PSYC 461-003: Autism (Fall 2021)

MW 10:30-11:45 am; 3.0 credits; Location: Krug Hall 253

Instructor: Allison Jack, PhD (she/her)
Email: ajack@gmu.edu
Office Hours: By appt. via Zoom
Office: David King Hall Rm 2050

Course description

In this seminar, we will discuss research on autism at multiple levels (biological, cognitive, social) and from multiple perspectives (autistic individuals, scientists, clinicians, disability studies scholars, etc.). Throughout, we will consider ethical issues arising in how we think, study, teach, treat, and write about autistic people. The first half of the course will provide you with a foundation in key issues and concepts in both the history of autism science and the current state of the field. The second half of the course will focus on our growing knowledge of issues critical to segments of the spectrum that are underrepresented in terms of research and access to services. In our final sessions, we will discuss intervention approaches and the neurodiversity movement.

Goals & objectives

1. To learn how to critically evaluate studies and claims about autism.
2. To become familiar with a variety of (often competing) perspectives on autism spectrum conditions.
3. To consider how well science characterizes autism, and how this influences those affected.
4. To develop the ability to thoughtfully and respectfully write and talk about these issues.

Required Materials

All readings & resources will be provided on the class Blackboard site. You will also be required to complete a project on a memoir written by an autistic author. You will learn more about this project later in the semester; all titles are available for purchase on Amazon or from other resellers at reasonable prices.

Grading & Course Requirements

Grade Components

Your final grade will be determined by the following elements:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attendance &amp; Participation</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reaction Papers</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Midterm Exam</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Article Presentation</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Memoir Essay</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final Exam</td>
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1 Many thanks to Vikram Jaswal at UVA for generously sharing portions of his “Autism: From Neurons to Neighborhoods” syllabus text, activities, and readings with me.
Grading Scale

Your final grade will be calculated using the percentages above, with 100% as the highest possible total grade. Letter grades will be assigned based on the standard format (scores of 0.5 and above are rounded up, anything below 0.5 is rounded down):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A+</td>
<td>97-100%</td>
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<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>93-96%</td>
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<td>A-</td>
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<td>C-</td>
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<td>D</td>
<td>60-69%</td>
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<td>F</td>
<td>&lt; 60%</td>
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Attendance & Participation

What is high-quality participation? This is not a lecture class. This means that you should have completed the readings before we meet, have taken notes, generated ideas, and/or tracked down additional material you want to share (e.g., an optional or another reading, TED talk, podcast, news article, blog post, etc.). High-quality participation also includes active listening, that is, considering the perspectives of your classmates, and framing follow-up questions that challenge, build upon, or seek clarification about their comments. These contributions are just as valuable as a "brand-new" thought.

I find speaking in front of others very challenging. How can I participate? To facilitate equitable contributions from everyone, I have created us a room on YoTeach!. When you come to class, you will be provided with a PIN that you can use to access the backchannel for that day’s class session. You can use it to share comments and questions throughout our discussion that will be visible to everyone. I encourage you to experiment with this form of participation, especially if you find speaking up to be challenging.

What if I miss a class?

- **Unexcused absences.** You are entitled to one (1) free “life happens” unexcused absence for which you will not be penalized. Each subsequent unexcused absence will lower your final grade 2.5%.
- **Excused absences.** If you have an appointment, or need to be away during one of our meetings, please let me know in advance/as soon as possible after. Because this class depends on everyone’s participation, please do not ask for more than one (1) absence to be excused.
- **Absences for COVID-19 or other communicable illness.** Please don’t come to class if you are sick or suspect you may be carrying a communicable illness. My infant is vulnerable due to his age and a medical condition, and I appreciate your help keeping him safe. Email me and we will arrange for you to participate remotely.

I’m having trouble getting to class on time. Everyone runs late occasionally, but chronic lateness can be disruptive to others and to your own learning experience. Please arrange a meeting with me if you are late more than twice.

Will you let me take this class all-online? Per the Office of the Provost, I am not permitted to offer individual students in the class a fully online modality given that this is listed in the course catalog as an in-person experience. Students who anticipate needing to complete the entire semester online should transfer to online courses via the add-drop process. However, I am happy to work with you about accommodations for a portion of the semester (for example, due to quarantine needs); please reach out to me before the classes you will not be able to attend in person as I will need to set up some extra technology for you.

Reaction Papers

Prior to at least ten (10) meetings, you’ll be required to post to the appropriate topic within the “reaction papers” forum/discussions of Blackboard a short essay of ~200-300 words (~1-1.5 pages double-spaced) on the prompt listed for that meeting (the prompt is available in the far right column in the course
calendar below and in the “view full description” option within a topic in the forum). Compose the essay in e.g., Word, save to your local machine, and then cut/paste into Blackboard. Five need to be completed before 10/12 and five after. Each is worth up to 2%. These should be thoughtful, polished, well-argued, and grammatically correct pieces, with a clear thesis backed up with evidence from the readings and/or material you track down. Stream-of-consciousness is not appropriate. These must be posted by 9 a.m. on the day of the relevant meeting, as they will help structure the class discussion. Late assignments will not be accepted and you must be in class to receive credit for your essay (because they’re meant to serve as fodder for the discussion).

Article Presentation

In the latter half of the semester, we will focus on different aspects of intersectionality in autism research, including: sex; gender; level of support needs; communication modes; race & ethnicity; culture, geography, & language; and age. You will be asked to read Cascio et al. (2021) and after considering your topic preference, I will assign you to a group of about 3 people, with whom you will read the article assigned for your class session and locate one additional article on the topic. Together, you will lead discussion for the first 15 minutes of class on the day of your topic, through a combination of brief slides and discussion questions. Detailed assignment guidelines will be available on Blackboard.

Memoir Essay

Over the course of the semester, you will read a memoir related to autism and turn in an essay that evaluates how well the science matches the account. Thereafter, you will spend one full class session sharing what you learned from these accounts with each other. Details of the assignment will be discussed in class and available on Blackboard.

Midterm & Final Exam

These are untimed, open-book/open-note exams each worth 20% of your final grade and consisting of a combination of short answer and essay questions. The exam questions will be available on Blackboard well in advance of the due date and more details will be provided in class.

Working together

This class will include a mix of individuals from different backgrounds and with various neurotypes. I expect that you will:

- Listen and respond to your classmates’ perspectives with respect.
- Ask me for what you need in order to maximize your learning, with the expectation that I will take your needs seriously while balancing fairness concerns.
- Consider how your background and neurotype influence your perspective on the issues discussed in class. What privileges (and challenges) do you have that might impact your views?
- Share as much or as little about your identity as feels comfortable to you.

How will you let me know I’m speaking too much? How can I let you know you’ve misunderstood me? I will raise my hand while you are speaking to indicate that your contribution to class discussion is running long or veering off-topic. This is a cue for you to wrap up your thought in the next minute or so. You should also feel free to raise your hand while I am answering your question if I have misunderstood you. I will then pause to allow you to clarify what you are asking.

How can I get accommodations for a disability? I encourage all students with disabilities, including non-visible disabilities, to discuss their needs with me. Mason Disability Services is also available to help; they are located in Student Union Building I (SUB I), Suite 2500 and can be reached at ods@gmu.edu | 703-993-2474.
I'm autistic. Do you have any special expectations for me? Please feel no obligation to “camouflage.” You are welcome to stim in class as needed. You should also feel free to come and go as necessary to self-regulate (you don’t need to ask me first). If you are unsure about an academic or social expectation related to this class, please feel free to ask me for clarification.

I'm a student parent who needs accommodations. I am committed to supporting student parents. While I maintain the same high expectations for all students in my class regardless of parenting status, I am happy to problem solve with you in a way that makes you feel supported.

When can I expect to hear a response back from my email? You can expect a response from me within 24-48 hours, Monday through Friday. I try to respond as promptly as possible, but must balance other obligations such as childcare.

Who are you? I am an assistant professor in the Applied Developmental Psychology and Cognitive Behavioral Neuroscience areas. You are welcome to address me as either Allison or Prof. Jack. My research over the past 12 years or so has focused mainly on how designated sex (and more recently, gender identity and expression) relates to various features of autism (such as genetics, brain function, cognitive traits, age of diagnosis, and quality of life). My career and research interests have also been strongly shaped by my experience of various anxiety disorders. I believe that ongoing learning and listening are critical qualities for a good teacher, scientist, & human; I welcome frank feedback about the course.

Course Schedule

The full course schedule with topics, required & optional readings, key concepts, assignments, and writing prompts is available for download on Blackboard.
University & Course Policy Details

Policy details are provided in full below. I first describe key elements more simply, and at the end I include the verbatim language required by Mason.

Simplified Policy Language

Enrollment, Add, Drop, & Withdrawal

Students are responsible for verifying their enrollment in this class. Schedule adjustments, including add/drop and (for undergrads) selective withdrawal, should be made by the deadlines published in the Schedule of Classes.

Important Dates:

- First day of Fall Classes: Monday August 23
- Last day to add: Monday August 30
- University Closed: Monday September 6. (Labor Day)
- Last day to drop: Tuesday, September 7
- Unrestricted withdrawal period: Wednesday September 15 – Monday September 27
- University Closed: Monday October 11 (Fall Break)
- University Closed: Wednesday November 24-Friday November 26 (Thanksgiving)
- Reading Days: Monday December 6 and Tuesday December 7

Regularly check Blackboard & Mason email

You are responsible for regularly checking your official Mason email account and the Blackboard site for this class. I will send important messages about this class to your Mason email address and post announcements on Blackboard, including in the event of class cancellation or a change of location/modality for a particular session.

Use of Electronic Devices

I will expect you to use your electronic devices (such as laptops, tablets, phones, etc.) as tools to further engage with the seminar (for example via YoTeach). However, engaging in activities that are unrelated to class may be distracting to peers who can see your screen. Remember that everyone has different attentional and executive function capacities, and be courteous to those around you. While I generally expect all phones to be silenced during class, I understand that emergencies, illnesses, and family obligations may on occasion require you to receive messages. I appreciate you sitting near an exit and taking your call outside when you expect this may be the case.

Academic Integrity

George Mason University has an Honor Code, which requires all members of this community to maintain the highest standards of academic honesty and integrity. I do not deal with any potential issues “off the record.” In order to ensure that I respond to all cases in an unbiased fashion, I refer all potential instances of cheating, plagiarism, lying, or stealing to the Honor Committee for adjudication.

Diversity, Equity & Inclusion

The Psychology Department seeks to create a learning environment that fosters respect for people across identities. We welcome and value individuals and their differences, including gender expression and identity, race, economic status, sex, sexuality, ethnicity, national origin, first language, religion, age and ability.

Sexual Harassment, Sexual Misconduct, & Interpersonal Violence

As your professor and as a person, know that I care about you and your well-being and stand ready to provide support and resources as I can. As a faculty member, I am a responsible employee, which means that I am required by University policy and federal law to report what you tell me to Mason’s Title IX Coordinator (703-993-8730; cde@gmu.edu). The Title IX Coordinator’s job is to ensure that the reporting student receives the resources and support that they need, while also reviewing the information presented to determine whether further action is necessary to ensure survivor safety and the safety of the University community. If you would rather keep this information confidential, there are Confidential Employees you can talk to on campus, including at the Student Support & Advocacy Center (ssac.gmu.edu | 703-380-1434), Counseling & Psychological Services (caps.gmu.edu | 703-993-2380), and Student Health Services (shs.gmu.edu | 703-993-2831). The worst possible situation would be for you or your friend to remain silent when there are so many here willing and able to help.
Detailed policy language:

**Title IX Statement.** Notice of mandatory reporting of sexual assault, sexual harassment, interpersonal violence, and stalking: As a faculty member, I am designated as a “Non-Confidential Employee,” and must report all disclosures of sexual assault, sexual harassment, interpersonal violence, and stalking to Mason’s Title IX Coordinator per University Policy 1202. If you wish to speak with someone confidentially, please contact one of Mason’s confidential resources, such as Student Support and Advocacy Center (SSAC) at 703-380-1434 or Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) at 703-993-2380. You may also seek assistance or support measures from Mason’s Title IX Coordinator by calling 703-993-8730, or emailing titleix@gmu.edu.

**The Honor Code.** Students in this course are expected to behave at all times in a manner consistent with the GMU Honor System and Code. (http://mason.gmu.edu/montecin/plagiarism.htm). Students are encouraged to study together as much as possible throughout the course, however, no assistance, sharing of information, or discussion of exam items or answers between students may take place. For all work, the name that appears on the paper must be the author. Violations of the Honor Code will not be tolerated in this course and will be immediately reported according to GMU procedures. The instructor reserves the right to use software to determine the extent to which the work is the student’s. The instructor for this course reserves the right to enter a failing grade to any student found guilty of an honor code violation.

**Disability Help.** Disability Services at George Mason University is committed to providing equitable access to learning opportunities for all students by upholding the laws that ensure equal treatment of people with disabilities. If you are seeking accommodations for this class, please first visit https://ds.gmu.edu/ for detailed information about the Disability Services registration process. Then please discuss your approved accommodations with me. Disability Services is located in Student Union Building I (SUB I), Suite 2500. Email: ods@gmu.edu | Phone: (703) 993-2474

**Miscellaneous.** Official Communications via GMU Email: Mason uses electronic mail to provide official information to students. Examples include communications from course instructors, notices from the library, notices about academic standing, financial aid information, class materials, assignments, questions, and instructor feedback. Students are responsible for the content of university communication sent to their mason email account, and are required to activate that account and check it regularly. As a tip, please include your G-number and the course section in the subject of the email in all email correspondences with all instructors. Recording of classroom lectures is not allowed without explicit permission by the instructor.

Students may not reproduce (including uploading to the Internet) any portion of the exam. Students who attempt to photograph or in any way capture information about the exam for others’ use will be reported for an honor violation.

Life is stressful and we all need a little support sometimes. Students are encouraged to contact Counseling & Psychological Services (3129 Student Union Building I, http://caps.gmu.edu/) at 993-2380 for assistance with any kind of psychological/life problem or crisis situation. I can help with referrals for students with particular counseling needs so please feel free to talk with me for help with anything.