

CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES IN PSYCHOLOGY: PSY 311-01

Tuesdays and Thursday, 1:00 – 2:15 p.m.
D1227 Mackinac Hall

Instructor: Brian Bowdle

Office: 2311 Au Sable Hall

Office Hours: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 11:30 a.m. – 12:30 p.m., and by appointment

Phone: 616-331-2420

E-mail: bowdleb@gvsu.edu

Required Texts

Keith E. Stanovich (2013) – *How to Think Straight about Psychology* (10th edition)

Michael Shermer (2011) – *The Believing Brain*

Jesse Bering (2013) – *Perv*

Adrian Raine (2013) – *The Anatomy of Violence*

Peter Gray (2013) – *Free to Learn*

In addition to the books listed above, a small number of short articles will be assigned throughout the semester to tie in with specific discussions and homework assignments. Required articles will be announced during class, and will be made available to you on our Blackboard site via the Additional Readings page.

Course Description

This course offers a series of critical thinking and communication exercises as ways of exploring current controversies in the field of psychology. Along the way, we will read about and discuss some recent theories (and relevant empirical studies) that tackle the most fundamental question of psychology: *What makes us who we are?* Among the general topics we will grapple with are nature versus nurture, free will versus determinism, the psychology of religious and political ideologies, human sexuality, the causes of violence, and evolutionary explanations of human behavior. These general topics will serve to ground a number of debates about more specific controversial issues (race relations, gender identity, pedophilia, drug addiction, terrorism, the insanity defense, parenting styles, etc.) throughout the semester. This course is worth three credits.

Course Evaluation

The maximum number of points you can receive in this course is 180, and point totals will be translated into grades at the end of the term using this scale:

167 – 180 points = A	131 – 138 points = C
162 – 166 points = A-	126 – 130 points = C-
157 – 161 points = B+	121 – 125 points = D+
149 – 156 points = B	113 – 120 points = D
144 – 148 points = B-	108 – 112 points = D-
139 – 143 points = C+	107 points or less = F

Your grade will be cumulatively determined by the following:

Attendance and participation. Your attendance of this course will be recorded, and – along with your in-class participation – is worth 30 points (1/6 of your grade). You are allowed to miss two classes without penalty; after that, however, each missed class will count against your final grade.

In order to facilitate our discussions, you are expected to write and bring to class three questions about the assigned book chapters every time a set of chapters is required reading for that day. The questions you compose should both (a) demonstrate that you have thought about the reading, and (b) be designed to stimulate potentially interesting discussion of the topics at hand. Your questions will be collected at the end of class, and will contribute to your participation points.

Homeworks. Expect to receive a homework assignment almost every week we meet. Taken together, these homeworks will be worth 30 points (1/6 of your grade). You are allowed to miss one homework without penalty. Late homeworks will not be accepted.

Quizzes. Five multiple-choice quizzes will be given this term, each of which covers one of the required texts in its entirety (see the course schedule for the dates of these quizzes). Taken together, these quizzes will be worth 30 points (1/6 of your grade). Missed quizzes cannot be made up.

In-class presentation. Working in a group, you will give a presentation to the rest of the class in which you take on a “hot topic” in psychology. Your presentation will be worth 30 points (1/6 of your grade). (Detailed instructions for the in-class presentations will be given on September 13th.)

Position paper. During the second half of this course, you will compose a substantial essay arguing for one side or the other of a current controversy in psychology. The composition process will be divided into three phases:

- 1) Write a draft of your position paper. (The draft will be due on November 15th.)
- 2) Write short reviews of three other position papers submitted by your classmates. (Your reviews will be due on November 29th.)
- 3) Write a revision of your position paper given the reviews you get back from your classmates. (The revision will be due on December 12th.)

Overall, the position paper assignment will be worth 30 points (1/6 of your grade). (Detailed instructions for the position papers will be given on November 1st.)

On-line discussion forum. The development of critical thinking is in many ways a social enterprise, requiring thoughtful interactions with other individuals whose perceptions, experiences, and beliefs may differ from your own. Therefore, you are expected to participate in an on-line discussion forum, which can be accessed through this course’s Blackboard site. Each week (which we will define as lasting from one Tuesday to the next) you should plan on making a minimum of three thoughtful and substantial (100 words or more) contributions to the forum. One of your weekly contributions must be an original item – a position, idea, or experience that you would like to share – which should be posted as a new thread, and which needs to be posted no later than Friday evening. Two more of your weekly contributions must be responses to other people’s messages. Any additional posts you make each week can be either type of contribution – it’s your choice. Your participation in the discussion forum will be worth 30 points (1/6 of your grade).

Here are some guidelines for using this forum:

- 1) While I will not be giving you any specific questions to answer on the forum, make sure that your contributions stay “on topic” by relating them to one or more of the assigned readings and/or various issues discussed in class that week.
- 2) Avoid the temptation to post all of your week’s contributions at once – this forum will work best if everyone in the class remains actively engaged in the evolving discussions throughout the week. (And be aware that the spacing of your contributions will be taken into consideration when giving credit for your participation in the discussion forum!)
- 3) Avoid redundancy. It is fine to create a new thread about a topic that others have discussed, but make sure that the content of your post brings something new to the table, as opposed to simply rephrasing a question that has already been asked or an observation that has already been made.
- 4) Relatively short (one- or two-sentence) posts are by no means forbidden, and may often be useful if you are moved to continue a discussion in a thoughtful manner. For instance, if you’d like someone to clarify a point they just made, do not feel like you have to compose a 100-word message asking for clarification when a 10-word question would serve the purpose.
- 5) Because this forum is “threaded,” please make sure that your responses are posted appropriately. That is, if you are responding to a specific message, post your response as a reply to that message, and not as a reply to a different message or as a new thread.

- 6) And finally, I expect the tone of our discussion forum to be respectful and courteous throughout. It is perfectly fine to express different (and perhaps even “unpopular”) viewpoints, and to openly disagree with others, but insulting or antagonistic posts have no place in this forum and will not be tolerated.

Please be aware that if you wish to receive better than a C (22 out of 30 points) for this activity, you will need to go beyond the minimum of three substantial weekly contributions on a fairly regular basis.

Additional Thoughts

Many of the discussions that we will have during this course will no doubt provoke strong feelings, and will sometimes challenge your customary ways of thinking about issues. As you share your thoughts with others during class, complete your assignments, and post messages on our discussion forum, I urge you to pay attention to how you come to hold the beliefs that you have. What sources of knowledge do you use to support your beliefs? How do you respond to evidence or arguments that question a belief that you hold? What do you do when you recognize contradictions among some of your beliefs? When do you find that it makes sense to change a belief? These are all important questions to consider...

Taking this Course as a Supplemental Writing Skills (SWS) Course

You must receive a grade of C or better both on the position paper assignment and in the course overall in order to get SWS credit. A C- will not do.

Class Correspondence and Announcements

Important class announcements will regularly be posted on Blackboard. You should make it a habit of logging onto our Blackboard site two to three times each week. Also, I will be using Blackboard to send out e-mails to members of this class, which means that you should regularly check the messages on your GVSU student e-mail account.

Students with Disabilities

If there is any student in this class who has special needs because of a learning, physical, or other disability, please contact me and Disability Support Resources (DSR) at (616) 331-2490. Furthermore, if you have a disability and think you will need assistance evacuating this classroom and/or building in an emergency, please make me aware so that the university and I can develop a plan to assist you. It is the *student's responsibility* to request assistance from DSR.

Disclaimer

The schedule of topics and assignments is subject to change. Any such changes will be announced during class.

COURSE SCHEDULE

<u>Topic/Event</u>	<u>Date(s)</u>	<u>Book Readings</u>
<i>Introduction</i>	8/30, 9/1	-
<i>The Science of Psychology</i>		
What Is Science?	9/8	<i>Think Straight</i> , pp. 1-72
Psychological Research	9/13	<i>Think Straight</i> , pp. 73-142
Intuition versus Empiricism	9/15 *	<i>Think Straight</i> , pp. 143-205
<i>The Psychology of Belief</i>		
Screening and Discussion of <i>Do the Right Thing</i>	9/20, 9/22	-
Belief-Dependent Realism	9/27	<i>Believing Brain</i> , pp. 1-138
Very Superstitious	9/29	<i>Believing Brain</i> , pp. 139-228
The Truth Is Out There	10/4 *	<i>Believing Brain</i> , pp. 229-344
<i>Group Meetings</i>	10/6	-
<i>Group Presentations</i>	10/11, 10/13 10/18, 10/20	- -
<i>Sex ...</i>		
Screening and Discussion of <i>XXY</i>	10/25, 10/27	-
Deviant versus Normal	11/1	<i>Perv</i> , pp. 1-136
The Road Less Travelled	11/3 *	<i>Perv</i> , pp. 137-233
<i>... and Violence</i>		
Screening and Discussion of <i>A Clockwork Orange</i>	11/8, 11/10	-
The Criminal Brain	11/15	<i>Anatomy of Violence</i> , pp. 1-181
Nature versus Nurture	11/17	<i>Anatomy of Violence</i> , pp. 182-272
A Brave New World?	11/22 *	<i>Anatomy of Violence</i> , pp. 273-373
<i>Redefining Childhood</i>		
Screening and Discussion of <i>Moonrise Kingdom</i>	11/29, 12/1	-
Then and Now	12/6	<i>Free to Learn</i> , pp. 1-109
A Matter of Trust	12/8 *	<i>Free to Learn</i> , pp. 110- 235
<i>Final Meeting</i>	12/12 (12:00 – 1:50 p.m.)	-
* QUIZ DATE!		