

# **SUMMER SPEAKER SERIES**

Wednesday, June 5, 2019 • 2:30pm, Dupuis Hall Room 215



**DR. THOMAS ARMSTRONG, Whitman College**

**TALK: How (not) to treat disgust in mental disorders: New insights from eye tracking**

## **TALK DESCRIPTION**

Disgust is a basic emotion that evolved under selective pressure from pathogens. Although it plays an important role in preventing disease transmission, too much disgust can cause problems. At the individual level, proneness to disgust has been linked to several disorders, including obsessive-compulsive disorder, eating disorders, and sexual dysfunctions. At the societal level, disgust is often harnessed to dehumanize marginalized groups (e.g., sexual minorities, immigrants), and it can also interfere with the adoption of sustainable practices (e.g., eating insects, recycling sewage water). Dr. Armstrong will provide an overview of disgust and its relations to mental disorders. Then, he will discuss a series of experiments that explore how disgust is resistant to several learning pathways underlying cognitive-behavioral therapy (e.g., habituation, extinction), yet also potentially amenable to novel learning pathways (e.g., conceptual reorientation). The talk will conclude with future directions for exploring how to reduce disgust more effectively.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Dr. Thomas Armstrong received his Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology from Vanderbilt University and is an assistant professor at Whitman College. He uses eye tracking to study attentional biases in anxiety-related disorders. He is particularly interested in strategic attentional biases observed during prolonged exposure to stimuli. His work has revealed that PTSD is uniquely characterized by strategic monitoring of threat, whereas specific phobias are uniquely characterized by strategic avoidance. Further, he has found that strategic monitoring of threat is a conditioned fear response, whereas strategic avoidance of threat is a conditioned disgust response. Dr. Armstrong also uses eye tracking to advance basic and applied research on disgust. Using "oculomotor avoidance" as a disgust indicator, he has revealed that disgust is highly resistant to habituation, yet potentially vulnerable to novel cognitive interventions such as conceptual reorientation.