Mind, Brain and Psychopathology
ANTH 423

Fall Semester 2019

HONOUR’S UNDERGRADUATE SEMINAR

Professor:
Dr. Samuel Veissière
Assistant Professor, Dept. of Psychiatry
Co-Director, Culture, Mind, and Brain Program
McGill University
samuel.veissiere@mcgill.ca

2:35 PM - 5:25 PM T Education Building 431 Sep 03, 2019 - Dec 02, 2019

Office:
Ludmer Research & Training in Psychiatry -- Room 136
1033 Pine Avenue West
(top of Peel/ corner Pine)
Prof office hours: by appointment, or as announced during paper-writing periods

Keywords:
Cultural evolution; cognition and culture; evolutionary psychiatry; social and cultural psychiatry; anthropology and philosophy of psychiatry; critical psychiatry; adaptationist approaches to psychopathology; youth mental health; looping effects; cultural phenomenology; “placebo” effects; resilience; antifragility; social pathology
Course description

As the global burden of disease has shifted from infectious diseases to chronic conditions, the World Health Organization has now identified depression as the leading cause of disability worldwide, with an estimated 300 million people suffering from the condition (an 18 per cent increase between 2005 and 2015), and another 260 million affected by anxiety disorders. In Canada, an estimated 1 in 5 people experience a mental health problem or illness each year, while 1.2 million children and youth are thought to be affected by mental illness. According to these models, approximately 20 per cent of Canadian youth will have developed a mental illness by age 25.

What is going on? Making sense of this ‘epidemic’ raises difficult questions about an interacting set of biological, psychological, ecological, economic, historical, social, and cultural factors. This seminar will follow a cultural-evolutionary approach to explore these complex topics.

Can we identity, for example, a set of changing modes of economic relations, social interactions, and belief systems that may contribute to rises in mental illness and specific patterns of distress? Or again: is ‘mental illness’ a ‘disease of progress’, or is it universal? Is the very notion of ‘mental health’ culture-bound and historically specific? Are biomedical psychiatric nosologies applicable to all humans? Does mental illness manifest in different ways across cultures? Are there gendered and sexually dimorphic patterns in the distribution of disorders? Do most psychopathologies harness normal human traits that evolved to support specific adaptive functions, but become maladaptive under certain ecological conditions?

To answer these questions, we must begin by interrogating the notion of ‘mind’ itself, and review current debates on the evolution and cross-cultural variations of human cognitive functions. After investigating the validity of current biomedical models (and folk biomedical models!) to the human experience at large through various controversies in critical psychiatry, medical anthropology, and social psychology, we will return to evolutionary questions to explore the ‘maladaptive hypothesis’ as it pertains to specific disorders.

This broad, multidisciplinary exploration of the human experience of wellness and distress may then assist us in identifying ‘healthy’ and ‘pathological’ ecological conditions that solicit the most fragile and anti-fragile elements of our evolving dispositions.

Required reading

In addition to articles linked in the course schedule below, the professor will assign additional readings to each group assigned to a specific presentation topic (see assignments below). Articles linked in the course schedule are required reading for all students.
**Evaluation**

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<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
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<td>Intro questionnaire</td>
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<td>Group presentation</td>
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<td>Paper proposal</td>
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<td>Final paper</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-evaluation and participation</td>
<td>10%</td>
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**Assignments**

**Intro questionnaire**

The professor will email a link to a short online introductory questionnaire. Data from the questionnaire will be used to sort students into 6 groups. Due online **Friday September 6**. Students are encouraged to get to know each other and guess the ‘trait’ criterion used for generating their group based on a fundamental commonality.

Link to questionnaire here:

https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/C7L6B23

**Group presentation**

5 groups of 4 to 6 students will be determined by the professor and announced on **September 10**. Each group will be assigned one topic by the professor. The topic will consist of one specific disorder or key dimension in psychopathology (e.g., *depression, OCD, PTSD, substance abuse, internet use disorders, gender and mental health*, etc.).

The students will need to draw on class material, additional references given to their group by the professor, and references of their own to explore the *maladaptive hypothesis* as it pertains to the disorder in focus. The disorder must be discussed in terms of evolved traits that might confer, or have conferred a specific fitness advantage in human environments, and may become maladaptive (harm everyday functioning) when over-excited under certain conditions.

The presentation should last 90min (half a class), with at least 15-20min dedicated to structured class discussion or another interactive exercise designed and led by the group.

Students are free to delegate tasks as they please and present their findings in a format of their choice.
Final paper
Min 3000 words; Max 6000 words. Any referencing style, as long as consistent throughout. Short papers encouraged. Paper should be of publishable quality, free of unexplained jargon and cover a topic of the students’ choice related to cultural-evolutionary approaches to psychopathology. The topic must be different from the one explored in the students’ group presentation. Students are expected to identify relevant references on their own, and use at least six references from the class material. Due December 10 on MyCourse

Paper proposal

2 pager minimum with tentative title, topic, research question, and tentative paper outline. Min. 6 references from outside the syllabus and 3 from the syllabus. Due November 1st on MyCourses

Self-evaluation and participation

One–page (min) first-person essay reflecting on commitment, interest and learning curve. Due December 10

(The Institution™ demands that the below be included in all course outlines)

McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/ for more information).(approved by Senate on 29 January 2003)

L'université McGill attache une haute importance à l'honnêteté académique. Il incombe par conséquent à tous les étudiants de comprendre ce que l'on entend par tricherie, plagiat et autres infractions académiques, ainsi que les conséquences que peuvent avoir de telles actions, selon le Code de conduite de l'étudiant et des procédures disciplinaires (pour de plus amples renseignements, veuillez consulter le site www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/).”

“In accord with McGill University’s Charter of Students’ Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.” (approved by Senate on 21 January 2009 --- see also the section in this document on Assignments and evaluation.)
The FRENCH TRANSLATION about this right may also be used on your course outlines: "Conformément à la Charte des droits de l’étudiant de l’Université McGill, chaque étudiant a le droit de soumettre en français ou en anglais tout travail écrit devant être noté (sauf dans le cas des cours dont l’un des objets est la maitrise d’une langue)."

Class schedule and links to readings

September 3 — Meet & Greet

Introductions of class topics and approaches.

No required readings.

September 10 — The Cultural-Evolutionary Approach


Initial group brainstorming exercise

Expectations and pedagogy explained and discussed

September 17 — Cognitive evolution I


September 24 — Cognitive evolution 2


Bloom, P. Natural-Born Dualists. Edge.org


October 1 — Sociocultural Neurophenomenology: the case of sleep

Guest lecture by Dr. Elizaveta Solomonova


October 8 — The nosology debates 1


October 15 — The nosology debates 2


October 22 — The pharmacology debates 1


October 29 — The pharmacology debates 2


November 5 — The phenomenology debates 1


Optional:

November 12 — The phenomenology debates 2


November 19 — The “placebo” debates


November 26 The madness of crowds revisited


Taleb, N. N. (2012). Antifragile: how to live in a world we don't understand (Vol. 3). London: Allen Lane