‘Social Perception’ Seminar  (Spring 2021)

What, When, & Where

Course #s: PSYC 425/625, CGSC 425
Distro Group: Social Sciences
When: Spring 2021, Tuesday afternoons, 3:30 - 5:20 pm
Where: Online, via Zoom (see below)
Webpage: http://perception.yale.edu/SocPercSem/

To download readings and other materials, you must be logged in to Canvas via CAS.

Who

Professor: Brian Scholl  (Professor, Dept. of Psychology; Chair, Cognitive Science program)
Office: SSS 304  (at the corner of College/Prospect Streets & Grove Street)
Email: brian.scholl@yale.edu
Web: http://perception.yale.edu/
Office Hours: Just after each class, or by appointment

Seminar Description

How does the mind work? One of the deepest insights of cognitive science is that this question does not have an answer. Or at least it doesn’t have a single answer: there is no one way that the mind works, because the mind is not one thing. Instead (like the body) the mind has parts, and different parts of the mind work in different ways. Accordingly, a great deal of research has involved asking about how different parts of the mind interact — and often exploring how one part of the mind influences another part (e.g. when studying the influence of emotion on memory, or of attention on moral reasoning). This seminar will explore one such potential connection — and it may be a surprising one, since it involves two aspects of the mind that are generally thought to be rather distinct.

We typically think of visual perception as among the simplest and earliest of our basic cognitive processes, while we think of social cognition as among the most advanced forms of higher-level thought. In this seminar we will explore how these two aspects of the mind connect — often in rich and unexpected ways. We will examine how social influences do and do not influence what we see, and how perception itself traffics in (and may be specialized for) social information.

Specific topics will likely include: the perception of agency and intentionality; biological motion; perceiving traits such as trustworthiness and competence in faces; facial attractiveness; gaze processing and social attention; the perception of race, and ‘perceptual stereotyping’; social color vision; morality and ‘mind perception’; social olfaction (exploring how we communicate social information to each other via smell); and social and cultural influences on perception.
Seminar Format

This course will be run as a reading and discussion seminar. Though there may be occasional mini-lectures or guest presentations, the usual format will involve an extended group discussion of a set of weekly readings focused on a particular aspect of social perception. The exact topics that we cover will depend on the interests of the seminar attendees and the interest generated about specific research ideas. In almost all cases, however, the majority of the readings will be drawn from the primary research literature in several areas of psychology and beyond — including cognitive psychology, vision science, social psychology, neuroscience, infant cognition, and behavioral economics.

The seminar is intended for both advanced undergraduates and graduate students. To ensure a relatively intimate forum for in-depth discussion, the seminar will be capped at approximately 20 students, so instructor permission will be required to attend after the first class. All participants should be prepared to discuss the material for each day of class in detail, and students will frequently be asked on the spot for their opinions and analyses.

Application/Selection Process

In expectation of the possibility that there may be more interested students than available spots, all potential attendees should send a note of interest (described in more detail below), no later than Wednesday 12/9 — a Yale-mandated deadline. Enrollment decisions will then be sent via email in return, no later than Monday, 12/14.

In case it helps with your planning and preferences, note that I do not plan to teach this seminar again (at least for several years).

The decisions about who will be able to enroll in the seminar will be made in a holistic and ineffable way on the basis of the information requested below, probably along with some form of random lottery. Senior majors in Cognitive Science and Psychology will have some priority (as will graduate students in Psychology) — but to help ensure some diversity of perspectives, some non-seniors and some students from other majors and programs will be able to take the seminar too, regardless of the demand. (Indeed, I always admit at least some juniors and even intrepid sophomores.)

In particular, interested students should send the following information (to brian.scholl@yale.edu — in the body of an email, with no attachments) by 12/9:

1. Class year (i.e. Nth year graduate student, senior, junior, sophomore...)
2. Major (for undergraduates) or Department + Advisor (for graduate students)
3. A list of the other Psychology and Cognitive Science courses that you’ve taken in the past, or will be taking this semester (for undergraduates); or a list of all graduate courses you’ve taken so far (for graduate students)
4. In less than 300 words: Why do you want to take this seminar — and is there anything else I should know? (As with all such constraints, you needn’t use all 300 words to craft a compelling response here!)
Pandemic-Inspired Remote Participation Details

Our seminar will obviously be run a bit differently this year, due to the pandemic and its related challenges. In particular:

“Synchronous” discussions: As a discussion-oriented seminar, it obviously won’t be possible for us to pre-record any content — and so all attendees must be able to attend ‘live’ (on Zoom) during our scheduled class times.

No recording: Per the recommended Yale policy for such seminars, our discussions will not be recorded. This will help to ensure plenty of spontaneity, interactivity, daring questions, and embarrassing gaffes — and this might be especially useful in a seminar like this where we will be discussing several ‘hot-button’ topics such as sex and attractiveness, and the perception of race.

Your face: Let’s try to be present for each other: please plan to virtually attend our discussions in a setting in which you’ll be able to keep your camera (and your microphone!) continuously on. It’s no problem if you need to hide behind an avatar occasionally for brief durations, but please only enroll if you’ll be able to be visually present for most of our time together. (Virtual backgrounds are discouraged.)

Grading: The grading scheme for our seminar is listed below. But of course it is challenging to take courses in this new and unfamiliar format — especially amidst the economic devastation and medical tragedy of a global pandemic. So I will just also gently suggest that I expect the grading of this seminar to be rather more lenient than usual.

Requirements and Evaluation

You will be expected to carefully study the background reading for each meeting, and to discuss the material in class. In addition, you’ll submit brief (~ 1-page) weekly reading responses, and will complete a final seminar paper or project on a relevant topic of your own choosing. (Graduate students taking the seminar as a ‘core’ course may also have some additional requirements, to be determined separately.) In more detail:

1. (20%) Participation in Discussions
   Your major task: just come to class each week prepared to actively and thoughtfully discuss the day’s topic(s)!

2. (30%) Weekly Reading Responses
   For each class, the next week’s readings will be distributed along with a question to which you’ll have to respond in a short (~ 1-page) essay. These questions will typically involve your own views on various theoretical issues involved in the readings, and they will often serve as the jumping-off point for the ensuing class discussion. Essay responses will be due no later than 5 pm on the evening before the class when the relevant readings will be discussed — by email to brian.scholl@yale.edu (with no attachments, please!).

3. (50%) Final Paper or Project
   The only other requirement for the seminar will be a final paper or project, due at the very end of the semester (typically a week before the final grades are due — a date that
May differ for different classes of students). This requirement is flexible: it can be met by a standard research paper (roughly 15 double-spaced pages), by a proposal for some experiments you would like to run (also roughly 15 pages), or by actually constructing and running a pilot experiment (with a brief write-up and/or class presentation). (For senior Psychology majors taking the seminar to fulfill part of their senior requirement, the minimum limit will be 5000 words, and the due dates may be a bit different.) We will discuss the nature of this paper/project more fully in class, and I will frequently highlight potential topics as we encounter them. And at some point near the end of the semester, I will also ask you to submit a brief list of brainstormed ideas for the paper. I invite you to view this paper/project not as an irritating course-specific requirement, but rather as an opportunity to integrate the seminar with your own more general research goals, by actually proposing (and then perhaps running) an experiment of your own design. Indeed, my hope is that this requirement may contribute to your own research goals beyond this seminar (e.g. forming the foundation of a senior thesis or even a published paper, as has often happened in previous iterations of this seminar).

**Tentative Schedule**

The schedule below may very well change, since the topics we cover (and how much time we spend on them) will depend on your interests — especially toward the end of the seminar. But this may serve as a rough guide to the kinds of topics we’ll discuss:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Feb 2</td>
<td><em>Introduction to social perception (the topic and the seminar)</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Feb 9</td>
<td><em>Can social factors change how we see?</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Feb 16</td>
<td><em>Can culture change how we see?</em></td>
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<td>Feb 23</td>
<td>[<strong>No class:</strong> Brian will be giving talks elsewhere this afternoon]</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Feb ??</td>
<td><em>Seeing you seeing me: Gaze perception and social attention</em> [rescheduled f/ 2/23]</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Mar 2</td>
<td><em>Seeing minds in motion: Visual processing of agency and intentionality</em></td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>Mar 9</td>
<td>[<strong>No class:</strong> This is one of those newfangled Yale College ‘break days’]</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Mar 16</td>
<td><em>I like the way you move: Perceiving biological motion</em></td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Mar 23</td>
<td><em>About face: Perceiving and recognizing faces</em></td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>Mar 30</td>
<td><em>I’d vote for her: Perceiving social information in faces</em></td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>Apr 6</td>
<td><em>Ooh la la: Facial attractiveness</em></td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>Apr 13</td>
<td><em>Seeing race: Perceptual stereotyping</em></td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>Apr 20</td>
<td><em>Romantic red?: Social color vision</em></td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>Apr 27</td>
<td><em>Morality, perception, and ‘mind perception’</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>May 4</td>
<td><em>Sniff, sniff: Social olfaction</em></td>
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**Readings**

A finalized reading list for the seminar as a whole is not possible, for the reasons noted above. The exact readings for each meeting will always be distributed at least one week in advance (e.g. announced during the previous session), and will typically involve several research papers, with a total of perhaps 30-60 pages per week.

The readings themselves will be drawn from several sources, including leading science journals (e.g. *Nature, Science*), leading psychology journals (e.g. *Psychological Science,*
BBS), perception journals (e.g. *Perception, Visual Cognition*), social psychology journals (e.g. *JPSP, JESP, Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, Social Cognition*) and perhaps some journals with which you are less familiar (e.g. *Proceedings of the IEEE, Archives of Sexual Behavior, American Journal of Political Science, Experimental Economics, Psychoneuroendocrinology*).

Occasionally, different students may be asked to complete different auxiliary readings, so that we can cover more ground. Other times — quite often, actually! — you may also be asked to read an additional paper of your own choosing, based on citations and discussions in the main assigned papers (or, better, based on your own literature search). In either case, you should be prepared to summarize your auxiliary reading during our class meeting, and I will typically ask you to send it to me ahead of time, along with a 1-paragraph summary of what piqued your interest about it.

There will be no reading packet. All of the readings will be available online, and will be posted on our class webpage, where you can print them out at your leisure, or read them on your computer/tablet/phone/watch, etc.

**Sample Readings**

Though the specific topics that we cover (and how much we cover them) are subject to change based on our collective interests, here are some of the sorts of readings we may explore together — with five sample papers listed per topic:

**Discussion #1: Can social factors change how we see?**


**Discussion #2: Can culture change how we see?**


**Discussion #3: Seeing you seeing me: Gaze perception and social attention**


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**Discussion #4: Seeing minds in motion: Visual processing of agency**


**Discussion #5: I like the way you move: Perceiving biological motion**


**Discussion #6: About face: Perceiving and recognizing faces**


**Discussion #7: I’d vote for her: Perceiving social information in faces**

Hall, C., Goren, A., Chaiken, S., & Todorov, A. (2009). Shallow cues with deep effects: Trait judgments from faces and voting decisions. In E. Borgida et al. (Eds.), *The political psychology of democratic citizenship* (pp. 73-99). OUP.


**Discussion #8: Ooh la la: Facial attractiveness**


**Discussion #9: Seeing race: Perceptual stereotyping**


**Discussion #10: Romantic red?: Social color vision**


**Discussion #11: Morality, perception, and ‘mind perception’**


**Discussion #12: Sniff, sniff: Social olfaction**


