

Psychology of Violence

PSY 407

Spring Term, 2015

Time/Place: GSH 132

Instructor: Jason Isbell (isbell@uoregon.edu)

Office Hours: By appointment

Office: LISB 232

Course Text: I will be providing PDFs of readings from various sources on Blackboard.

Course Description: This course is meant to be a general introduction to the psychological study of violent behavior. The intent is to introduce students with little or no background in psychology to some of the definitions, theories, and methodologies used in studying violence, as well as look into some of the sociological, psychological, and biological mechanisms associated with violent behavior. This is a broad and complicated topic and thus draws from various fields, ranging from sociology to evolutionary theory. Of course, not all topics germane to violence can be addressed in ten weeks. The course is meant to provide students with the foundation necessary to delve further into this challenging, emotionally and politically loaded, but ultimately interesting and important topic.

The topic of violence is quite broad and potentially meandering. It is therefore nearly impossible to find a “perfect” textbook for this course. Luckily that means you are not required to purchase an expensive textbook, as I will be providing digital copies of the readings free of charge. However, all evaluation will be done based on information provided in the lectures. The readings are there to supplement the lecture material, but in-class attendance is critical.

Tentative Class Schedule:

Week 1: Syllabus Review, Intro to Violence

Week 2: Approach to Theory

Week 3: A History of Violence

Week 4: Biology: The Central Nervous System

Week 5: Biology: Hormones

Week 6: Biology: Genes and Neurotransmitters

Week 7: Psychopathy

Weeks 8, 9, and 10: Violent Crime

***This schedule is subject to modification depending on how quickly we get through the material.

Course Work: Your performance will be evaluated on a combination of quizzes and assigned writings.

Quizzes: Every two weeks there will be a quiz in class covering the previous two weeks’ material. There will be 5 quizzes total consisting of 10 questions per quiz. The final quiz will consist in part of material from the entire term’s lectures (i.e., the final quiz is partially comprehensive). Questions will be multiple-choice and will seek to test your *understanding of course definitions and concepts*.

Papers: There will be 3 assigned writings for this course. The first paper will be a discussion of the General Aggression Model (GAM) and its criticisms. The second paper will be a reaction paper to one of two movies you will be asked to watch outside of class, in which you will try to integrate course material in your analyses. The third paper will be a proposal for a way in which to measure aggression in a laboratory environment. (Rubrics below.) The papers are meant to test your *ability to integrate course material* and *to think critically*.

Participation: Much of class time will be devoted to discussing the readings and lecture material. Please look over both before each class so that you can come prepared with questions to ask or insights to offer. I would encourage you to write down your thoughts/questions and bring them with you to class so as to facilitate discussion.

Total Course Points: Quizzes = 50, Papers = 100, Participation = 25 TOTAL = **175 points**.

Grades: Grades will be assigned in the following way:

93-100%= A	73-76.99%= C
90-92.99%= A-	70-72.99%= C-
87-89.99%= B+	67-69.99%= D+
83-86.99%= B	63-66.99%= D
80-82.99%= B-	60-62.99%= D-
77-79.99%= C+	59.99%-below= F

I do reserve the right to curve at the end of the course but it is *highly unlikely* that I will do so, in an attempt to attenuate grade inflation.

Suggestions for Lecture: I will provide you with my lecture slides via Blackboard. Although they contain the skeleton of the course material, I will flesh them out as I speak. I strongly recommend you print them out, bring them to class, and annotate them throughout the discussion. If I speak too fast, etc., then do not hesitate to raise your hand and ask me to repeat myself. Also, I encourage discussion in class. As mentioned, I urge you to do the readings before class so that you can come prepared to discuss the materials.

Cheating and Plagiarism: Don't do it. I am required by university protocol to report any suspected cheating/plagiarism.

Students with Disabilities: If you have a documented disability and anticipate needing accommodations in this course, please make arrangements to meet with me as soon as possible. Also, please request that the Counselor for Students with Disabilities (Hillary Gerdes, hgerdes@oregon.uoregon.edu, tel. 346-3211, TTY 346-1083) send a letter verifying your disability.

Course Readings: All of the following can be found online on the Blackboard website.

Rubric for Paper #1 (50 points):

This will be the most “formal” and effortful writing assignment in the course. This goal of this assignment is to get you thinking critically about what makes a good theory of violence. Theories are what bring seemingly disparate facts together, and generate hypotheses to be tested. They are therefore central to scientific investigation. Drawing from principles contained in the Eisner paper (*The Uses of Violence*), read the Anderson & Bushman paper (*Human Aggression*) and evaluate the merits of the theory to the best of your ability. You may do this from a logical perspective (e.g., this theory is logically inconsistent/consistent for the following reasons...), a conceptual perspective (e.g., this theory fails to define adequately the following important concepts... Or, this theory defines the following important concepts well, and here’s why...), a methodological perspective (e.g., the empirical results that appear to support this theory have the following flaws/strengths...), etc.

If you have trouble getting a foothold, I encourage you to draw from the Ferguson & Dyck paper (*Paradigm Change in Aggression Research*). State whether the criticisms contained therein are legitimate or not, in your estimation, and explicate clearly your reasons why or why not. You are welcome (and encouraged) to reach outside of the assigned literature to support your argument, but you are not required to do so. All references should be cited properly (ask me if you are unsure how to do this; it is relatively easy and I’m happy to show you). Feel free to ask questions about this assignment via email and/or during office hours.

The first paragraph should contain your general thesis. The first page or two should demonstrate your grasp of the GAM. That is, give a brief review of the theory to the best of your ability, covering the most important features. The next section should convey your position on the theory (yea or nay), followed by your reasons that support your position. All of this should be followed by a summary of your paper and suggestions for future research, theoretical clarifications, methodological improvements, etc. Double-spaced, one-inch margins, 12-point font. The paper has no lower limit on pages, though I would be surprised if you can accomplish all you need to in less than 5 pages. There is an upper limit of 8 pages (front and back). No cover page is necessary and time-stamped digital copies in my email are fine. (Hard copies are okay, too.) **No late work will be accepted unless previously approved by the instructor, and that is unlikely.**

- *Intro Paragraph: 5 points.* (Is it clear? Concise? Could I read it solely and get a good idea of your position? Do you capture my interest and compel me to read more?)

- *Review of GAM: 15 points.* (Do you convey adequate knowledge of the theory without being overly verbose? Will I get the *gist* of the theory if I read nothing more than your review? Again, is it concise?)

- *Argument for/against (analysis): 20 points.* (Is your position clear from the beginning? Is your argument developed logically and coherently? Can I tell you’ve done the required readings? That is, how well do you integrate information from the three assigned readings? Is there an intelligible flow? Are you interpreting the theory and/or its criticisms accurately?)

- *Summary and Future Considerations: 10 points.* (Do you summarize the key points well? Are your “future considerations” thoughtful, or did you just throw them together at the last minute?)

Rubric for Paper #2 (35 points):

This paper is to be a “reaction paper” to one of the two movies you will be asked to watch outside of class. For either movie, the assignment is the same. You are encouraged to take notes while watching the movie so you can address specific claims, scenes, etc. Essentially, I want you to interpret the content of the movie through a slightly more “scientific” lens. That is, evaluate what you saw through a specific theoretical perspective that we have covered in class. This may be the movie’s general message, or it might just be a particular scene.

Your analysis might be via the GAM, or through evolutionary principles, or through the lens of status, and so on. Start with a brief summary of the movie’s general message (or the specifics of a particular scene) and then develop your analysis of it. “The movie suggested people did behavior X due to reasons 1, 2, and 3. I (agree/disagree) and my reasons are drawn from principle Z that we covered in class...” Obviously, this is just an oversimplified example of one approach. (Do not copy/paste this sentence into your paper.)

Although I expect intelligible writing and cogent reasoning, you do not need to worry about extreme formality. I simply want you to demonstrate your ability to integrate class material into your opinion of these movies. The paper only needs to be 2-4 pages, double-spaced.

- *Intro Paragraph: 5 points.* (Is it clear? Concise? Could I read it solely and get a good idea of your position? Do you capture my interest and compel me to read more?)

- *Review of Movie Theme/Scene: 10 points.* (Will I get the *gist* of the theme/scene if I read nothing more than your review? Again, is it concise?)

- *Analysis: 20 points.* (Is your position clear from the beginning? Is your argument developed logically and coherently? How well do you integrate information from the lectures/readings? Is there an intelligible flow? Are you interpreting the course material and applying it accurately?)

Rubric for Paper #3 (15 points):

Throughout the course, either directly or indirectly, we have discussed the limitations of measures of physical aggression. That is, they are often confounded with competition, notions of “fairness”, etc., and have questionable ecological validity. That is, they are often artificial and their results may not generalize to more authentic situations.

Your task is to come up with a measure of *physical* aggression that is (hopefully) an improvement over the measures we have discussed in class (e.g., the TAP, the PSAP, or the Ultimatum Game). You are welcome (and encouraged) to read up on other papers (assigned or otherwise) to get an idea of what is often used as a measure of aggression. You may also speak with me during office hours.

Ideally, your task will tap into a participant’s tendency to be *physically* aggressive. As much as possible, it will be minimally confounded with competition. It will also need to be “costly” to the participant in some way, just as physical aggression is in the real world (e.g., being injured, being embarrassed, losing a fight). However, you are also constrained by ethical considerations. Obviously your participants cannot be subjected to any real physical danger or psychological trauma. You may—to a certain extent—lead them to believe there are certain dangers posed, via deception. But if so then you need to develop a way to debrief them adequately. That is, they cannot leave your task feeling betrayed by science, traumatized, etc. Despite being a relatively short assignment, you may find this more challenging than you anticipate. I do *not* recommend putting this off until the last minute. And again, just do your best.

- *Does it Measure Aggression?* **5 points.** (Is it highly confounded with other things, such as “justice” or competitiveness?)

- *Is it Ecologically Valid?* **5 points.** (Is it reflective of situations one might encounter in the real world? Does it induce sincere, authentic responses from the participants?)

- *Is it Ethical?* **5 points.** (Can we do this without harming people physically or psychologically? Would you be willing to participate in something like this, or have people you care about participate in this?)