

PSYC 3232-301

Seminar in Cognitive Neuroscience: The Social Brain

Spring 2025 Tues 1:45-4:45pm Cohen 493
Professor: Anna Jenkins, Ph.D. Email: acjenk@upenn.edu

Course Description

This discussion-based seminar examines the cognitive and neural mechanisms that enable individuals to understand the minds of others and how those mechanisms drive behavior. We will be propelled throughout the course by fundamental questions about the human social brain. For example, why are humans so social? Are humans' social capacities unique to our species? Does the human brain have processes specialized for social thought? Are there large-scale consequences of how our minds process social information? What would it take for Artificial Intelligence to resemble a socially aware human? Consideration of these questions will involve advanced treatment of a range of topics, including the neural basis of impression formation and stereotyping, mind perception, and theory of mind; social thinking in autism; the social abilities of non-human animals; and the susceptibility of social thought and behavior to contextual and cultural influences.

Course website: <https://canvas.upenn.edu/courses/1830508>

Course Requirements and Grading

Participation (30%). This course is run as a discussion seminar, and its success depends upon your participation. Your contributions to weekly discussions will determine nearly one-third of your grade. You should arrive to every meeting prepared to discuss all of the readings, to answer questions about them—ranging from the specifics of study design to the theoretical implications of a finding—and to ask questions of your own. Your grade will reflect both how frequently and how substantively you contributed.

Discussion Comments (20%). Each week, everyone will post a brief discussion comment (approx. 3-5 sentences) in response to the week's readings on the course website. Comments are due by 9pm the night before class (Monday). If the website isn't working, email the comments to me and your classmates before the deadline. You may submit your comments late (or not at all) up to three times with no penalty.

Final Paper Flash Talk (10%). In one of the last three class meetings, you will give a flash talk (i.e., a very short presentation) on your final paper topic. This will be an opportunity to share your work with the class and receive feedback on your ideas before submitting your final paper.

Final Paper (40%). The capstone of the course is your final paper (~8 pages, double-spaced, not counting the title page, abstract, figures, or references), in which you have an opportunity to make an original contribution to the science of the social brain. The paper will be broken down into four different assignments with their own due dates: paper idea proposals, a first draft that will undergo peer review, a second draft that I will review, and the final version.

Course Policies

Attendance. The interactive nature of this course means that your presence is important both for its success and for yours. It's also important to me that the course be compatible with your health and well-being. Two absences will be excused automatically, regardless of the reason, if you email me in advance. A third may be excused in case of emergency. Additional absences will result in 0 participation points for the week(s). Repeated lateness will also be reflected in your participation grade. With only 14 classes, each is a good portion of the course. Please do your best to be in class when you're healthy.

Deadlines. You should think of each deadline as the *very last opportunity* I can give you to submit an assignment without disrupting the functioning of the course (not as the submission time you should be aiming for). Submitting early is encouraged whenever possible. Discussion comments need to be submitted before the deadline so that they can be incorporated in to our class discussion. Because life happens, you may submit your discussion comments late (or, if you wish, not at all) up to three times with no penalty. Paper proposals need to be submitted before the deadline so that I can read them before I meet with each of you to discuss your ideas. Extensions of up to 24 hours prior to your scheduled 1-on-1 meeting with me may be accommodated if requested in advance of the original deadline. Paper drafts need to be submitted before the deadline so that they can be included in your in-class peer review session. Late drafts will be penalized 10% immediately (e.g., 92→82). Final papers need to be submitted on time so that I can review them before final grades are due. Please plan ahead! Once in a while, a student experiences circumstances that are truly extreme. If that happens to you and you are concerned about your coursework, please (seek the other help you need and) contact me.

Scholarship. Your assignments must be your own, original work, completed newly for this course. Science is cumulative, and you will draw upon existing research to inform and support your ideas. In doing so: (1) always cite the source of a finding, idea, or argument put forth by someone else (including another student) and (2) always describe the findings, ideas, and arguments you cite in a way that reflects your own thinking (don't copy-paste and change a few words). If a direct quote is necessary, use quotation marks and include the page number(s) in the citation. You are welcome to use ChatGPT as a source, but keep in mind that it might tell you something incorrect. Like any other source, it must be cited. Plagiarized or improperly cited work will be subject to penalties (within the course) and disciplinary action (beyond the course). Please be very careful. When in doubt, cite.

Contacting and meeting with me

Contact. The best way to reach me is by email (acjenk@upenn.edu). I make it a priority to respond to your emails during the semester, usually within 24 hours.

Meetings. To allow you to meet with me when it is most helpful, I don't have set office hours. Always feel free to set up a meeting! Meetings are typically for 10-15 minutes. Just email me for an appointment, suggest three potential times that would work for you, and let me know if you prefer Zoom or in-person (Solomon Labs, room D9A).

Course Overview (subject to small adjustments)

Class 1	Jan 21	Introduction to The Social Brain	
Class 2	Jan 28	Other minds in your brain	
Class 3	Feb 4	The social brain in autism	
Class 4	Feb 11	Processes of the social brain	
Class 5	Feb 18	The social brain in affiliation and dehumanization	
Class 6	Feb 25	Social pain and pleasure	
Class 7	Mar 4	Social cognition in non-human animals	
-- Spring Break: no class --			
Class 8	Mar 18	The social brain, morality, psychopathology	<i>paper proposals due Thurs 3/20 9pm</i>
Class 9	Mar 25	The social brain in the courtroom	
Class 10	Apr 1	Toward an artificial social brain	
Class 11	Apr 8	Peer review session	<i>paper draft 1 due 1:45pm</i>
Class 12	Apr 15	Final paper flash talks	<i>paper draft 2 due on the Friday following <u>your</u> talk, 9pm</i>
Class 13	Apr 22	Final paper flash talks	
Class 14	Apr 29	Final paper flash talks + conclusion	

May 12 - Final paper due 9pm