

PSYC 433: Children's Learning and Cognitive Development

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Office hours: Wednesday 10am – 11am, or by appt.

This course meets every Monday and Wednesday 4:00 – 5:50pm in Kaprielian Hall 165.

Overview

Course Description

As a capstone course, this course links psychological theory to research, and research to applications—all within the domain of cognitive development. Throughout the course, we will explore how innate human capacities interact with diverse lived experiences to facilitate children's development. By the end, I hope you will have an appreciation for how *incredible* our development really is: children become fluent in language using only a vanishingly small proportion of the data that ChatGPT can access; children infer nuanced, intersectional relationships between social groups and individuals based on very little explicit instruction; and children create and test their own theories of physics, biology, and psychology. Moreover, they do it all before they're able to tie their shoelaces or eat without making a mess.

To see how this developmental process plays out, we will proceed in roughly chronological order, from infancy into late childhood, with frequent comparisons to adult performance. We will examine how infants and children learn to navigate the world—from **physical reasoning** (What do infants know about gravity? How do they keep track of objects?) to **language acquisition and concept learning** (How do infants learn the sounds and meanings of words? How do kids' concepts differ from adults' concepts?) to **social cognition** (When do children attend to other people's gender or race? How do they learn to identify others' emotions?). The course will conclude with classes on topics chosen by you, the students.

Course Objectives

After taking the course, you will have:

- An appreciation of the seminal theories, methods, and findings in cognitive development
- An ability to synthesize multiple findings in support, or criticism, of a scientific theory
- A deep understanding of your chosen research topic in cognitive development and an informed position about what research should be done next

Reading Material

All readings will be posted on Brightspace at least 1 week before they are due. No textbook is required. However, **readings may change**; I adjust readings to the class strengths and interest.

Course Schedule

Week	Day	Question	Reading (before class)	Assignment (before class)
1	8/26	Intro: What is cognition?		
	8/28	<i>What does being innate mean?</i>	Spelke (2022) – Ch 1.1, 1.2, 1.3 – Vision	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QzkMo45pcUo&t=36s&ab_channel=steveasat2
2	9/2	LABOR DAY – No class		
	9/4	<i>Is perceiving language innate or acquired?</i>	Hudson-Barr (2014); Werker et al. (1981)	
3	9/9	<i>Do we learn object permanence?</i>	Spelke (2022) – Ch 2.1, 2.2, 2.6	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hwgo2O5Vk_g&ab_channel=Adam
	9/11	<i>Do babies understand gravity?</i>	Adolph (2008); Baillargeon (1994)	Response #1 – pick 1 paper to respond to
4	9/16	<i>Does physical experience affect cognition?</i>	Gerson & Woodward (2013)	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0BHOcnMymY0&ab_channel=PositiveParentingNewsfeed
	9/18	<i>How do we learn spatial navigation?</i>	Li & Gleitman (2002); Levinson et al. (2002)	Response #2 – respond to Li & Gleitman
5	9/23	<i>Can infants add?</i>	Wynn (1992)	Response #3 https://today.duke.edu/2013/10/babymath
	9/25	<i>How do we learn numbers?</i>	Carey (2004); Frank et al. (2008)	
6	9/30	<i>How do we learn words?</i>	Smith & Yu (2008)	Response #4
	10/2	<i>How do we infer a word's meaning?</i>	Booth et al. (2005); Smith & Samuelson (2006)	
7	10/7	<i>How does language evolve?</i>	Senghas et al. (2004); Smith (2018)	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_1FY5kL_zXU
	10/9	Office hours for midterm		Midterm paper due 10/13
8	10/14	Catchup / Discussion: Nativism & Empiricism	N/A	
	10/16	<i>How do infants form object concepts?</i>	LaTourrette & Waxman (2019); Gelman (2004)	
9	10/21	<i>What social concepts are present in infancy?</i>	Jin & Baillargeon (2017)	Response #5
	10/23	<i>How do children form social concepts?</i>	Rhodes et al. (2012); Kinzler & Dautel (2012)	
10	10/28	<i>How do we think about the natural world?</i>	Pizza & Keleman (2023)	Response #6
	10/30	<i>Are children magical thinkers?</i>	Woolley et al. (2004); Legare & Gelman (2008: Study 1)	
11	11/4	<i>Are emotions universal?</i>	Barrett et al. (2007)	Response #7
	11/6	<i>How do emotions develop?</i>	Kashdan et al. (2015); Price et al. (2022)	
12*	11/11	Veteran's Day – no class		
	11/13	Topics chosen by students		Response #8
13	11/18	Topics chosen by students		
	11/20	Topics chosen by students		Response #9
14	11/25	Topics chosen by students		
	11/27	Happy Thanksgiving – no class		
15	12/2-4	Final presentations		Research proposal due end of Finals

*Starting Week 12, class topics & readings will be chosen democratically. Note *assignment* dates don't change.

Evaluation

Grade Breakdown:

Discussion	10%
Reading Responses	24%
Article meeting (pre-presentation)	5%
Article presentation	10%
Midterm paper	20%
Research proposal presentation	6%
Research proposal	25%

Grading Guidelines:

Grade	Points	Grade	Points
A / 4.0	94-100	C+ / 2.3	77-79.99
A- / 3.7	90-93.99	C / 2.0	73-76.99
B+ / 3.3	87-89.99	C- / 1.7	70-72.99
B / 3.0	83-86.99	D+ / 1.3	67-69.99
B- / 2.7	80-82.99	D / 1.0	60-66.99
		F / 0.0	59.99 and below

Assessments

Discussion. As this is an upper-level seminar course, I expect all students to actively participate in discussion, contributing their own perspectives and insights thoughtfully and respectfully. This generally requires arriving on time to class and ready to participate, but I know unforeseen events happen (to all of us). So don't sweat an emergency absence or an off day, but you are expected to attend and participate regularly. You can also receive credit for discussion by coming to office hours or otherwise sharing your thoughts/questions with me.

Reading Responses. By 11:59pm the day before the relevant class period (see syllabus), you will post a short (~300-400 word) response to the readings for that class period. In general, the response will include a brief summary of the paper, your own evaluation of the findings (i.e., their strengths and weaknesses), and your thoughts on next steps—connections you see to other work, ideas for future research, or possible applications of the work. Additional detail on this will be provided in class. There will be 9 opportunities to write papers; you must write 6. If you would like, you may submit a 7th paper to replace your lowest score.

Article presentation & meeting. From weeks 3 to 14, each student will present a research article to the class and moderate discussion of that article. You will choose the article yourself, though I am happy to offer suggestions. This article must be an **empirical article** (i.e., one presenting new data, not just reviewing other papers).

After you have chosen your article, please schedule a 30-minute meeting with me to discuss it. You must **schedule this meeting the week before your presentation** and send the article to me

at least **24 hours before** the meeting. In the meeting, please come prepared to discuss the article, any questions you have about it, and how you will present it. The **meeting is worth 5% of your grade and will be completion-graded**; as long as you schedule it for the week before your presentation and show up prepared, you will receive full credit.

In your class presentation, you will be responsible for communicating the article's findings to the class, putting them in the context of the theories we have discussed, and leading a discussion of the article's implications. There will be no specific time limits, but please aim for a **15 minute PowerPoint** (or other media) presentation of the article, with an additional 15 minutes for questions and discussion.

Midterm paper. In this 4-6 page (double-spaced) paper, you will summarize **3-4 research findings not covered in class** and discuss how these findings relate to the theories we have discussed. You must select at least two papers which have **differing theoretical claims** and present an argument as to what theory gives the best synthesis of the results.

Research proposal. In a 10-12 page (double-spaced) paper, you will summarize and synthesize research findings on a topic of your choice. You will conduct a literature review (including **at least 6 new empirical papers**), defend **your own position** on what theory best accounts for these findings, and propose **a new study to test this theory**. Details will be provided later.

Proposal presentation. You will give a short presentation of the highlights of your paper and proposed study to the class, in Week 15.

Class Policies

In this class,
WE BELIEVE



You are my priority. The purpose of this class is to foster your learning, not to produce a certain amount of papers and talks. So, if you are choosing between your health and the completion of an assignment, I would always rather you choose your health. If you are facing difficulties, let me know, and we can figure out a solution.

Like a good mattress, my class policies are firm but not rock-hard: individual cases may involve extenuating circumstances that would allow for changing many of the policies below. I encourage you to **contact me** if you have any questions.

Office hours: I strongly encourage you to come to office hours! This is the ideal time to address questions about the course and ask me anything else. **I'd love to get to know you** and hear what you're passionate about! I hope to see each of you at least once. And if the times don't work for you, email me and I'll happily set up a meeting!

Deadlines. Papers are due by **11:59pm at the end of the day** posted on the syllabus. However, if it's 15 minutes late, that's fine.

No-questions-asked extensions. To reduce stress, all students have **two 24-hour no-questions-asked extensions**. These extensions can be used for any *non-final, non-presentation assignment*. Please notify me before the deadline if you want to use an extension. You may also **use both extensions** on the same assignment (i.e., creating a 48-hour extension). Otherwise, acceptance of late work is at my discretion; if you are experiencing difficulties, please talk to me and we will likely be able to work out a brief extension. If you do not use or successfully request an extension, I will deduct 10% for each 24-hour period the assignment is late.

Paper formatting. Paper formatting needs to be easily readable: use **1-inch margins** and a **reasonable font size**, like 12 pt Times New Roman, or 11 pt Arial. All papers should be double-spaced. In general, I expect citations to be in APA style. However, if you are unfamiliar with APA and would prefer a different style, let me know and I will likely agree. Papers need not be precisely formatted in APA style.

Inclusive learning policy. I view my job as helping each of you to succeed, and I want every student to **feel welcome** in my classroom. I strive to make my classroom a place where you will be treated with respect, and I welcome individuals of all ages, backgrounds, beliefs, ethnicities, social classes, gender identities, gender expressions, national origins, documentation statuses, religious affiliations, sexual orientations, abilities, and other visible and nonvisible differences. To make a better, more inclusive psychological science, we must always hold each other accountable for creating a **respectful and supportive environment**. This means that when we disagree in this class—and good science always involves some disagreement—I expect we will consider others' perspectives thoughtfully and disagree constructively. If something was said in class (by anyone, including myself) that made you feel uncomfortable, please talk to me about it. I'm here to help all of you succeed and will always do my best to support you.

Anti-discrimination policy. Discrimination, sexual assault, and harassment are not tolerated by the university. You are encouraged to report any incidents to the *Office of Equity and Diversity* <http://equity.usc.edu/> or to the *Department of Public Safety* <http://capsnet.usc.edu/department/department-public-safety/online-forms/contact-us>. This is important for the safety of the whole USC community. Another member of the university community – such as a friend, classmate, advisor, or faculty member – can help initiate the report, or can initiate the report on behalf of another person. *The Center for Women and Men* <http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/cwm/> provides 24/7 confidential support, and the sexual assault resource center webpage sarc@usc.edu describes reporting options and other resources.

Plagiarism. Presenting someone else's ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in USC's Student code, at https://policy.usc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/USC_StudentCode_September2023-1.pdf. For a helpful guide to avoiding plagiarism, see: <https://libguides.usc.edu/writingguide/plagiarism>. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable.

As a general rule, you should never produce an assignment identical to another student's, nor should your assignments be identical to any other source (e.g., an article abstract). All writing must be your own, or quoted and cited appropriately. Please note that in general, I consider text produced by ChatGPT or other chatbots to not constitute your own writing. Any exceptions to this will be explicitly mentioned in class, or if you feel there is a helpful way of using this technology, reach out to me and we can discuss it *before* you complete the assignment.

University Academic & Support Systems

Students and Disability Accommodations:

USC welcomes students with disabilities into all of the University's educational programs. [The Office of Student Accessibility Services](#) (OSAS) is responsible for the determination of appropriate accommodations for students who encounter disability-related barriers. Once a student has completed the OSAS process (registration, initial appointment, and submitted documentation) and accommodations are determined to be reasonable and appropriate, a Letter of Accommodation (LOA) will be available to generate for each course. The LOA must be given to each course instructor by the student and followed up with a discussion. This should be done as early in the semester as possible as accommodations are not retroactive. More information can be found at osas.usc.edu. You may contact OSAS at (213) 740-0776 or via email at osasfrontdesk@usc.edu.

Student Financial Aid and Satisfactory Academic Progress:

To be eligible for certain kinds of financial aid, students are required to maintain Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) toward their degree objectives. Visit the [Financial Aid Office webpage](#) for [undergraduate](#)- and [graduate-level](#) SAP eligibility requirements and the appeals process.

Support Systems:

[Counseling and Mental Health](#) - (213) 740-9355 – 24/7 on call

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.

[988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline](#) - 988 for both calls and text messages – 24/7 on call

The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline (formerly known as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline) provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, across the United States. The Lifeline consists of a national network of over 200 local crisis centers, combining custom local

care and resources with national standards and best practices. The new, shorter phone number makes it easier for people to remember and access mental health crisis services (though the previous 1 (800) 273-8255 number will continue to function indefinitely) and represents a continued commitment to those in crisis.

[Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services \(RSVP\)](#) - (213) 740-9355(WELL) – 24/7 on call

Free, confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender- and power-based harm (e.g., sexual assault, intimate partner violence, stalking).

[Office for Equity, Equal Opportunity, and Title IX \(EEO-TIX\)](#) - (213) 740-5086

Information about how to get help or help someone affected by harassment or discrimination, rights of protected classes, reporting options, and additional resources for students, faculty, staff, visitors, and applicants.

[Reporting Incidents of Bias or Harassment](#) - (213) 740-2500

Avenue to report incidents of bias, hate crimes, and microaggressions to the Office for Equity, Equal Opportunity, and Title for appropriate investigation, supportive measures, and response.

[The Office of Student Accessibility Services \(OSAS\)](#) - (213) 740-0776

OSAS ensures equal access for students with disabilities through providing academic accommodations and auxiliary aids in accordance with federal laws and university policy.

[USC Campus Support and Intervention](#) - (213) 740-0411

Assists students and families in resolving complex personal, financial, and academic issues adversely affecting their success as a student.

[Diversity, Equity and Inclusion](#) - (213) 740-2101

Information on events, programs and training, the Provost's Diversity and Inclusion Council, Diversity Liaisons for each academic school, chronology, participation, and various resources for students.

[USC Emergency](#) - UPC: (213) 740-4321, HSC: (323) 442-1000 – 24/7 on call

Emergency assistance and avenue to report a crime. Latest updates regarding safety, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible.

[USC Department of Public Safety](#) - UPC: (213) 740-6000, HSC: (323) 442-1200 – 24/7 on call

Non-emergency assistance or information.

[Office of the Ombuds](#) - (213) 821-9556 (UPC) / (323-442-0382 (HSC)

A safe and confidential place to share your USC-related issues with a University Ombuds who will work with you to explore options or paths to manage your concern.

[Occupational Therapy Faculty Practice](#) - (323) 442-2850 or otfp@med.usc.edu

Confidential Lifestyle Redesign services for USC students to support health promoting habits and routines that enhance quality of life and academic performance.