

## SEMESTER AT SEA COURSE SYLLABUS

**Voyage:** Spring, 2013  
**Discipline:** Psychology  
**PSYC 4559-102:** Human Nature: Biological, Psychological & Cultural Perspectives  
Upper Division  
**Faculty Name:** Dr. Charles J. Morris  
**Prerequisite:** Introductory Psychology, One Additional Course, or  
Permission of Instructor

### COURSE DESCRIPTION

This is a course about what the biological and social sciences have taught us about human nature: Is there, in fact, a human nature, or are we a “blank slate” (*tabula rasa*) at birth, as proposed by philosopher John Locke, shaped entirely by our culture and the process of socialization? Or are we a product of both nature and nurture and, if so, how do they interact to determine who we are? This is one of science’s enduring controversies and it continues even today. Only a few years ago, the late Harvard professor Stephen Jay Gould described humans as “...the beings whose essence lies in having no essence,” and goes on to say that “...the human brain is capable of the full range of behaviors and predisposed to none.” On the other hand, his colleague Steven Pinker argues that “The modern sciences of mind, brain, genes, and evolution are increasingly showing that it (the concept of a ‘blank slate’) is not true.” We will consider this evidence during the semester. It is a fascinating and complicated story.

Quite apart from the issue of whether we are a product of nature or nurture, or both, is the question of human potential—the extent to which we are capable of rising above the conditions which led to who we are at a given point in time. Are we “victims” of our biology or past histories or do we have the power to control our future and enhance our well-being? Martin Seligman argues that “Everyone has signature strengths and everyone is capable of crafting their lives to use them more.” This is the message of the emerging field of “positive psychology,” a future-oriented perspective which focuses on maximizing human potential and what is called “flourishing.” We will examine what positive psychology tells us about human nature and our potential for overcoming the limitations imposed by our biology and/or prior socialization.

Our voyage will provide a unique opportunity for us to gain a deeper understanding of cultural differences among the countries we will be visiting—the process of socialization, child-rearing practices, parent-child relationships, attitudes/beliefs/values, and even perceptual and cognitive processes. Along with readings and several lectures on cultural differences, our field lab component will be us the opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of life in Morocco, a predominantly Muslim country.

## COURSE OBJECTIVES

By the time you have completed this course, you will have accomplished the following:

- Gained a better understanding why the nature vs. nurture controversy continues to dominate the field of psychology and the social sciences.
- Learned how the social and political climate affects research on the nature vs. nurture controversy.
- Developed a deeper understanding of the various perspectives on human nature we will consider throughout the semester.
- Developed a deeper understanding of cultural differences and how those differences shape our attitudes, beliefs, and values.
- Developed a more complete understanding of positive psychology, including its methodology and major principles, along with how it is being applied to promote human happiness and well-being.

## TOPICAL OUTLINE OF COURSE

### I. Human Nature: The Historical Context & Basic Issues (Days 1-6)

Reading Assignment: (Quiz 1, Saturday, January 26)

**Pinker: *The Blank Slate*: Chapter 1 (The Official Theory, pp. 5-13)**

**Gilbert: *Stumbling on Happiness*: Chapter 1 (Journey to Elsewhen, pp. 3-27)**

**Stanovich: *How to Think Straight About Psychology*: Chapter 5 (Correlation and Causation, pp. 69-79)**

### II. The Evolutionary Psychology Perspective (Days 7-9)

Reading Assignment: (Quiz 2, Monday, February 18)

**Buss: *The Great Struggles of Life***

**Buss: *Human Nature & Culture***

### III. The Behavior Genetic Perspective (Days 10-12)

Reading Assignment: (Quiz 3, Sunday, March 3)

**Bouchard: *The Minnesota Study of Twins Reared Apart***

**Gottfredson: *The General Intelligence Factor***

**Stanovich: *What IQ Tests Miss***

**Halpern: *Gender Differences in Cognitive Abilities***

#### **IV. The Cognitive-Neuroscience Perspective (Days 13-15)**

**Reading Assignment: (Quiz 4, Sunday, March 17)**

**Kahneman: *Thinking, Fast & Slow*: (Two Systems, pp. 1-30)**

**Haidt: *The Happiness Hypothesis*: (The Divided Self, pp. 1-22)**

#### **V. The Social Psychological & Cultural Perspectives (Days 16-19)**

**Reading Assignment: (Quiz 5, Tuesday, April 2)**

**Aronson: *The Social Animal*: (Chapters 1-7)**

#### **VI. The Perspective of Positive Psychology (Days 20-22)**

**Reading Assignment: (Quiz 6, Monday, April 15)**

**Seligman: *Authentic Happiness*: (Chapters 1-14)**

**Final Exam (Tuesday, April 23)**

#### **FIELD ASSIGNMENT**

**Twenty percent of your grade will be based upon the field lab component, which will involve a day-long immersion into life in Morocco. The purpose of our field lab is to deepen your understanding of daily life in a very different, predominately Muslim country. Among our objectives are a better understanding of socialization and child-rearing practices, the status of women, and the role of religion in Moroccan life and politics. On Thursday, April 18, we will spend the day at the Center for Cultural Learning in Rabat, discuss various cultural issues with the faculty and staff, and meet with Moroccan college students for the purpose of comparing cultural differences and attitudes between our two countries. We will also have the opportunity to sample some Moroccan food and spend some time exploring life in a nearby medina. Attendance is mandatory.**

#### **METHOD OF EVALUATION**

**Your grade will be based upon your performance on 6 quizzes during the semester (60%), a cumulative final exam (20%), and completion of your field lab requirement which will include reading assignments and 5-10 page paper (20%). The following grading scale will be used:**

**A: 93-100% B: 83-86% C: 73-76% D: 63-66%**  
**A-: 90-92% B-: 80-82% C-: 70-72% D-: 60-62%**  
**B+: 87-89% C+: 77-79% D+: 66-69% F: < 60%**

Depending on the overall performance of the class, the grading scale may be lowered somewhat but it will not be made more stringent.

### **REQUIRED TEXTBOOKS**

**AUTHOR: Martin P. Seligman**  
**TITLE: *Authentic Happiness* (Paperback)**  
**PUBLISHER: Free Press, 2002**  
**ISBN#: 13:978-07432-2298-3**

**AUTHOR: Elliot Aronson**  
**TITLE: *The Social Animal* (Paperback, 11<sup>th</sup> edition)**  
**PUBLISHER: Worth, 2012**  
**ISBN#: 13:978-1-4292-3341-5**

### **ELECTRONIC COURSE MATERIALS**

In addition to the textbooks, a number of articles on various aspects of the nature vs. nurture controversy will be assigned throughout the semester. These materials will be placed in the electronic course folder.