

The University of Hong Kong
Department of Psychology

Departmental Seminar

*Flexibility and redundancy in emotion communication
and empathic responding*

Date: April 2, 2013 (Tuesday)

Time: 11:30 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.

Venue: Rm 8.13, 8/F, The Jockey Club Tower, Centennial Campus, HKU

Speaker: Dr. Skyler Hawk

Department of Youth & Family

Utrecht University

The Netherlands

About the Speaker:

Dr. Skyler Hawk is a post-doctoral fellow at the Research Center for Adolescent Development at Utrecht University. He received his PhD in Experimental Social Psychology from the University of Amsterdam. His research has primarily focused on emotional communication and empathy, both between strangers and in specific relationship contexts (e.g., parents and children), as well as how affective and cognitive processes interact to produce prosocial or antisocial responses to others' expressed emotions.

Abstract:

People show empathy toward each other on a daily basis, by recognizing emotional expressions, mimicking nonverbal behaviors, and even “catching” others' feelings. These responses can be triggered by several social cues, such as nonverbal signals in the face or voice, or even by merely imagining oneself in another's emotional situation. There thus appears to be substantial flexibility in how individuals reach an empathic end-state, allowing for such responding across a multitude of social contexts and sources of information. In this talk, I will focus on the potential equifinality of empathy, presenting evidence that 1) certain nonverbal behaviors show both heightened efficacy, and substantial redundancy, for communicating particular emotions; 2) individuals mimic others' emotion expressions across several nonverbal channels, such as smiling after hearing laughter, and this “cross-channel” mimicry influences both emotional processing and the intensity of subjective empathy; and 3) individuals can experience complex empathic emotions, like embarrassment, through purely cognitive processes in absence of any emotion information communicated by the other. Thus, individuals in particular contexts can rely upon different combinations of intrapersonal and interpersonal cues in order to understand, share, and respond adaptively to other's feelings.