

PSY 492-09
THE PSYCHOLOGY CAPSTONE
Tuesdays and Thursdays, 11:30 a.m. – 12:45 p.m.
312 Eberhard Center

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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 psychological perspectives, (c) determine whether and how competing 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.

Blackboard

Our Blackboard website is an integral component of this course. You will be using Blackboard to access required articles and films, as well as to submit all our writing assignments. And I will be using Blackboard to post important announcements and to send messages to members of this class.

Course Materials

Throughout the semester, we will be grappling with several provocative books, a few films, and a variety of articles drawn from both academic and nonacademic publications. These materials are described below to help you prepare for our intellectual journey. The dates of all reading and film assignments are given in our course schedule.

Books. There are eight (yes, eight!) required books 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*
- Viktor E. Frankl (1962) – *Man's Search for Meaning*
- Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore (1967) – *The Medium Is the Massage*
- Patricia S. Churchland (2019) – *Conscience*
- David Sloan Wilson (2019) – *This View of Life*
- Jens Heycke (2023) – *Out of the Melting Pot, Into the Fire*
- Sofia Samatar (2024) – *The Practice, the Horizon, and the Chain*

Understanding the relationship between individual and collective processes ideally involves an interdisciplinary approach, and some of the above books come from outside of the field of psychology. Nevertheless, nearly all of them closely align with specific psychological perspectives on self and society.

Our discussions and assignments will refer extensively to these books 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?

In order to get the most out of these books, I encourage all of you to (a) **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; (b) **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 (c) **take notes as you progress through the text**, keeping track of your various reactions to and struggles with the material.

Films. We will also be watching six films this semester and discussing them in relation to our books. These films are *Apocalypse Now* (1979); *The Truman Show* (1998); *Persona* (1966); *The Ballad of Narayama* (1958); *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010); and *Do the Right Thing* (1989). You can access all these films via Blackboard, where I have embedded them as Panopto files. You should be able to play them on a wide range of devices, but I encourage using the biggest screen and the best speakers available to you.

Please note that the films assigned for this course 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 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 urge you to approach each of these films with an open mind and a clinical eye.

Articles. Twelve articles will be assigned throughout the semester to tie in with specific films and homework assignments. These articles 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. All such articles are available on Blackboard.

Course Evaluation

The maximum number of points you can receive in this course is 120, and point totals will be translated into grades at the end of the semester using this scale:

111 – 120 points = A	87 – 92 points = C
108 – 110 points = A-	84 – 86 points = C-
105 – 107 points = B+	81 – 83 points = D+
99 – 104 points = B	75 – 80 points = D
96 – 98 points = B-	72 – 74 points = D-
93 – 95 points = C+	71 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. You are allowed to miss one class meeting for any reason without penalty. After that, however, each unexcused absence will deduct one point from your attendance score.

GVSU's official attendance policy, which includes information about what counts as an excused absence, can be found at <https://www.gvsu.edu/catalog/2021-2022/navigation/academic-policies-and->

[regulations.htm#anchor-44](#). I will need some kind of documentation to forgive more than one missed session.

Given the nature of this course, everyone is expected to keep up with our assigned readings and films, and to be fully present during our class discussions and activities. And, of course, everyone should do their very best to arrive to class on time.

When you look over our course schedule, you will see that all our required class meetings are listed in **bold**. You will also see that although this is a Tuesday/Thursday course, we will not officially convene on Tuesdays during our six film weeks. (Everyone will be watching the assigned movies on their own time instead of during class.) However, I will be hosting informal coffee klatches on these six Tuesdays. Our coffee klatches are strictly optional events – they are intended to be more social than academic, and I will not be taking attendance during these gatherings.

Talking Points. Six times this semester, you will be submitting a pair of talking points about an assigned film and a companion article. These talking points should be written such that, if raised during class, they could stimulate some interesting conversations about the material. They can include questions you would like to ask, scenes or quotes you would like to discuss, connections you made with other things you have learned or experienced, or your own personal reactions – be they intellectual or emotional – to what you watched and read. Your talking points should demonstrate that you engaged with both the film and the article. Oh, and anytime you offer a question as a talking point, you should indicate how you yourself would respond to the question.

Each pair of talking points is worth 2 points, for a combined total of 12 points. Due dates can be found in our course schedule. **Late talking points will not be accepted.**

Peer-Replied Journal. For each of our books, you will be assigned to a journal group on Blackboard consisting of yourself and two other members of the class. The online journaling that you will do in these groups is one of the most important components of this course, both pedagogically and grade-wise, and it is worth 48 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 whichever 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.

Keep in mind that 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 “struggle” as being synonymous with “confusion.”

(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 replies due three days later. These replies should be substantial (**300 words minimum, no maximum**) engagements with the journal entries you receive from the two other members of your journal group. When composing your replies, 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 your replies, please speak directly to your classmates – that is, do not refer to them in the third person. I will be reading everything you write, but you are each other's primary audience. And yes, you should read the replies you receive from the other members of your journal group – and you can respond to these replies whenever you would like to turn a discussion into a conversation.

No individual journal entry or peer reply will be graded, but an overall score will be given for your entire set of entries and replies. You will not be evaluated in terms of "getting the right answers," as there is no such approved list for any of our books. To receive high marks 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 32 out of 48 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 book 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 replies. (If you do these things, it will be hard to get less than 36 out of 48 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 40 out of 48 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 replies in the spirit of collaborative exploration. (If you do these things, it will be hard to get less than 44 out of 48 points.)
- 5) If you want to receive the maximum number of points possible for the peer-replied journal, **do all 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) of the book.

Journal entries and peer replies may be turned in up to two days late for partial credit, but out of respect for the other members of your group, you should aim to complete all your journaling on time. Detailed instructions for how to submit your entries and replies will be posted on Blackboard during the second week of class.

Homework Assignments. Six homework assignments will be due this semester, all of which will be made available to you on Blackboard. As often as not, these assignments will ask you to extend whichever psychological perspective we have been considering to a new set of ideas or observations, and they will typically require you to engage with a target article. Each of the six homework assignments is worth 5 points, for a combined total of 30 points. Due dates can be found in our course schedule. **Late homework assignments will not be accepted.**

All homework assignments must be completed using APA style and turned in as either Word documents or PDF files. Guidelines for formatting and submitting these assignments will be posted on Blackboard by the third week of class.

Panel Discussion. Once during this semester, you and two or three of your classmates will be assigned to a panel to discuss whichever 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 announced 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 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.

Each panel discussion will be divided into two parts. For the first 45 minutes, the discussion will primarily be between panel members. For the remaining 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 your responses at the 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 text. 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 text.

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

Students with Disabilities

If anyone in this class 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 the GVSU policies regarding enrollment, grading, academic integrity, and fairness listed at <http://www.gvsu.edu/coursepolicies/>.

Generative AI Policy

Generative AI tools (such as ChatGPT and Copilot) are evolving at a rapid rate, and you may already recognize some of the ways this technology can enhance productivity. For the purposes of this course, however, these tools should not be adopted as shortcuts to avoid reading, thinking, and writing for yourself.

The use of generative AI is permitted in this course for the following activities:

- Finding additional information about a topic;
- Brainstorming and refining your ideas; and
- Checking the grammar and style of your writing.

The use of generative AI is **not** permitted in this course for the following activities:

- Writing a draft of an assignment;
- Creating paragraphs or even sentences to complete assignments; and
- Impersonating you in online class activities.

Any such unauthorized applications of generative AI tools will be treated as academic misconduct.

You should also refrain from using AI reading assistants to create summaries of any of our books and articles as a way to sidestep actually reading them. Such summaries nearly always miss the intellectual and emotional nuances of the original material, convey almost none of the author's voice and style, and sometimes contain major inaccuracies ("hallucinations"). By engaging directly with each of our readings, you will develop a far deeper understanding and appreciation of the author's message.

If you wind up having any questions or concerns about my generative AI policy – this is new territory, after all – please do not hesitate to reach out to me.

COURSE SCHEDULE FOR PSY 492-09

INTRODUCTION

- January 7 **Class meeting** – overview of course.
Start reading *Civilization and Its Discontents* after class.
- January 8 Read “Is Google Making Us Stupid?”
- January 9 **Class meeting** – foundational issues.

SELF AND SOCIETY, PART ONE: CLASSIC CONCEPTIONS

The Psychoanalytic Perspective (and the Perils of Progress)

- January 14 Morning coffee klatch.
- January 15 Watch *Apocalypse Now*.
Read “It’s the End of the World and They Know It.”
Submit your talking points.
- January 16 **Class meeting** – movie musings.
- January 17 Finish reading *Civilization and Its Discontents* and submit your journal entry.
- January 20 Submit your journal replies.
- January 21 **Class meeting** – panel discussion of *Civilization and Its Discontents*.
Start reading *Walden Two* after class.
- January 22 Homework 1 (“Social Psychology as History”) is due.
- January 23 **Class meeting** – further considerations.

The Behaviorist Perspective (and the Utopian Impulse)

- January 28 Morning coffee klatch.
- January 29 Watch *The Truman Show*.
Read “The ‘Truman Show’ Delusion.”
Submit your talking points.
- January 30 **Class meeting** – movie musings.
- January 31 Finish reading *Walden Two* and submit your journal entry.
- February 3 Submit your journal replies.
- February 4 **Class meeting** – panel discussion of *Walden Two*.
Start reading *Man’s Search for Meaning* after class.
- February 5 Homework 2 (“Psychology, Ideology, Utopia, and the Commons”) is due.
- February 6 **Class meeting** – further considerations.

The Existential Perspective (and the Primacy of Meaning)

- February 11 Morning coffee klatch.
- February 12 Watch *Persona*.
Read "Existential Isolation."
Submit your talking points.
- February 13 **Class meeting** – movie musings.
- February 14 Finish reading *Man's Search for Meaning* and submit your journal entry.
- February 17 Submit your journal replies.
- February 18 **Class meeting** – panel discussion of *Man's Search for Meaning*.
Start reading *The Medium Is the Massage* after class.
- February 20 **Class meeting** – further considerations.

Welcome to the Global Village

- February 21 Finish reading *The Medium Is the Massage* and submit your journal entry.
- February 24 Submit your journal replies.
- February 25 **Class meeting** – open discussion of *The Medium Is the Massage*.
Start reading *Conscience* after class.
- February 26 Homework 3 ("First we invented stories, then they changed us") is due.
- February 27 **Class meeting** – further considerations.
- March 2 – 9 *Spring Break*

SELF AND SOCIETY, PART TWO: RECENT PROPOSALS

The Neuroscience Perspective (and the Moral Sentiments)

- March 11 Morning coffee klatch.
- March 12 Watch *The Ballad of Narayama*.
Read "Culture's Constraints."
Submit your talking points.
- March 13 **Class meeting** – movie musings.
- March 14 Finish reading *Conscience* and submit your journal entry.
- March 17 Submit your journal replies.
- March 18 **Class meeting** – panel discussion of *Conscience*.
Start reading *This View of Life* after class.
- March 19 Homework 4 ("Wisdom and How to Cultivate It") is due.
- March 20 **Class meeting** – further considerations.

The Evolutionary Perspective (and the Primacy of Groups)

- March 25 Morning coffee klatch.
- March 26 Watch *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*.
Read "Awe as a Pathway to Mental and Physical Health."
Submit your talking points.
- March 27 **Class meeting** – movie musings.
- March 28 Finish reading *This View of Life* and submit your journal entry.
- March 31 Submit your journal replies.
- April 1 **Class meeting** – panel discussion of *This View of Life*.
Start reading *Out of the Melting Pot, Into the Fire* after class.
- April 2 Homework 5 ("Religion and Intragroup Cooperation") is due.
- April 3 **Class meeting** – further considerations.

The Cultural Perspective (and the Challenges of Diversity)

- April 8 Morning coffee klatch.
- April 9 Watch Do the Right Thing.
Read "How Could They?"
Submit your talking points.
- April 10 **Class meeting** – movie musings.
- April 11 Finish reading *Out of the Melting Pot, Into the Fire* and submit your journal entry.
- April 14 Submit your journal replies.
- April 15 **Class meeting** – panel discussion of *Out of the Melting Pot, Into the Fire*.
Start reading *The Practice, the Horizon, and the Chain* after class.
- April 17 **Class meeting** – further considerations.

Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow

- April 18 Finish reading *The Practice, the Horizon, and the Chain* and submit your journal entry.
- April 21 Submit your journal replies.
- April 22 **Class meeting** – open discussion of *The Practice, the Horizon, and the Chain* and
closing thoughts.
- April 23 Homework 6 (three big ideas) is due.