

# Psychology 709-301: Transdiagnostic Processes in Psychopathology

Fall 2021

Mon. 12:00 – 3:00

Claudia Cohen Hall, Room 237

**Instructor:** Ayelet Meron Ruscio, Ph.D.  
*ruscio@psych.upenn.edu*  
(215) 573-4113  
Office Hours: By appointment  
Office: Stephen A. Levin Building, Room 454

## Overview

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For more than a century, psychopathology has been organized according to clinical syndromes. Although syndromes like schizophrenia, major depression, and ADHD have some utility, there is growing concern that they may be deeply flawed in ways that hamper real progress in research and treatment. In recent years, an alternative approach has been 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 disruptions in human emotion, cognition, movement, behavior, and social 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. Our goal will be to break free of the *DSM-5* model of mental disorders and to explore what transdiagnostic models have to offer for our understanding of psychopathology. You will be challenged not only to become familiar with the transdiagnostic approach, but to rigorously evaluate its strengths and limitations and apply it to your own research.

## Goals of the Course

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This course is designed to achieve three goals:

***Goal 1: Broaden your views of psychopathology beyond the diagnostic categories included in the prevailing classification of mental disorders, the DSM-5.*** You will be asked to think about psychopathology in new ways, reconsider the boundaries of abnormality, and explore 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.

***Goal 2: Invite you to critically examine the transdiagnostic approach and its implications for theory, research, and practice.*** “Transdiagnostic” has become a buzzword in mental health, and many psychologists have enthusiastically embraced the transdiagnostic approach without close scrutiny of its advantages and disadvantages. To gain a more informed perspective, you will be asked to critique existing studies, probe unchallenged assumptions, and grapple with open questions. The aim is to prepare you to contribute meaningfully to a dialogue that is rapidly changing the landscape of the field.

***Goal 3: Facilitate your application of transdiagnostic concepts and principles to your own research.*** Transdiagnostic processes are attracting increasing attention in psychopathology journals and guiding funding priorities at the National Institute of Mental Health. You will be encouraged to consider how these processes might inform and enhance your research program. The aim is to help you identify

promising new research questions, measures, and methods that may emerge from taking a transdiagnostic perspective, and to think concretely about how that work could be carried out.

### **Required Readings**

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All readings will be available electronically on the course Canvas website (<https://canvas.upenn.edu>) under the link for Files. 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**

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The success of this course depends heavily on the engagement and participation of all members of the class. The problems we'll be considering are among the most challenging in the field, and genuine progress will require critical thinking and creative solutions. Active questioning and open-minded dialogue will help us all to better appreciate, and develop more informed views about, these complex issues. Consequently, this course will follow a seminar format in which student discussion and debate play a central role. 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**

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A *tentative* list of dates and topics appears at the end of this syllabus. These may change, so please check the course Canvas website for updates throughout the semester.

### **Evaluation**

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**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 one class period. As discussion leader, you will be asked to lead the class in discussing that day's empirical or clinical reading during the final hour of class. Class participation will constitute 20% of your course grade.

**Reflection Questions.** You will be asked to write a brief reflection question in response to each reading. These questions will serve two purposes. First, they will encourage active reading, prompting you to reflect on important ideas and findings as you read. Second, they will ensure that we each come to class with questions, reactions, and ideas to serve as a jumping-off point for discussions. Questions can take many forms, including: (a) probing: delving deeper into a key point raised by the reading, (b) challenging: challenging an assumption or critiquing evidence presented in the reading, (c) inquiring: noting a topic that you found especially important and identifying an aspect that you are curious to learn more about, or (d) extending: speculating about connections to other themes we have discussed or about promising directions for future work. *Reflection questions are due on Canvas by 11:00 am on the day of class.* In addition, please bring a copy of your reflection questions to class and be prepared to raise your questions during the discussion. The reflection question assignments, scored on a scale from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent), will collectively constitute 20% of your course grade.

**Final Paper.** You will be asked to write a final paper that takes a transdiagnostic approach to an area of psychopathology that holds particular interest for you. This assignment will give you the chance to apply concepts learned throughout the semester to a concrete problem, and to consider how you would

handle theoretical and practical decisions for which there is limited precedence in the literature. Using one of the transdiagnostic frameworks that we explored in class, you will select a psychopathological process that cuts across two mental disorders from different chapters of the *DSM-5*. The first part of your paper will critically review what is known about the role of that target process in each of the two disorders. The second part of your paper will take one of the following forms:

1. *Propose a new research study* to advance understanding of the target process and its disruption in psychopathology. The study must be explicitly transdiagnostic; you should not focus on a single *DSM* disorder (and can even choose not to measure any *DSM* disorder). You are encouraged to consider the following questions:
  - What research question is your study designed to answer?
  - Who will be included in the study sample, who will be excluded, and why?
  - What will you ask research participants to do?
  - What outcomes will you measure?
  - What results do you expect, and how will they advance the field?
  
2. *Propose a new clinical intervention* to improve the target process and its disruption in psychopathology. This may involve either treatment or prevention, but it must be explicitly transdiagnostic; you should not focus on a single *DSM* disorder (and can even choose not to measure any *DSM* disorder). You are encouraged to consider the following questions:
  - What problem is your intervention designed to help?
  - Who will be offered the intervention, who will not be offered it, and why?
  - What will the intervention consist of?
  - How will you evaluate efficacy?
  - What outcomes do you expect, and how will they advance the field?

Please e-mail me a brief description of your paper idea (approximately 1 page long, double-spaced) by Oct. 6 so that I may offer feedback on your topic and ensure that topics do not overlap across students. *The final paper should be e-mailed to me by Dec. 17.* It should be approximately 10 pages long (excluding references), double-spaced, and written in APA style. The final paper will constitute 45% of your course grade.

**Presentation.** You will be asked to give a presentation summarizing the topic you explored in your final paper. Your presentation will describe the gap in knowledge or practice that your proposal seeks to address, the advantages of a transdiagnostic approach for filling this gap, and the rationale for the procedural decisions that you made. The presentation will give you a chance to organize your thoughts and get feedback on your ideas before submitting your final paper. It will also allow you to learn from your classmates' work, giving you a broader perspective on the opportunities and challenges of taking a transdiagnostic approach. *You will record your presentation and upload it to Canvas by Dec. 1.* Your classmates and I will watch the presentation and bring questions and ideas to our next class period. The presentation will constitute 15% of your course grade.

### **Additional Course Information**

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*Course Announcements.* Announcements and other course information will be posted periodically on the Canvas website for this course or e-mailed to you through Canvas. Please check Canvas and your e-mail regularly to ensure that these announcements reach you promptly.

*Disability Accommodations.* If you have a disability and are in need of reasonable accommodation in this course, please speak with me and contact Student Disabilities Services early in the semester.

*Academic Integrity.* You are responsible for knowing and adhering to the university's Code of Academic Integrity (see <https://catalog.upenn.edu/pennbook/code-of-academic-integrity/>). Please review the Code and ask me if you have any questions about my expectations or about how the guidelines apply to this course.

*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! 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 valuable to you.

**TENTATIVE COURSE OUTLINE**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Topics</b>	<b>Discussion Leaders/ Assignments</b>
Sep. 13	Limitations of syndromal classification and the need for an alternative approach	
Sep. 20	Transdiagnostic approaches I Endophenotypes The Research Domain Criteria (RDoC) framework	
Sep. 27	Transdiagnostic approaches II Cognitive-behavioral processes The Hierarchical Taxonomy of Psychopathology (HiTOP)	
Oct. 4	Emotion I Fear vs. Anxiety Threat processing	
Oct. 6	---	<b>Paper idea due</b>
Oct. 11	Emotion II Approach vs. Anhedonia Reward processing	
Oct. 18	Emotion III Arousal Regulation	
Oct. 25	Cognition I Perception Reasoning & judgment	
Nov. 1	Cognition II Attention, cognitive control Sensorimotor processes	
Nov. 8	Behavior Avoidance Impulsivity	
Nov. 15	Social processes Empathy, social cognition Affiliation & attachment	
Nov. 22	Transdiagnostic approaches to etiology	
Nov. 29	Transdiagnostic approaches to treatment	
Dec. 1	---	<b>Presentation due</b>
Dec. 6	Unresolved questions and future directions	
Dec. 17	---	<b>Final Paper due</b>