

PSYCHOLOGY CAPSTONE: PSY 492-01

Tuesdays and Thursdays, 8:30 – 9:45 a.m.
122 Lake Huron Hall

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Course Description

The purpose of this capstone course is to explore different theories of human nature, the relationships among these theories, and their implications not only for (a) personal insight and growth, (b) contemporary culture and its institutions, and (c) the future of our species, but also for (d) the proper role, scope, and conduct of psychological science. Our various explorations will revolve around the central theme of *self and society*, and we will adopt a seminar format (guided student discussions as opposed to formal lectures) for most of our class meetings. This course is worth three credits.

Required Texts

There are eleven (yes, eleven!) required texts for this course:

- Sigmund Freud (1930) – *Civilization and Its Discontents*
- B. F. Skinner (1948) – *Walden Two*
- F. S. Michaels (2011) – *Monoculture*
- Ernest Becker (1971) – *The Birth and Death of Meaning*
- Joel Gold and Ian Gold (2014) – *Suspicious Minds*
- Sarah Blaffer Hrdy (2009) – *Mothers and Others*
- James J. Heckman (2013) – *Giving Kids a Fair Chance*
- Ara Norenzayan (2013) – *Big Gods*
- Sebastian Junger (2016) – *Tribe*
- Jonathan D. Moreno (2012) – *Mind Wars*
- Louis G. Herman (2013) – *Future Primal*

Understanding the relationship between individual and collective processes ideally involves an interdisciplinary approach, and many of the above books come from outside of the field of psychology. Nevertheless, nearly all of these books closely align with particular psychological perspectives on self and society. Our discussions and assignments will refer extensively to these texts and, as you read each one, you should keep the following questions in mind:

- How does the author conceptualize human nature?
- How are the dynamics between the self and one's society (or civilization or culture) viewed from this psychological perspective?
- What are the potential moral, civic, and/or political implications of this perspective?
- Do you agree with the author's claims, and why or why not?
- How does this psychological perspective relate to previous perspectives we have explored? (Watch for the historical evolution of various psychological ideas and issues as you read these texts.)

In order to get the most out of these texts, I encourage all of you to (1) **pace your reading of each of the texts**, with the aim of reading a chapter or two each day during the week or so prior to our first write-ups and discussions of the material; (2) **engage in a "mental dialogue" with the author as you read the text** – that is, actively question (rather than passively accept) each of the author's claims; and (3) **take notes as you progress through the text**, keeping track of your various reactions to and struggles with the material.

In addition to the books listed above, a number of (mostly short) articles will be assigned throughout the semester to tie in with specific discussions and homework assignments. These articles should be treated as essential readings – they will serve to reify certain theoretical claims from the books, to update older ideas in light of newer empirical

evidence, and to fill in important conceptual gaps between the psychological perspectives we will be considering. Required articles will be announced during class, and will be made available to you on our Blackboard site via the Additional Readings page. Please note that I reserve the right to give unannounced quizzes on these articles, and am likely to do so if it seems that not everyone has done the assigned readings. Any such quizzes will be factored into your participation score for this course.

Course Evaluation

The maximum number of points you can receive in this course is 100, and point totals will be translated into grades at the end of the term using this scale:

93 – 100 points = A	73 – 76 points = C
90 – 92 points = A-	70 – 72 points = C-
87 – 89 points = B+	67 – 69 points = D+
83 – 86 points = B	63 – 66 points = D
80 – 82 points = B-	60 – 62 points = D-
77 – 79 points = C+	59 points or less = F

Your grade will be cumulatively determined by the following:

Attendance and participation. Your attendance will be recorded, and – along with your in-class participation – is worth 20 points. With the exception of the date of your panel discussion (see below), you are allowed to miss two of our class meetings without penalty.

Homeworks. Six homework assignments will be given this semester. More often than not, these homeworks will ask you to extend the psychological perspective at hand to a new set of observations. Each homework assignment must be completed using APA style. A template for formatting homeworks will be handed out with the first assignment.

The six homeworks are together worth 30 points (5 points each). Late homework assignments will not be accepted.

Panel discussion. Once during this semester, you and two or three of your classmates will be assigned to a panel to discuss the current book in front of the rest of the class. A few of days in advance of each panel discussion, a short list of questions about the material (and the psychological perspective it represents) will be posted on Blackboard. Acting in the role of moderator, I will pose these questions to the panel at appropriate points during the discussion. The panel members will then take turns responding to these questions, and are encouraged to engage with one another (in a civil manner, of course) whenever differences of opinion emerge.

Additionally, all panel members are expected to bring to class a list of three to five comments and questions of their own about specific claims from the current text that they either reacted strongly to (positively or negatively) or were confused about. At least some of these comments and questions should be introduced during the panel discussion, and every panel member's list will be turned in at the end of the discussion.

Each panel discussion will be divided into two parts. For the first 30 to 40 minutes, the discussion will primarily be between panel members. For the next 20 to 30 minutes, the discussion will open up to include the rest of the class, who can then offer their own opinions or pose their own questions to the panel.

Please keep in mind that a panel discussion is typically defined as discussion of a particular topic by a small number of speakers in front of an audience. Given this, you should treat the first part of your panel discussion as a focused conversation between yourself and your fellow panelists. In other words, you should be talking mostly to each other, rather than directing all of your responses at the instructor/moderator (me) or at the rest of the class. Of course, all bets are off when we open things up during the second part of the panel discussion.

I realize that it can be difficult to publicly hold forth on a topic that you have only recently begun to grapple with. And it would be unreasonable to treat every member of a discussion panel as an “expert” on the assigned reading. But your panel discussion can and should extend beyond the covers of the book. Each of you has a wealth of personal experiences – and probably some long-held beliefs about human nature (which you should continuously

reexamine as you progress through this course) – that can potentially be related to the material you are discussing. Moreover, I have little doubt that all of you have read and talked about theories and findings in other courses here at GVSU that can be brought to bear on any of the psychological perspectives being explored in this class. I encourage you to cast a wide net as you prepare for your panel discussion, and to refer to things that you have observed, felt, done, and learned in other contexts as you react to the assigned reading.

Your panel discussion is worth 10 points. Panel assignments will be posted on Blackboard during the second week of class.

Peer-responded journal. The most important component of this course, grade-wise, is the peer-responded journal, which is worth 40 points. Please read the following very carefully.

Eight times during the semester, you will submit a substantial (**600 words minimum, no maximum**) journal entry engaging with the current book. These entries should be written informally – although I expect you to write using complete grammatical sentences, you should not be composing formal essays with polished beginnings, middles, and endings. Rather, jump into the material whenever something strikes you as provocative, problematic, or perplexing. Do not merely summarize the material or attempt to demonstrate your “mastery” of the text. Instead, *struggle* with it – the greater the struggle, the better the journal entry.

Please note I am using the term “struggle” in the broadest and most positive sense possible. That is, you should not limit the focus of your journal entries to aspects of the material that you found difficult to comprehend, but should more generally (and more importantly) discuss things that challenged your customary beliefs and perceptions, that sparked new questions in your mind, that led to new insights or even inspired you in some way, that raised red flags for being logically inconsistent or factually incorrect, or that otherwise prompted a strong reaction from you. In other words, do not simply treat the term “struggles” as being synonymous with “confusions.”

(And to the extent that you do write about confusions you had with any given text in your journal entries, the struggles you describe should be deep as opposed to shallow ones. For example, if you simply write something like “I have no idea what Freud was getting at in Chapter 1 of *Civilization and Its Discontents*” without saying anything else about the chapter, this hardly suggests much effort on your part in trying to work out possible interpretations of the material. Likewise, if you come across an unfamiliar word, concept, reference, or allusion in any of the assigned readings, you should try doing a web search for clarification before citing it as a point of confusion. The bottom line here is that you should treat every initial roadblock to comprehension as an invitation to further thinking and learning, rather than as an excuse to check out until the going gets easier.)

Every time a journal entry is due, there will be two journal responses due three to four days later. These responses should be substantial (**300 words minimum, no maximum**) engagements with the journal entries you receive from the two other members of your peer-responded journal group. In these responses, you should spend little time praising – and no time condescending to – either the journal entry or the journalist. Instead of making judgments, grab on to some of the points raised by the journalist and further the discussion. Once again, no formal beginning, middle, and ending is expected or desired. In all of your responses, please speak directly to your classmates. Do not refer to them in the third person: “Chris makes a really great point here when he says that...” I will be reading everything you write, but you are each other’s primary audience.

No individual journal entry or journal response will be graded, but an overall grade will be given for your entire set of entries and responses. You will not be scored in terms of “getting the right answers,” as there is no such approved list. To receive a high grade for your efforts, do the following on a regular basis:

1) **Produce a sufficient quantity of relevant writing in a timely manner.** (If you do this, it will be hard to get less than 24 out of 40 points.)

2) In addition to (1) above, **struggle, be engaged, open up, and deal with the difficult.** That is, along with describing the sections of the text that struck you as provocative, problematic, or perplexing, discuss **why** you found these sections provocative, problematic, or perplexing – and how you attempted to come to grips with the material.

And refrain from simply rehashing your original entries in your peer responses. (If you do these things, it will be hard to get less than 28 out of 40 points.)

3) In addition to (1) and (2) above, **demonstrate significant improvement from the beginning of the semester to the end.** (If you do this, it will be hard to get less than 32 out of 40 points.)

4) In addition to (1), (2), and (3) above, **demonstrate intellectual imagination.** In other words, extend your thinking beyond the covers of the book, and try to approach the material in nonobvious yet illuminating ways. And write your peer responses in the spirit of collaborative exploration. (If you do these things, it will be hard to get less than 36 out of 40 points.)

5) If you want to receive the maximum number of points possible for the peer-responded journal, **do all of the above in the extreme**, which will typically require you to go well beyond the minimum word counts. And keep in mind that the best submissions will grapple in some way with the “big picture” being painted by the author(s).

Detailed instructions for how to submit your journal entries and journal responses will be posted on Blackboard during the second week of class.

About plagiarism. GVSU’s Student Code is very clear on the issue of plagiarism:

Any ideas or material taken from another source for either written or oral presentation must be fully acknowledged. Offering the work of someone else as one's own is plagiarism. The language or ideas taken from another may range from isolated formulas, sentences, or paragraphs to entire articles copied from books, periodicals, speeches or the writings of other students. The offering of materials assembled or collected by others in the form of projects or collections without acknowledgment also is considered plagiarism. Any student who fails to give credit in written or oral work for the ideas or materials that have been taken from another is guilty of plagiarism.

Plagiarism of any form will not be tolerated, and is grounds for failure of this course. But there should be no need to worry about this - just read, think, and write for yourself!

The Capstone Forum

I suspect that most of you will wind up feeling strongly about at least two or three of the texts, movies, or psychological perspectives that we'll be exploring in this course, and might appreciate the opportunity to engage further with some of your classmates as we progress through these works and theories. Therefore, I have created a tool for enabling such discussions outside of class – the Capstone Forum – that can be accessed via Blackboard.

Perhaps you'd like to start up a conversation with like-minded individuals. Perhaps you'd like to begin a debate. Or perhaps you'd simply like to survey the opinions of your classmates. The Capstone Forum will allow you to do any of the above.

Please note that participation in this forum is optional. That being said, thoughtful contributions to the Capstone Forum can be used to boost your participation score in this class. In other words, this forum is also an extra-credit opportunity.

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.

Film Screenings

With only one or two exceptions, the films we will be watching and discussing are not your typical Hollywood productions – they exist more as provocations to thought than as mere entertainments, and you may find some of them disturbing (or even offensive) in terms of the attitudes and behaviors they portray. But the field of psychology ideally covers the full range of human thought and activity, and I encourage you to approach each of these films with an open mind and a clinical eye.

Students with Disabilities

If there is any student in this class who has special needs due to any kind of disability, please contact the Disability Support Resources (DSR) at (616) 331-2490, and let me know as well. Furthermore, if you have a disability and think you will need help 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.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Introduction

- August 30 Overview of course.
- September 1 The human condition.
- September 6 NO CLASS – LABOR DAY BREAK

PART ONE: SANITY AND SOCIETY (Life in the Company of Others)

The Psychodynamic Perspective

- September 8 Screening of *Night and Fog* (Alain Resnais, 1955)
- Finish reading *Civilization and Its Discontents* and submit journal entry by 6:00 p.m. on Friday, September 9.
- September 13 (before class) Submit journal responses.
Panel discussion of *Civilization and Its Discontents*.
- September 15 Turn in and review homework assignment 1 (Freud reconsidered).
Topic for further consideration: Science and pseudoscience.

The Behaviorist Perspective

- September 20 Screening of *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir, 1998).
- September 22 Screening of *The Truman Show*, continued.
- Finish reading *Walden Two* and submit journal entry by 6:00 p.m. on Friday, September 23.
- September 27 (before class) Submit journal responses.
Panel discussion of *Walden Two*.
- September 29 Turn in and review homework assignment 2 (*Monoculture*).
Topic for further consideration: Language and thought.

The Existential Perspective

- October 4 Narrative identity.
- October 6 Screening of *It's Such a Beautiful Day* (Don Hertzfeldt, 2012).
- Finish reading *The Birth and Death of Meaning* and submit journal entry by 6:00 p.m. on Friday, October 7.
- October 11 (before class) Submit journal responses.
Panel discussion of *The Birth and Death of Meaning*.
- October 13 Turn in and review homework assignment 3 ("What Are We So Afraid Of?")
Topic for further consideration: Biopolitics.

The Maddening Crowd

→ Finish reading *Suspicious Minds* and submit journal entry by 6:00 p.m. on Friday, October 14.

October 18 (before class) Submit journal responses.
Open discussion of *Suspicious Minds*.

October 20 The ties that bind – and their undoing.

PART TWO: THE HUMAN TRAJECTORY (Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?)

The Evolutionary Perspective I – It Takes a Village

October 25 Sociobiology and its offshoots.

October 27 Screening of *Happy* (Roco Belic, 2011).

→ Finish reading *Mothers and Others* and submit journal entry by 6:00 p.m. on Friday, October 28.

November 1 (before class) Submit journal responses.
Panel discussion of *Mothers and Others*.

November 3 Turn in and review homework assignment 4 (*Giving Kids a Fair Chance*).
Topic for further consideration: Social network dynamics.

The Evolutionary Perspective II – Climbing Jacob's Ladder

November 8 Screening of *The Ballad of Narayama* (Keisuke Kinoshita, 1958).

November 10 Screening of *The Ballad of Narayama*, continued.

→ Finish reading *Big Gods* and submit journal entry by 6:00 p.m. on Friday, November 11.

November 15 (before class) Submit journal responses.
Panel discussion of *Big Gods*.

November 17 Turn in and review homework assignment 5 (*Tribe*)
Topic for further consideration: Victim mentality.

Life During Wartime

→ Finish reading *Mind Wars* and submit journal entry by 6:00 p.m. on Friday, November 18.

November 22 (before class) Submit journal responses.
Open discussion of *Mind Wars*.

November 24 NO CLASS – THANKSGIVING BREAK

November 29 Violent extremism.

Bringing It All Back Home

December 1 The cultural niche.

December 6 Screening of *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (Werner Herzog, 2010).

December 8 Screening of *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, continued.

→ Finish reading *Future Primal* and submit journal entry by 6:00 p.m. on Friday, December 9.

December 12 (before class) Submit journal responses.

(10:00 a.m.) Panel discussion of *Future Primal*.

Turn in and review homework assignment 6 (three big ideas).

Closing thoughts.

Disclaimer

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