

SEMESTER AT SEA COURSE SYLLABUS

Voyage: Spring 2013

SEMS 3500-102: Psychological Approaches to Complex Problems

Faculty Name: Bill von Hippel

Time: 17:00-18:15, A Day

Location: Room 2

Pre-requisites: Introductory Psychology

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This upper division course is intended to teach students to think like a psychologist. In service of this goal, the course will focus on the study of complex problems. Although experimental research provides a powerful mechanism for understanding a wide variety of psychological phenomena, many human activities are not readily amenable to this approach. For example, it can be unethical, impractical, or even impossible to conduct experiments on important topics, such as poverty, genocide, crime, and sexuality. In this class we will take a psychological approach to such complex problems, and will focus on how researchers try to tease out cause and effect when they cannot conduct experiments. We'll address topics such as the impact of parenting, gender differences in math performance and sexual plasticity, and ethnic differences in crime and incarceration. We will also focus on topics that are of specific relevance to the countries we visit, such as the social consequences of China's one-child policy, rural/urban differences in intelligence, and the geography of opportunity and ability.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

The aim of this course is to teach students new ways to address and solve complex research problems in psychology. The course will provide students with hands-on experience in hypothesis formation, operationalizing variables, data collection, and (to a limited degree) statistical analysis. After completing the course students should have a greater understanding of some of the major theoretical and practical issues involved in psychological research, a greater understanding of the ethical issues surrounding psychological research, and a more innovative approach to solving practical problems from a theoretical perspective.

REQUIRED TEXTBOOKS

AUTHOR: Levitt & Dubner
TITLE: Freakonomics
PUBLISHER: HarperCollins
ISBN #: 13: 9780060731335
DATE/EDITION: 2009

TOPICAL OUTLINE OF COURSE

Class 1: Course Introduction and Goals

This lecture will review the course goals, field assignments, field lab, and optional faculty led trip. It will also provide a brief background on experimental methods and establishing causality. We will also design a study to test whether the parents of SAS students prefer male or female children.

Class 2: The Law of Unintended Consequences and China's One-Child Policy

This class will consider possible consequences of China's one-child policy.

Reading: Levitt & Dubner (LD) Chapter 1

Class 3: Analysis of Preference Study

In this class we will analyze the data from the preference study and discuss what can be inferred from it.

Reading: LD Chapter 2

Class 4: Exploring Ethnic Differences in Crime and Punishment

In this class we'll consider data on ethnic differences in crime statistics and discuss what can be inferred from these data. We will also design a study to test whether punishment prevents crime.

Reading: LD Chapter 3

Class 5: Analysis of Punishment Study

In this class we will analyze the data from the punishment study and discuss what can be inferred from it.

Reading: none

Class 6: Did Legalizing Abortion Cause a Decrease in Crime in the US?

In this class we'll review Levitt's argument and the supporting data, and consider alternative arguments made by Steve Pinker.

Reading: LD Chapter 4

Class 7: Is Psychology the Study of WEIRD People? I

In this class we will review the argument that psychology is inappropriately based on research populations that are Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD), and discuss how findings (and methods) might differ in other kinds of samples.

Reading: Henrich et al., pp 1-23

Class 8: Is Psychology the Study of WEIRD People? II

In this class we will continue our discussion of WEIRD psychology.

Reading: Henrich et al., pp 23-51

Class 9: Is Psychology the Study of WEIRD People? III

In this class we will finish our discussion of WEIRD psychology and will choose our experiments for the field lab.

Reading: Henrich et al., pp 51-75

Class 10: Is the World Getting Safer?

In this class we'll discuss Pinker's proposal that the world is getting less violent (from *The Better Angels of our Nature*) and review the underlying data.

Reading: none

Class 11: Do Parents Matter?

In this class we'll consider research on whether parents have an important influence on their children through their socialization practices.

Reading: LD Chapter 5

Class 12: **Midterm Exam**

Class 13: Nominal Determinism

In this class we'll consider research on unconscious self-esteem and biases toward people, places, and careers.

Reading: LD Chapter 6

Class 14: Food and Eating I

In this class we'll consider factors that lead people to consume more or less.

Reading: Gladwell *Shopping*

Class 15: Food and Eating II

In this class we'll consider sources of the worldwide increase in obesity.

Reading: none

Class 16: Gender Differences in Sexual Plasticity and Sexual Orientation

In this class we'll consider whether men and women differ in the nature of their sexual responsiveness.

Reading: none

Class 17: Gender Differences in STEM Fields

In this class we'll consider whether there are gender differences in math/science ability.

Reading: Gladwell *The Sports Taboo*

Class 18: Emotions

In this class we'll examine the nature of emotions and their expression.

Reading: Gladwell *Naked Face*

Class 19: The Geography of Opportunity

In this class we'll consider geographic differences in intelligence, opportunity, and pathogen prevalence, and how they might inter-relate.

Reading: Gladwell *Brain Candy*

Class 20: The Geography of Ethnocentrism

In this class we'll discuss geographic differences in prejudice, languages, and religion, and how they might inter-relate.

Reading: none

Class 21: The Geography of Masculinity

In this class we'll discuss geographic differences in pathogen prevalence, violence, wealth, and preference for masculinity.

Reading: none

Class 22: The Geography of Inequality

In this class we'll consider geographic differences in inequality and whether they influence psychological factors such as deception of self and other.

Reading: none

Class 23: Wrap-up and Review

In this class we'll try to figure out what it all means.

Reading: none

Class 24: **Final Exam**

FIELD WORK

FIELD LAB

This field lab will take place on Tuesday, 12 February. Attendance is mandatory. We will visit an orphanage in Vietnam where we will meet the children and test a few psychological theories developed in WEIRD cultures to see if it differs here. This lab will relate to the ongoing theme of cross-cultural psychology. The write-up of this lab will be a 1,500-2,000 word paper written in APA style. The paper will review the relevant theory that we tested, describe our methods and results, and discuss the findings and their broader implications. The paper is due at the beginning of class on A11 and is worth 25% of the final grade.

FIELD ASSIGNMENTS

- After any five of the ports (excluding Hawaii, and not to include more than one port from a single country) students will write a one-page reflection on how a psychological phenomenon that we studied in class is manifested in the country we visited. Each write-up will be worth 5% of the final grade and is due in the second class after the relevant port.

METHODS OF EVALUATION / GRADING RUBRIC

Field Assignments and the Field Lab will be evaluated for quality of exposition and quality of ideas. Papers are to be clear and concise. It is also important that these papers provide an overview of the psychological phenomenon that is the topic of the paper. The midterm and final exam will both be short answer format, and will each be worth 25% of the final grade in the course.

RESERVE LIBRARY LIST

N/A

ELECTRONIC COURSE MATERIALS

NOTE: All of these are in the public domain, and I will provide electronic copies to the library.

Henrich, J., Heine, S. J. & Norenzayan, A. (2010). The weirdest people in the world. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 33:1–75.

Malcolm Gladwell: *The Science of Shopping*, November 4, 1996, *The New Yorker*.

Malcolm Gladwell: *The Sports Taboo*, May 19, 1997, *The New Yorker*.

Malcolm Gladwell: *The Naked Face*, August 5, 2002, *The New Yorker*.

Malcolm Gladwell: *Brain Candy*, May 16, 2005, *The New Yorker*.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

N/A

HONOR CODE

Semester at Sea students enroll in an academic program administered by the University of Virginia, and thus bind themselves to the University's honor code. The code prohibits all acts of lying, cheating, and stealing. Please consult the Voyager's Handbook for further explanation of what constitutes an honor offense.

Each written assignment for this course must be pledged by the student as follows: "On my honor as a student, I pledge that I have neither given nor received aid on this assignment." The pledge must be signed, or, in the case of an electronic file, signed "[signed]."