

Syllabus

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376-1309-00: The Social Brain: Critical Perspectives on Science, Society and Neurodiversity

Instructor: Rich Ramsey, PhD.

Contact: See me in class.

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Course description

Meaningful social interactions form the foundation of cohesive societies, with implications extending far beyond psychology and neuroscience into education, technology, policy, and healthcare. Although the scientific study of social behavior has only recently emerged as a distinct research discipline, its applications are already widespread, raising critical questions about the relationship between knowledge creation and societal applications. Simultaneously, multiple scientific disciplines are confronting a “replication crisis,” revealing challenges in reproducing findings and highlighting questionable research practices that demand critical reflection on how scientific knowledge is produced and communicated. This seminar examines the historical, moral, epistemological, and societal contexts of social neuroscience research, encouraging students to question established frameworks and consider a variety of new perspectives. We begin by exploring how a widespread replication crisis has emerged in science and what it means for both research practices and public science literacy. The seminar then applies this critical lens to social neuroscience, examining how reconceptualizing cognitive variation as a natural continuum rather than through deficit models can transform scientific understanding and promote more inclusive societal perspectives that value the rich diversity of human experience and capability.

Learning Outcomes

- To examine critically how neuroscientific concepts, theories, and findings relate to broader historical, moral, and social contexts, enhancing reflective competencies.
- To question the production and validation of scientific evidence within the context of the replication crisis, enabling students to evaluate how knowledge is created, validated, and communicated.
- To understand how conceptualising cognitive variation as a natural continuum challenges deficit-focused models, promoting more inclusive frameworks for society.
- To develop effective communication skills for translating complex scientific concepts to diverse audiences, fostering public understanding of science.

Format

Lectures will be split into two sections with a short break in the middle. I will present material in the first half. In the second half, students will break into small groups and have time to read and discuss relevant papers from that week’s material.

Structure

Introduction

In week 1’s lecture, I will outline the structure of the course, introduce the topics to be covered and give details on the assessment.

Crisis and Reform

In weeks 2 to 4, I will outline critical perspectives associated with the reproducibility crisis in psychology and outline some of the proposed solutions

Social Neuroscience

In weeks 5 – 8, we will cover the neural bases of social cognition in healthy individuals.

Neurodiversity

In weeks 9 – 13, we will cover neurodiverse individuals.

Essay writing Q&A

In week 14, we will discuss features that for well-written essays and students can ask questions regarding the written assessment and spend time planning and writing their assignments.

Schedule

Semester: Autumn

When: Tuesdays 10:15am to 12noon

Location: LFW B2

Week	Date	Lecture	Description
1	Sep 16	Intro	Introduction to the course
2	Sep 23	Crisis Part 1	Is psychological science in a crisis?
3	Sep 30	Crisis Part 2	The reform movement in psychological science
4	Oct 7	Crisis Part 3 (Recorded lecture)	A problem in theory?
5	Oct 14	Crisis Part 4 (No lecture - reflective writing)	Does the crisis extend beyond psychology?
6	Oct 21	Social Neuroscience Part 1	Social Neuroscience 1
7	Oct 28	Social Neuroscience Part 2	Social Neuroscience 2
8	Nov 4	Social Neuroscience Part 3	Social Neuroscience 3
9	Nov 11	Neurodiversity Part 1	Re-thinking neurodiversity
10	Nov 18	Neurodiversity Part 2	Guest lecture: A view from the clinic
11	Nov 25	Neurodiversity Part 3	Loneliness
12	Dec 2	Neurodiversity Part 4	Autism
13	Dec 9	Neurodiversity Part 5	Attention and Impulsivity
14	Dec 16	Essay Writing	Essay Writing

Assessment

The assessment is based on each student writing an essay. In week 1, comprehensive assessment details will be provided.

Submission date: Monday January 5th 2026.

Assessment criteria:

Threshold

Adequate understanding of the material is demonstrated, which is largely based on information provided within lectures.

Good

Generally accurate coverage of relevant material, which shows evidence of independent thought that extends lecture materials. Well organised and structured.

Excellent

Consistently accurate coverage of relevant material, which shows a depth of independent thought that comprehensively extends lecture materials. Well organised and structured with a clear and efficient writing style.

Feedback

Feedback is provided in the following ways:

1. Lecture discussion throughout the semester.
2. Written feedback on each student's assignment.

Supporting Materials

Lectures

Lecture slides will be posted on Moodle before each lecture.

Texts, journal articles and books

The course will feature select material from books and journal articles. This material will be available on this website, via Moodle or via ETHZ's library holdings and subscriptions.