

Psych 412-52612

Current Topics in Social Psychology: Thinking, Feeling, and Deciding in Everyday Life

Fall 2019 – Mon & Wed, 2-4pm, VPD LL101

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Draft – details will change.

The final syllabus lives on Blackboard.

Things to know about this class

What is this class about?

How do we make sense of the world around us? How do we imagine the future and remember the past? How does that impact our preferences and daily decisions? What do we enjoy and regret? And why are we often wrong in what we think we'd enjoy or regret? Why do we often fail to learn from experience? How do we think about well-being, consumption, money, politics, and relationships? What is the role of feelings in all of this? Psychologists address such issues by bringing basic research into thinking and feeling to bear on judgment and decision making in everyday life. This class reviews some of the key lessons learned.

We will explore these issues in a mix of overview lectures, in-depth analyses of select original studies, and discussions of their implications. The overview lectures present exemplary findings and highlight the underlying principles. The discussions elaborate on the implications of the research, address how this knowledge was developed and tested, how compelling the evidence is, and what kind of research could improve on this knowledge and extend its applications. Throughout, we will pay close attention to what it all means for daily life.

Learning Objectives

The learning objectives are to

- (1) develop an understanding of principles of social cognition
- (2) and the interplay of feeling and thinking;
- (3) learn to recognize these processes in everyday life
- (4) and consider the implications for our own decision making;
- (5) learn to analyze competing theoretical accounts and their implications;
- (6) consider ways to distinguish these accounts in empirical research;
- (7) learn to evaluate how well the methods chosen for a given study test a theoretical account; and
- (8) learn how to design theoretically informative studies.

Format

The class meets twice a week. Each broader topic will be covered in several meetings, one that mostly consists of an overview lecture and one or two that mostly consist of a discussion of readings and student presentations

of selected studies. Each week, *all* students read one to three core readings. In addition, some students prepare short presentations on one additional reading of their choice (from a list) and present the key points during the discussion. Expect to make 3 presentations over the course of the semester. The bulk of the readings will be original research articles. All will be available on Blackboard.

Prerequisites

PSYC 274 (statistics) and PSYC 314 (research methods).

Grading

Over the course of the semester, there will be 3 short quizzes, covering key issues of preceding classes. Each quiz will take 15 minutes. I drop your weakest quiz and the remaining two make up 45% of your grade. In addition, students will make 3 short presentations that summarize key points from one reading. I drop your weakest presentation and the remaining 2 presentations make up 45% of the grade. Discussion participation counts 10%. There is no final exam.

Instructor

My own research falls into the areas we cover in this class. You can find information about the research that my students and I do at my USC [homepage](#) and on [Google Scholar](#). Most of my papers are available on [ResearchGate](#), an open access paper archive.

Topics

This preliminary syllabus only lists key topics and some illustrative readings, so you can decide whether this class is of interest to you. More details will follow on Blackboard.

#1 Introduction & overview

People react to the world as they see it. But how do we “see” the world? How do we construct reality and how do we make sense of it? The introduction provides an overview of the core themes by asking, somewhat tongue-in-cheek: *Suppose you wanted to think yourself happy, how would you do that?* In the following weeks, we will address these basic judgment processes and their implications in more detail.

#2 Would this be good for me? Predicting future experience

Many important decisions involve predictions about future outcomes – would this be good or bad for me? Would your life get worse if you moved from sunny California to icy Boston? Would a better paying job in Boston compensate you for that change in climate? Would driving a BMW be more fun than driving a Ford Escort? Would you be forever miserable if you lost a leg? Despite strong and compelling intuitions, we often get it wrong. We look at how we make such hedonic forecasts and why they frequently lead us astray. We also address why we often learn surprisingly little from the prediction errors we make and end up as naïve after the fact as we were before.

#3 Am I satisfied with my life? Evaluating the present

How do we evaluate our own lives? Most people have days when life seems great and days when life seems dreadful, yet little of great importance has happened that would justify this change in evaluation. Drawing on theories of judgment, we look at how people evaluate their lives, which aspects they draw on, against which

standards they evaluate them, and why the outcome is highly malleable.

#4 How was it? Reconstructing the past

What were you like when you were 16? What were your opinions and preferences? What happened that year? Our autobiographical memory is often foggy and we reconstruct what our past must have been like by applying general beliefs and inference rules to the bits and pieces we seem to remember. This is particularly true when we're thinking about past feelings. We review these processes of reconstructive memory and their role in judgment and pay particular attention to how they impair learning from our past experience.

#5 What if? Looking back with regret

Although we have all experienced regret, our assumptions about what we would or would not regret are often wrong. When looking ahead, we are concerned about how much we might regret things we do (acts of commission), but when looking back we are more likely to regret all the things we did not do (acts of omission). Ironically, this makes our efforts to avoid regret in the near future ("it would be so terrible...") a likely source of regret in the distant future ("if only I had..."). In many cases, our regrets have more to do with our fantasies about how things could have been otherwise, than with the actual outcomes we obtained. We review basic insights into counterfactual thinking and regret.

#6 Naïve realism

How we see the world and our own place in it is strongly influenced by how we think about it. But throughout, we experience our own construals as real – the world is the way I see it and if you see it otherwise, you're probably wrong! We review the processes underlying this "naïve realism" and discuss their implications, from personal life to national politics.

#7 What makes ideas feel right?

Why do some ideas feel right and others wrong, often before we even gave them much thought? What makes some (fake) news feel true and other news feel wrong? How do we assess truth? We review research into judgments of truth and their implications for public discourse, the acceptance and correction of misinformation, and the sharing of news on social media.

#9 Thinking about money

Money figures prominently in people's plans for their future. We address three broad themes. First, typical pitfalls of everyday financial decisions and the underlying mental processes. Second, the (weak and complicated) relationship between money and happiness. And finally, the often surprising influence of money related thoughts on social behavior in nonmonetary domains of life.

#10 What does the body have to do with it?

We interact with the world through our body and experience it through our senses. A rapidly growing area of research highlights close links between our thoughts and our bodily movements and experiences. Many of these relationships are reflected in metaphors. E.g., holding a cup of warm coffee rather than ice coffee makes you feel "warmer" about the person you are talking with, looking "up" to someone increases perceived authority, and talking badly leaves you with a "dirty mouth" that triggers an interest in mouthwash. Beyond such cute findings, this work breaks new ground in understanding the interplay of body and mind.

The final meetings of the semester will explore this interplay of body and mind.

Some illustrative readings

If you want to get a better sense of the topics you can check these illustrative readings, which download from Dropbox:

Schwarz, N., & Strack, F. (2004). How to think (and not to think) about your life: Some lessons from social judgment research. In S. Neiman (ed.), *Zum Glück* (pp. 163-182). Berlin, Germany: Akademie Verlag. [\[pdf\]](#)
This is the English language manuscript of an overview chapter that was published in German.

Ross, L. & Ward, A. (1996). Naïve realism in everyday life: Implications for social conflict and misunderstanding. In E. S. Reed, E. Turiel, & T. Brown (eds.), *Values and knowledge*. New York: Psychology Press [\[pdf\]](#)

Schwarz, N., Newman, E.J., & Leach, W. (2016). Making the truth stick and the myths fade: Lessons from cognitive psychology. *Behavioral Science & Policy*, 2(1), 85-95. [\[pdf\]](#)

Useful questions for empirical readings

These questions can guide your thinking about the empirical readings. They are the kind of questions you should have in mind when you read research reports. As you'll notice over the course of the semester, there is no "perfect" study -- there's always some room for improvement and once the findings are in, everybody is smarter in hindsight.

Introduction: Theory & predictions

- What problem was studied, and why?
 - How does this study relate to, and go beyond, past investigations of the problem?
- How did the researchers derive their hypotheses?
 - What are the theoretical assumptions they make?
 - Can they support these assumptions with earlier research?
 - Which predictions follow from them?
 - How well do these predictions follow?
 - Are there additional assumptions they have to make to get from here to there?
- Would you have arrived at different predictions?
 - If so, why? Explain your logic

Methods

- How do the authors test their predictions?
 - Is the study correlational or experimental (= based on random assignment)?
 - What are the independent and dependent variables?
 - Which independent variables are *manipulated*? How?
 - Which independent variables are *measured*? How?
 - How is the dependent variable assessed?
- Are the methods used adequate for testing the theoretical predictions?
- Is there something you would have done differently?
 - If so, why?

Results

- Is there a “manipulation check”?
 - Does it indicate that the manipulation “worked”?
- What are the major findings?
- Do these findings support or challenge or falsify the authors’ predictions?
 - Support = the results are consistent with predictions
 - Challenge = the results are not quite what was expected although by and large they seem to support the bulk of the theorizing
 - Falsify = this is clearly not what was predicted and it is hard to see how the findings could be compatible with the theory

So what?

- What conclusions can be drawn from the study?
 - What are the key theoretical implications of the findings?
 - If what you read is right, what else would follow?
 - Does it challenge other things we think we know?
- Do the authors revise their theorizing in light of their results?
 - How?
- What are some of the applied implications of these findings?
 - What could one do with these insights?
 - How would you test if that works?

What’s next?

- What would be a useful next step in this research program?
 - Important conceptual issues?
 - Conceptual clarifications?
 - Contradictions with other bodies of research?
 - Improvements on the experiment?
 - Better manipulations?
 - Naturalistic study?
 - New domain of application?
 - They’re wrong!
 - How would you show that?
 - What would support your alternative explanation?
 - Any other exciting stuff coming to mind?

Implications for everyday life

- How does this bear on human behavior in the wild?
 - Are there phenomena it can illuminate?
 - Are there phenomena that are incompatible with the researchers’ rationale?
 - Can the conceptual rationale help us in solving some real problem?
- What would you like lay people to know about this?
 - Which aspects should they know about?
 - Why?
 - How would you convey that information to them?

USC regulations

Please note that these regulations are frequently updated. The ones that apply are always the current ones, even if this preliminary syllabus cites last semester's version.

Statement for Students with Disabilities

Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability is required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP. Please be sure the letter is delivered to me as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in STU 301 and is open 8:30 a.m.–5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. Website and contact information for DSP: http://sait.usc.edu/academicsupport/centerprograms/dsp/home_index.html, [\(213\) 740-0776](tel:2137400776) (Phone), [\(213\) 740-6948](tel:2137406948) (TDD only), [\(213\) 740-8216](tel:2137408216) (FAX) ability@usc.edu.

Statement on Academic Integrity

USC seeks to maintain an optimal learning environment. General principles of academic honesty include the concept of respect for the intellectual property of others, the expectation that individual work will be submitted unless otherwise allowed by an instructor, and the obligations both to protect one's own academic work from misuse by others as well as to avoid using another's work as one's own. All students are expected to understand and abide by these principles. *SCampus*, the Student Guidebook, (www.usc.edu/scampus or <http://scampus.usc.edu>) contains the University Student Conduct Code (see University Governance, Section 11.00), while the recommended sanctions are located in Appendix A.

Emergency Preparedness/Course Continuity in a Crisis

In case of a declared emergency if travel to campus is not feasible, USC executive leadership will announce an electronic way for instructors to teach students in their residence halls or homes using a combination of Blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technologies.

Syllabus Changes

The syllabus and course schedule may change as we move along, mostly in response to your interests and in response to new topics that may come up in discussion. The official syllabus is the document on Blackboard. I will announce changes in class and via email sent by Blackboard.