

CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES IN PSYCHOLOGY: PSY 311-01

Tuesdays and Thursdays, 1:00 – 2:15 p.m.
2310 Au Sable Hall

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Course Description

This course offers a series of critical thinking and communication exercises as ways of exploring current psychological controversies. A wide range of such controversies will be discussed, including ongoing debates within the field of psychology, theoretical disagreements between psychology and neighboring disciplines, and contentious social issues that evoke competing perspectives on human nature. After successfully completing the course, students will be able to (a) identify areas of psychological controversy and evaluate arguments based on empirical findings; (b) demonstrate the ability to think critically about opposing arguments and form their own reasoned judgments; and (c) research and express ideas clearly in both written and oral formats. This course is worth three credits.

Required Books

Keith E. Stanovich (2018) – *How to Think Straight about Psychology* (11th edition)

Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson (2015) – *Mistakes Were Made (but Not by Me)* (2nd edition)

Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt (2018) – *The Coddling of the American Mind*

Christina Hoff Sommers (2013) – *The War Against Boys* (2nd edition)

Jesse Bering (2013) – *Perv*

Matt J. Rossano (2013) – *Mortal Rituals*

These six books constitute the core of this course, and everyone is expected to keep up with the readings – and to come to class prepared to discuss any chapters that are assigned for that day (see the course schedule at the end of this syllabus for a list of our reading dates).

In addition to the books listed above, a small number of 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 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:

169 – 180 points = A	131 – 138 points = C
162 – 168 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

Grades 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. **You are allowed to miss two class meetings without penalty; after that, however, each missed class will count against your final grade.**

Homeworks. Fifteen short homework assignments will be due this term. Upcoming homeworks will be announced during class, and will be made available to you on our Blackboard site via the Assignments page. Each homework

response must be typed, not handwritten, and must be turned in during class on the date it is due. **Late homeworks will not be accepted.** Taken together, the homework assignments will be worth 30 points.

Quizzes. Six multiple-choice quizzes will be given this term, each of which covers one of the required books in its entirety (see the course schedule for the dates of these quizzes). Taken together, these quizzes will be worth 30 points. **Missed quizzes cannot be rescheduled, but your lowest quiz grade will be dropped.**

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. Detailed instructions for the in-class presentations will be given on January 15th.

Position paper. During the second half of this course, you will compose a substantial (1500- to 2000-word) 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 March 21st.)
- 2) Write short reviews of three other position paper drafts submitted by your classmates. (Your reviews will be due on April 9th.)
- 3) Write a revision of your position paper given the reviews you get back from your classmates. (The revision will be due on April 22nd.)

Overall, the position paper assignment will be worth 30 points. Detailed instructions for the position papers will be given on February 26th.

Online discussion forums. 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 a series of online discussion forums, which can be accessed on our Blackboard site via the Discussion Forums page. To be more specific, there will be six different discussion forums, each of which will revolve around one of our six required books. **For each of these forums, you should plan on making a minimum of five thoughtful and substantial (100 words or more) contributions.** One of these contributions must be an original item – a question, position, idea, or experience that you would like to share – which should be posted as a new thread. Four more of these contributions must be responses to other people’s messages. Any additional posts you make to any of the forums can be either type of contribution – it’s your choice. Your participation across all six of the discussion forums will be worth 30 points.

Here are some additional guidelines for using the online forums:

- 1) While I will not be giving you any specific questions to answer, make sure that your contributions to each forum stay “on topic” by relating them to the contents of the book at hand. This will still allow for plenty of flexibility in terms of what you can write about, of course – not only do all six of our books cover lots of conceptual territory, but the various twists and turns of our in-class discussions for each of these books are also fair game for your posts. Moreover, if you can find interesting ways of relating the issues covered in one of our books to current events, to personal experiences, and/or to material you have discussed in other courses here at GVSU, I encourage you to write about these things as well.
- 2) Each one of our six discussion forums will have a limited window of availability – it will appear three days prior to our first scheduled discussion of the relevant book, will remain active across all of the class meetings devoted to that book, and will disappear three days after our last scheduled discussion of the book. Once a forum has disappeared, you can no longer post to it, so make sure that you stay on top of the discussion forums (and the books themselves).
- 3) Avoid the temptation to post all of your contributions to a given forum at once – these forums will work best if everyone in the class remains actively engaged in the discussions as they evolve from one day to the next.
- 4) Avoid starting new threads on the very last day a discussion forum is available. Otherwise, many of your classmates may not have enough time to consider your contribution and post thoughtful responses before the forum disappears.

- 5) 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.
- 6) Although I expect most of your contributions to be substantial (100 words or more), 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.
- 7) Because these forums are "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.
- 8) And finally, I expect the tone of our discussion forums 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 these forums 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 online activity, you will not only need to contribute to all six discussion forums, but will also need to go beyond the minimum of five substantial contributions to each forum on a regular basis.

Additional Thoughts

Many of the discussions that we will have during this course will no doubt provoke strong feelings and challenge your customary ways of thinking about the issues at hand. As you share your thoughts and reactions with others during class, complete our various assignments, and post messages on our discussion forums, I urge you to repeatedly ask yourself the following questions: How did you come to hold the beliefs that you currently have? What sources of knowledge do you use to support your beliefs? How do you typically respond to evidence or arguments that run contrary to your most cherished beliefs – and how do you typically view people who confront you with such evidence or arguments? What do you do when you recognize contradictions among two or more of your beliefs? And what would it take to make you change a belief that has always struck you as being obviously true? These are all questions that are worth returning to again and again throughout this course ... and throughout life, when you get down to it.

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

This course is designated SWS. Completion of WRT 150 with a grade of C or better (not C-) is a prerequisite. SWS credit will not be given to a student who completes this course before completing the prerequisite. SWS courses adhere to certain guidelines. Students turn in a total of at least 3000 words of writing. Part of that total may be essay exams, but a substantial amount of it is made up of essays, reports, or research papers. For any significant paper assignments, students will receive assistance with revising their drafts before submitting their final papers for grading. At least four hours of class time will be devoted to writing instruction. At least one-third of the final grade in the course is based on writing assignments. Students must complete this course with a grade of C or better in order to receive SWS credit.

Students with Disabilities

If there is any student in this class who has special needs because of a cognitive, physical, or other disability, please let me know, and contact Disability Support Resources (DSR) at (616) 331-2490. Although students with disabilities are held to the same academic standards as all other students, accommodations will be provided as appropriate.

GVSU Policies

This course is subject to all of the GVSU policies regarding enrollment, grading, academic integrity, and fairness listed at <http://www.gvsu.edu/coursepolicies/>.

Disclaimer

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

COURSE SCHEDULE

TOPIC/ACTIVITY	DATE(S)	BOOK READINGS
<i>Introduction</i>	1/8, 1/10	---
<i>Group Presentation Instructions</i>	1/15	---
<u>The Science of Psychology</u>		
The Nature of Science	1/17	<i>Think Straight</i> , pp. 1-49
Research in Psychology	1/22	<i>Think Straight</i> , pp. 50-98
Intuition versus Reason	1/24 *	<i>Think Straight</i> , pp. 99-145
<u>The Psychology of Belief</u>		
The Power of Self-Justification	1/29	<i>Mistakes Were Made</i> , pp. 1-121
<i>Group Meetings</i>	1/31	<i>Mistakes Were Made</i> , pp. 122-238
Honesty and Forgiveness	2/5 *	<i>Mistakes Were Made</i> , pp. 239-312
<i>Group Meetings</i>	2/7	---
<i>Group Presentations</i>	2/12, 2/14 2/19, 2/21	--- ---
<i>Position Paper Instructions, Part 1</i>	2/26	---
<u>The New Culture Wars</u>		
Three Great Untruths	2/28	<i>American Mind</i> , pp. 1-122
<i>No Class – Spring Break!</i>	3/5, 3/7	---
The Rise of Safetyism	3/12	<i>American Mind</i> , pp. 123-232
Wising Up	3/14 *	<i>American Mind</i> , pp. 233-269
<u>Gender and Education</u>		
Shifting Inequalities	3/19	<i>War Against Boys</i> , pp. 1-90
<i>Position Paper Instructions, Part 2</i>	3/21	<i>War Against Boys</i> , pp. 91-147
Character Development	3/26 *	<i>War Against Boys</i> , pp. 148-205
<u>Sexual Morality</u>		
Deviant versus Normal	3/28	<i>Perv</i> , pp. 1-66
Nature versus Nurture	4/2	<i>Perv</i> , pp. 67-166
The Road Less Travelled	4/4 *	<i>Perv</i> , pp. 167-233
<i>Position Paper Instructions, Part 3</i>	4/9	---
<u>Evolution and Human Behavior</u>		
Ancient Ways	4/11	<i>Mortal Rituals</i> , pp. 1-84
The Power of Ritual	4/16	<i>Mortal Rituals</i> , pp. 85-148
The Origins of Religion	4/18 *	<i>Mortal Rituals</i> , pp. 149-200
<i>Final Meeting</i>	4/22 (12:00 – 1:50 p.m.)	---

* QUIZ DATE!