours and I will try my best to help you and I will also point you to additional resources that can help you to build your writing skills.

**Late Assignments:** All discussion questions are due at 9am the day of the class, and the final paper is due at the start of the final class (11am Monday December 3<sup>rd</sup>). Late discussion questions will not be accepted. Late assignments will be accepted with a penalty of 10% for every day (after 11am Monday morning counts as a day) that the assignment is late.

## Grading System

The following cutoffs will be used to determine your final grade:

<b>Class Facilitation</b>	<b>20%</b>
<b>Participation</b>	<b>20%</b>
50% In Class Participation	
50% Discussion Questions	
<b>Debate</b>	<b>20%</b>
<b>Research Proposal</b>	<b>40%</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>

Grade	Percentage	Definition
A+	90-100	Excellent
A	85-89	
A-	80-84	
B+	77-79	Good
B	73-76	
B-	70-72	
C+	67-69	Adequate
C	63-66	
C-	60-62	
D+	57-59	Marginal
D	53-56	
D-	50-52	
F	0-49	Inadequate

**Class Facilitation:** Once during the semester, you and a partner will serve as class facilitators. Class facilitation should include two components: 1) Clearly and concisely describe the main ideas and findings from your article by giving a short (no longer than 12 minutes) PowerPoint presentation), and 2) facilitate discussion through discussion questions. Given the size of the groups, these two tasks should be broken down so that each group member shows that they were actively involved with their group and can demonstrate mastery of the material. The discussion leaders will come into class prepared to lead and guide the discussion so that the discussion is fluid, lively, and interesting for all the students in the class. I encourage all leaders to be creative by incorporating class activities (e.g. breaking class into small groups to discuss different perspectives of the readings) and multimedia into their discussions. Though not required, familiarity with other relevant readings will help you develop “expertise” on your topic. Leaders also should prepare questions to help guide class discussion.

**Class Participation and Attendance** In a seminar-style class, attendance is expected and participation is essential. Your participation grade will depend on quality as well as quantity of participation. I will keep a record of participation throughout the term. Signs of good

participation includes: Attendance, punctuality, eagerness to participate, showing respect to others' contributions, paying careful attention to classmates' presentations, and offering constructive feedback, questions, and comments. Please note that I do not want class discussions monopolized by the same 3 or 4 people. That means that people should make an effort to talk enough, but not too much.

**Discussion Questions:** In order to facilitate critical thinking about the readings, students are required to submit 2 discussion questions before each class to which readings are assigned. (Prepare one question for each article). You don't need to do this for all of the classes, only the 6 classes you're most interested in (excluding the week you are leading the discussion. These discussion questions should be thoughtful responses to the readings, not requests for clarifications (although you are welcome to ask clarifications questions in addition to your discussion questions). In forming your discussion questions you may want to consider practical implications of the findings, challenge conclusions, or relate the reading to other topics. Discussion Questions make up 50% of your participation mark.

**Debate:** We will have 4 different debates on controversial topics (See course schedule for specific topics and dates). At the beginning of the term we will split up the class into groups of six and assign one of the four topics to the groups. Each group will then split in half so 3 people will be assigned to argue for one side of the debate and 3 to argue for the other. At the beginning of the debate each group will have the opportunity to present their arguments using a PowerPoint presentation. Each argument has to be backed up by empirical findings (including citations of peer-reviewed psychological journals). Following the presentations, both groups will have 5 minutes to prepare their rebuttal. Rebuttals will then be given orally with arguments based on your general knowledge of the topic. In order to come up with good arguments and to be able to give a good rebuttal it is important that you come prepared with a relatively broad knowledge on your topic. A thorough literature review during your preparation is essential and you might find it helpful to also anticipate some of the arguments of the opposing group. Debates will be evaluated based on quality and quantity of the initial arguments and the quality and relevance of the cited sources. The quality of your rebuttal will also be part of your grade.

**Research Proposal:** The research proposal will involve researching a topic of the students' own interest related to the social psychology of empathy, writing a detailed description of a specific model, theory, hypothesis, or phenomenon, reviewing the literature, and writing a research proposal to further examine that model, theory, hypothesis, or phenomenon. Detailed instructions for the research proposal will be provided in class and a grading rubric will be posted on blackboard later in the term.

### **Classroom Expectations**

**Class Participation:** As a special topics seminar, this class is structured primarily around class discussion. Thus, it is imperative that students actively participate in class discussions, activities, and exercises. This will greatly enhance the classroom experience. It will make learning more interactive, more fun, and more personally relevant.

**Use of Electronics:** Turn off cell phones, digital assistants, mp3 players, and/or any device that makes noise during class. Answering a phone call, text messaging, or sending e-mail during class is inappropriate. Also, if you are bringing a laptop to class, only use it for appropriate activities (e.g. taking notes).

**Classroom Civility:** We hope to create an environment where open discussion can happen about topics in psychology. By virtue of this, there are going to be discussions about sensitive topics that individuals will hold differing opinions on. Please respect the opinions and perspectives of your classmates.

**Emails:** All emails you send should include PSYD15 in their title. Expect response within 24 hours (please don't expect me to reply over the weekend. I'll respond to all emails I received till Friday 6pm and then again Monday morning)

**Disabilities:** Academic accommodations are available for students with disabilities who are registered with AccessAbility Services. Students who register and utilize the AccessAbility services will not be identified on their transcript as receiving accommodations. Information disclosed to the service is confidential and is disclosed only with the student's permission. Students in need of disability accommodations should schedule an appointment with me early in the semester to discuss appropriate accommodations for the course. Talking with me well in advance is always better. There is little to nothing that I can do for you after an assignment is due.

**Academic Integrity:** Academic integrity is essential to a positive teaching and learning environment. All students enrolled in University courses are expected to complete coursework responsibilities with fairness and honesty. Failure to do so by seeking unfair advantage over others or misrepresenting someone else's work as your own can result in disciplinary action. The University of Toronto's Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters outlines the behaviours that constitute academic dishonesty and the processes for addressing academic offences.

"Scholastic Dishonesty: Scholastic dishonesty means plagiarizing; cheating on assignments or examinations; engaging in unauthorized collaboration on academic work; taking, acquiring, or using test materials without faculty permission; submitting false or incomplete records of academic achievement; acting alone or in cooperation with another to falsify records or to obtain dishonestly grades, honors, awards, or professional endorsement; altering forging, or misusing a University academic record; or fabricating or falsifying data, research procedures, or data analysis."

In this course, a student responsible for scholastic dishonesty can be assigned a penalty up to and including an "F" or "N" for the course. If you have any questions regarding the expectations for a specific assignment or exam, ask me.

## Course Calendar

Date	Topics	Readings
10-Sept	Introduction	None
17-Sept	Philosophical Perspectives on Empathy	Goldman, 1992
		Churchland, 1991
24-Sept	The Neuroscience of Empathy <i>Debate: Theory Theory vs. Simulation Theory</i>	Decety 2011
		Zaki, Ochsner, 2012
		Ramachandran, edge article
01-Oct	Empathy, Evolution, and Human Nature <i>Debate: Do animals have empathy?</i>	Peston & de Waal, 2002
		Burnstein, Crandall, Kitayama, 1994
08-Oct	Thanks Giving – <b>No Class</b>	
15-Oct	Biased Empathy - Empathy and Helping Behavior across Social Groups.	Weisbuch, Ambady, 2008
		Hein, Silani, Preuschoff et al. 2010
22-Oct	The Empathy-Altruism Hypothesis <i>Debate: Is there such a thing as a truly altruistic behavior?</i>	Cialdini, Brown, Lewis et al., 1997
		Batson & Shaw, 1991
29-Oct	Empathy and morality <i>Debate: Is empathy a moral emotion?</i>	Prinz, 2011,
		Austin, Farrelly, Black, & Moore, 2006
5-Nov	Resonating with each other: Behavioral synchrony, imitation.	Chartrand & Bargh, 1999
		Knoblich,& Sebanz, 2006
12-Nov	Taking the other's perspective: Theory of Mind and Cognitive perspective taking	Vorauer, & Sasaki, 2009
		Flafell, 1999
19-Nov	Data Blitz + How to write a research proposal	No readings
26-Nov	Empathic accuracy and improving empathy	Zaki, Bolger, Ochsner, 2008
		Bartz, et al., 2010
3-Dec	Does evil exist? Empathy disorders, guilt and the law.	Herpertz, Sass, 2000
	<b>Final Proposal Due at the beginning of the class</b>	Blair, 2004

