

PSYC 51: Thinking

Winter 2025

MWF 12:50-1:55 pm

Instructor

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Course Description

Understanding how people think is a central quest in cognitive psychology. The extraordinary human capacity for logic and reason have earned our species the moniker “rational animal”. But research points to a dizzying array of cognitive functions that may come into play when we think. Thought may be infused with emotion, blinded by illusion, relativized by culture, or biased by ideology or self-interest. Thought is framed by mental categories, constrained by selective attention, memory and forgetting, and skewed by the familiar or the novel. In this course, we will examine research on many of these facets of thinking -- from lucidly logical thinking to brazenly irrational thinking to aesthetic thinking that is neither. Along the way, we will consider a range of related issues: slow and fast thinking; conscious and unconscious processing; verbal and spatial thinking; the relationship between thought and language; imagination, creativity, and artistic thinking; attributions of causality; moral thinking; and judgments of people and groups. We will also touch upon the evolutionary bases for thought and a comparison of human intelligence with artificial intelligence.

Fulfills a Social Analysis (SOC) requirement.

Learning Objectives

To develop and demonstrate a nuanced ability to analyse, synthesize, and evaluate patterns of thought in terms of contemporary research in cognitive psychology.

To tease apart the cognitive components of thought and judgment in fast and slow modes of thinking, including: the impact of evidence; argument; selective attention, memory and forgetting; emotion; implicit bias; and social in-group/out-group attributions.

To recognize fallacies and cognitive illusions in one’s own thinking and that of others.

To generalize the applicability of these research-based analyses to novel contexts.

To demonstrate a principled understanding of how the structure and functioning of the brain can so easily give rise to irrationality, self-contradiction, bias, and internal conflict.

To acquire an appropriate scepticism of fast-thinking patterns that bombard us in our personal, professional, and political lives.

To acquire the habit of critiquing putative slow-thinking arguments that may be infused with fast-thinking biases.

To become more thoughtful.

Teaching Method and Philosophy

My teaching philosophy is one of *active learning* based on research about learning. *Passive learning* (learning that is assessed solely by high-stakes examinations) yields learning outcomes that may be impressive in the short term but are not enduring and do not generalize to new contexts. In active learning, assessments are more varied and frequent, students are challenged to apply and critique situations that go beyond “what’s going to be on the exam”, and real-time participation and contribution are emphasized.

Students are expected to have done the assigned reading before class in order to participate meaningfully. Attendance is mandatory in order to build a shared basis for productive discussion.

Assessment

Quizzes: two quizzes, each worth 20%

Final presentation and paper: 30%

Debates: 10%

Preparedness for and quality of class participation: 20%

Readings and Resources

Textbook: Daniel Kahneman (2011). *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Handouts on selected topics.

Research articles for debates and final paper.

Class Climate

In order to achieve the stated learning objectives, class discussion must have four characteristics: 1) freedom to express one’s views, even if they may be controversial, 2) a willingness to face critique of one’s views; 3) a civil decorum characterized by listening, turn-taking, and mutually respectful critique; and 4) a focus on evidence, reason, and critiques thereof, as informed by the research material covered in the class.

Student Accessibility Services

Students requesting disability-related accommodations and services for this course are required to register with Student Accessibility Services (SAS; [Apply for Services webpage](#); student.accessibility.services@dartmouth.edu; 1-603-646-9900) and to request that an accommodation email be sent to me in advance of the need for an accommodation. Then, students should schedule a follow-up meeting with me to determine relevant details such as what role SAS or its [Testing Center](#) may play in accommodation implementation. This process works best for everyone when completed as early in the quarter as possible. If students have questions about whether they are eligible for accommodations or have concerns about the implementation of their accommodations, they should contact the SAS office. All inquiries and discussions will remain confidential.

Mental Health and Wellness

The academic environment is challenging, our terms are intensive, and classes are not the only demanding part of your life. There are a number of resources available to you on campus to support your wellness, including: the [Counseling Center](#) which allows you to book triage appointments online, the [Student Wellness Center](#) which offers wellness check-ins, and your [undergraduate dean](#). The student-led [Dartmouth Student Mental Health Union](#) and their peer support program may be helpful if you would like to speak to a trained fellow student support listener. If you need immediate assistance, please contact the counselor on-call at (603) 646-9442 at any time. Please make me aware of anything that will hinder your success in this course.

Honor Principle

All activities and performances in this course are governed by the Honor Principle.