

PSYCHOLOGY CAPSTONE: PSY 492-04

Tuesdays and Thursdays, 10:00 – 11:15 a.m.
1117 Au Sable 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 for personal insight and growth, for contemporary culture and its institutions, and for the future of our species. Throughout this course, we will also consider the proper scope, role, 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.

Learning Objectives

Upon successfully completing this course, students should be able to (a) identify concepts associated with major theoretical perspectives in psychology, (b) describe the strengths and weaknesses of competing theoretical perspectives, (c) determine whether and how competing theoretical perspectives can be integrated, (d) apply theories and basic research findings to real-world situations, (e) recognize sources of bias in psychological research, (f) appreciate interdisciplinary approaches to psychological questions, and (g) write in a professional style.

Required Texts

There are ten (yes, ten!) required texts for this course, which are listed here in the order we will be reading them:

- 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*
- Frans de Waal (1982) – *Chimpanzee Politics*
- Alan Page Fiske and Tage Shakti Rai (2015) – *Virtuous Violence*
- Sebastian Junger (2016) – *Tribe*
- John R. Hibbing, Kevin B. Smith, and John R. Alford (2014) – *Predisposed*
- Joseph Henrich (2016) – *The Secret of Our Success*
- Louisa Hall (2015) – *Speak*

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 move from one book to the next.)

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 articles will be assigned throughout the semester to tie in with specific discussions and homework assignments. (Expect to receive two articles per week on average.) 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:

94 – 100 points = A	73 – 76 points = C
90 – 93 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 book we have just finished reading in front of the rest of the class. A few 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 handed out 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 book we have just finished reading. 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.

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

The films we will be watching and discussing this semester 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 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

Introduction

January 8 Overview of course.

January 10 Reading in the digital era – a preliminary conversation.

SELF AND SOCIETY, PART ONE: CLASSIC POSITIONS

The Psychodynamic Perspective

January 15 Screening of *Walkabout* (Nicolas Roeg, 1971).

January 17 Screening of *Walkabout*, continued.

→ Finish reading *Civilization and Its Discontents* and submit journal entry by 6:00 p.m. on Friday, January 18.

January 22 (before class) Submit journal responses.
Panel discussion of *Civilization and Its Discontents*.

January 24 Turn in and review homework assignment 1 (psychodynamics reconsidered).
Topic for further consideration: Science versus pseudoscience.

The Behaviorist Perspective (and the Utopian Impulse)

January 29 Environmental determinism.

January 31 The tragedy of the commons.

→ Finish reading *Walden Two* and submit journal entry by 6:00 p.m. on Friday, February 1.

February 5 (before class) Submit journal responses.
Panel discussion of *Walden Two*.

February 7 Turn in and review homework assignment 2 (*Monoculture*).
Topic for further consideration: Language and thought.

The Existential Perspective

February 12 Screening of *The Ballad of Narayama* (Keisuke Kinoshita, 1958).

February 14 Screening of *The Ballad of Narayama*, continued.

→ Finish reading *The Birth and Death of Meaning* and submit journal entry by 6:00 p.m. on Friday, February 15.

February 19 (before class) Submit journal responses.
Panel discussion of *The Birth and Death of Meaning*.

February 21 Terror management theory.

Someone Told Me It's All Happening at the Zoo

→ Finish reading *Chimpanzee Politics* and submit journal entry by 6:00 p.m. on Friday, February 22.

February 26 (before class) Submit journal responses.
Open discussion of *Chimpanzee Politics*.

February 28 Turn in and review homework assignment 3 (social psychology as history).
Topic for further consideration: Happiness versus meaning.

March 5, 7 No class – spring break!

SELF AND SOCIETY, PART TWO: RECENT PROPOSALS

The Cultural Perspective (and the Grammar of Human Relationships)

March 12 Screening of *The Battle of Algiers* (Gillo Pontecorvo, 1966).

March 14 Screening of *The Battle of Algiers*, continued.

→ Finish reading *Virtuous Violence* and submit journal entry by 6:00 p.m. on Friday, March 15.

March 19 (before class) Submit journal responses.
Panel discussion of *Virtuous Violence*.

March 21 Turn in and review homework assignment 4 (*Tribe*).
Topic for further consideration: Diversity and community.

The Dispositional Perspective (and the Psychology of Bedrock Social Dilemmas)

March 26 Sociobiology and its offshoots.

March 28 Moral foundations theory.

→ Finish reading *Predisposed* and submit journal entry by 6:00 p.m. on Friday, March 29.

April 2 (before class) Submit journal responses.
Panel discussion of *Predisposed*.

April 4 Turn in and review homework assignment 4 (promoting social mobility).
Topic for further consideration: Descriptive representation.

The Evolutionary Perspective

April 9 Screening of *Lo and Behold: Reveries of the Connected World* (Werner Herzog, 2016).

April 11 Screening of *Lo and Behold: Reveries of the Connected World*, continued.

→ Finish reading *The Secret of Our Success* and submit journal entry by 6:00 p.m. on Friday, April 12.

April 16 (before class) Submit journal responses.
Panel discussion of *The Secret of Our Success*.

April 18 Design principles for cooperative groups.

The Shape of Things to Come?

→ Finish reading *Speak* and submit journal entry by 6:00 p.m. on Friday, April 19.

April 24 (before class) Submit journal responses.
(8:00 a.m.) Open discussion of *Speak*.
Turn in and review homework assignment 6 (three big ideas).
Closing thoughts.