

Psychology 709-301: Transdiagnostic Processes in Psychopathology

Spring 2012

Mon. 11:00 – 2:00

Solomon Labs, Room C21

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Overview

Psychopathology has traditionally been organized according to clinical syndromes which, despite some utility, have been argued to thwart scientific progress through their heterogeneity, comorbidity, and overlapping features. Even as these syndromes are being revised for *DSM-5*, an alternative approach is gaining momentum in the field. Rather than focusing on syndromes, psychologists increasingly are studying—and treating—basic processes that cut across traditional mental disorder categories. This course explores psychopathology at the level of these processes. We will examine fundamental disruptions in human emotion, cognition, behavior, and interaction that underlie symptoms of mental illness. We will consider how disruptions in these processes are being defined and measured, what methods have been (and could be) used to study them, and how findings from basic research on these mechanisms may be translated into improved interventions. The focus is on rigorously evaluating the transdiagnostic approach to psychopathology and its implications for theory, research, and treatment. You will be challenged not only to become familiar with the existing transdiagnostic literature, but to make your own novel contribution to this literature.

Goals of the Course

In recent years, transdiagnostic theories and treatments have become the “hot new thing” in mental health. The enthusiasm generated by this approach has so far gone largely unchecked, and no serious critiques of its strengths and limitations have yet been published. This opens a window of opportunity, not only to pursue independent study of the transdiagnostic approach, but to contribute to a dialogue that is poised to shape the future of the field. This course consequently is designed to achieve two mutually reinforcing goals:

The first goal is to broaden your views of psychopathology and of critical challenges to be addressed in its classification, investigation, and intervention. You will be asked to think about psychopathology in new ways, to explore fundamental mechanisms of abnormal functioning, and to consider essential features that unite mental disorders as well as features that distinguish them. The aim is to develop, through these experiences, a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of abnormal behavior.

The second goal is to invite you to critically evaluate the transdiagnostic approach and to consider its implications for psychological theory, research, and practice. You will systematically review existing studies, probe unchallenged assumptions, and grapple with questions that have not yet been addressed. Together with your classmates and instructor, you will translate these efforts into a collaborative paper. The aim is to produce a high-quality manuscript that makes a novel, substantive contribution to the literature on the transdiagnostic approach to psychopathology.

Required Readings

All readings will be available electronically on the Blackboard website for this course (<https://courseweb.library.upenn.edu/>) under the link for Course Documents. Readings will be posted as they become available. Please read the assigned readings before the designated class and come prepared to discuss, critique, and debate this material.

Class Format

The success of this course depends heavily on the engagement and participation of all members of the class. The problems that we will be considering are among the most challenging in the field, and genuine progress will require critical thinking and creative solutions. Consequently, this course will follow a seminar format in which student discussion and debate play a central role. Active questioning and open-minded dialogue will help us all to better appreciate and develop increasingly sophisticated views about these complex issues. I look forward to sharing my enthusiasm for this subject matter with you and to revisiting and revising my own views through our class discussions.

Course Outline

A *tentative* list of dates and topics appears at the end of this syllabus, including the readings to be completed before each class. Topics or readings may change, so please check the course Blackboard website for updates throughout the semester.

Evaluation

Class Participation. Given the importance of your regular and active participation in class, both for your learning and for the overall success of the course, a portion of your grade will be based on participation. Your participation grade will be determined jointly by (a) your contributions to class discussions throughout the semester and (b) your efforts in preparing for and leading a portion of the discussion during two class periods. As discussion leader, you will be asked to select one reading that links the topic of the day to our collaborative paper, post the reading on Blackboard at least one week in advance, and lead the class in discussing the reading—and its implications for our paper—during the final hour of class. Class participation will constitute 20% of your course grade.

Reflection Papers. You will be asked to write a brief reflection paper (roughly 3 pages, double-spaced) in response to the readings for each class period. Reflection papers will serve three purposes. First, they will prompt you to contemplate important concepts raised by the readings and to consider where you stand on the issues prior to our class discussion. Second, they will give me a chance to evaluate and provide feedback on your critical thinking about the arguments and evidence presented in the readings. Third, they will ensure that we each come to class with questions, examples, and ideas to serve as a jumping-off point for discussions. You do not need to address every aspect of the readings in your paper; rather, I encourage you to delve deeply into one or more key points raised by the readings, or to themes that cut across the readings, that you found especially interesting or important. Please bring a printed copy of your reflection paper to class. The reflection papers will collectively constitute 20% of your course grade.

Paper Section. As a class, we will write a collaborative paper that seeks to meaningfully advance the field-wide dialogue about the transdiagnostic approach to psychopathology. The goal will be to produce a manuscript that is suitable for publication, although the decision over whether to submit will ultimately be based on the extent of the contribution we can make to the literature. You will be

responsible for writing a section of the paper that explores an area of the transdiagnostic literature which holds particular interest for you. You will be asked to critically review the evidence base, current proposals, and unresolved questions related to your area, applying concepts learned throughout the semester and considering promising directions for future work. Your paper section will be evaluated on both its quality as a stand-alone paper and the quality of its contribution to the collaborative paper. It will be prepared in three stages:

A short list of your paper ideas is due in class on Feb. 27. We will use the written lists as a starting point for in-class discussion to ensure that each student identifies an area of interest and that these will complement one another in forming a continuous, complete paper.

Your paper section is due in class on Apr. 16. It will be read by me and by each of your classmates, then used as the input for collaborative writing as we integrate the paper sections into a coherent whole. The paper section should be approximately 10 pages long, double-spaced, and written in APA style. It will constitute 20% of your course grade.

Your revised paper section with cover letter is due electronically on Apr. 30. The cover letter will describe changes that you have made to (a) improve your paper section in response to feedback and (b) modify the content and style of your paper section to integrate more seamlessly with the others. The revised paper section will constitute 25% of your course grade.

Presentation. You will be asked to give an **in-class presentation on Apr. 16** that summarizes the findings and recommendations of your paper section. The presentation will introduce the class to the area that you reviewed, highlighting major gaps in knowledge, special challenges, and priorities for future research. Following each presentation, we will have time for discussion relating your findings to the areas reviewed by other students and to the paper as a whole. Your presentation grade will be based on both your oral presentation and the subsequent class discussion that you lead on your topic. The final presentation will constitute 15% of your course grade.

Additional Course Information

Course Announcements. Announcements, assignments, and other course information will be circulated via e-mail. Please let me know your preferred e-mail address (if different from your Penn address) and check your e-mail regularly to ensure that these announcements reach you promptly.

Feedback. I am committed to making this course as informative, stimulating, and enjoyable as I can. If there are ways in which we can tailor the course to align more closely with the interests of our class, or if the course is not meeting your expectations or goals, please let me know as soon as possible. The number of relevant topics far exceeds what we can cover in this course, and your feedback will help me focus our inquiry in directions that are most intriguing to you.

TENTATIVE COURSE OUTLINE

Date	Topics	Readings/Assignments
Jan. 23	Limitations of syndromal classification and the need for an alternative approach	<i>Carson (1997)</i> <i>Hyman (2007)</i>
Jan. 30	The transdiagnostic perspective	<i>Harvey et al. (2004), Chapter 1</i> <i>Sanislow et al. (2010)</i> <i>RDoC Project description (web)</i>
Feb. 6	Transdiagnostic approaches to etiology, assessment, and treatment	<i>Nolen-Hoeksema & Watkins (2011)</i> <i>Brown & Barlow (2009)</i> <i>McManus, Shafran, & Cooper (2010)</i>
Feb. 13	Emotion I Fear vs. Anxiety Threat processing	<i>Lang & McTeague (2009)</i> <i>Rauch & Drevets (2009)</i> ***
Feb. 20	Emotion II Approach vs. Anhedonia Reward processing	<i>Kring & Bachorowski (1999)</i> <i>Rottenberg et al. (2002)</i> ***
Feb. 27	Emotion III Arousal Regulation	Paper Ideas due <i>Berenbaum et al. (2003)</i> <i>Kuo & Linehan (2009)</i> ***
Mar. 5	<i>NO CLASS – Spring Break</i>	
Mar. 12	Cognition I Attention Perception	<i>Harvey et al. (2004), Chapter 2</i> <i>Schmidt et al. (2009)</i> ***
Mar. 19	Cognition II Cognitive control Working memory	<i>Lesh et al. (2011)</i> <i>Schweizer & Dalgleish (2011)</i> ***
Mar. 26	Behavior Avoidance Impulsivity	<i>Harvey et al. (2004), Chapter 6</i> <i>Lynam et al. (2000)</i> ***
Apr. 2	Social processes Empathy Attachment	<i>Blair (2005)</i> <i>Hooley et al. (2005)</i> ***
Apr. 9	Unresolved questions and future directions	<i>Hasler et al. (2004)</i> <i>Siegle (2011)</i> ***
Apr. 16	Student presentations	Paper Section due
Apr. 23	Paper discussion and integration	<i>Read all paper sections</i>
Apr. 30	Revised Paper Section with cover letter e-mailed to Ayelet by 5 PM	

*** Student-selected reading linking the topic of the day to the collaborative paper