

PSY 392C/D: Contemporary Issues in Psychology (Spring 2020)

Bullshitting and Calling Bullshit

Syllabus

Instructor: John V. Petrocelli
E-mail: petrocjv@wfu.edu
Office: 459 Greene Hall
Office phone: (336)-758-4171
Office hours: By appointment

Days: Tuesday/Thursday
Time: C: 9:30 – 10:45 / D: 11:00 – 12:15
Location: Greene Hall 310
Course website: <https://canvas.wfu.edu>

Course Description

Seminar treatment of current theory and research in several areas of psychology. Prerequisites: Senior, major standing.

Course Objectives and Learning Outcomes

This course is an opportunity to engage more fully in the field of experimental psychology by reading, discussing, and evaluating primary research articles related to particular topics (i.e., the behavior of bullshit, detecting bullshit, and confronting bullshit). You will be introduced to critical issues with an emphasis on thinking and talking about new ideas and concepts in this research area. The course involves a critical analysis in perspective taking of human systems (e.g., cultural, economic, political, and built), which operate in observable patterns. Beyond increasing awareness of the importance of the social psychology of bullshit and bullshitting, increasing abilities to review original sources, presenting those ideas, and thinking about the relevance of this material to your own life, learning outcomes include:

- An understanding of empirical findings in social psychology and how major research designs address different questions and hypotheses
- An ability to formulate social psychological problems/questions, to determine the degree to which an explanation is supported by reasoning/empirical evidence, to perceive alternative explanations and to determine what evidence is needed to choose between them, to synthesize empirical evidence and psychological concepts, and to critically evaluate existing explanations and generate new ideas
- An ability to locate social psychological research information, to design and conduct research, to use statistical techniques to analyze information, to evaluate statistical information and quality of research
- An ability to use professional writing conventions (APA) and effective written/oral communication skills
- An ability to recognize the relevance of social psychology to everyday life and appreciate the importance of social psychological science to answering fundamental questions
- An ability to critically evaluate claims made in social psychological research
- An understanding of how social psychologists form questions and design experiments in ways that can test their hypotheses statistically

Required Readings

Readings are made available on Canvas. These readings will serve as a framework for the course. Please bring to class either a hard copy of the readings (no computers) so that you can reference the material. The quality of your work (i.e., Final Quiz and Final Paper) is likely to reflect your record of attendance and the effort that you put into reviewing the course readings.

Student Responsibilities

- Attend class and be prepared to participate
- Check Canvas regularly for course updates
- Complete all course requirements
- Complete a student course evaluation

Grading

Your letter grade for this course is determined by the percentage of total points (500 possible) earned throughout the semester. A letter grade will be assigned on the basis of the following scale:

A+ 98.00 – 100% A 93.00 – 97.99% A- 90.00 – 92.99% B+ 88.00 – 89.99% B 83.00 – 87.99%
B- 80.00 – 82.99% C+ 78.00 – 79.99% C 73.00 – 77.99% C- 70.00 – 72.99%... F <60%

Points are earned in six ways:

❖ **Reaction Essays (10 points each x 7 = 70 points):** You will be assigned to write a Reaction Essay to the two readings scheduled for each week. Submit a one-page paper in reaction to the readings for the week. Essays may be single-spaced (approx. 500 words) or double-spaced (approx. 250 words), but are not to exceed one page (if you have more to say, reduce the font and/or margins). Understand that a Reaction Essay is not a simple re-wording of the Abstract of an article, or a summarization. It is intended to serve as an intellectual exercise that may take the form of an agreement, disagreement, elaboration, contrast, parallel, or critical analysis of the work selected. Examples of sentences to get you started:

- “I see a contradiction between Smith’s (2002) article and the section we read about...”
- “A possible experiment that could be conducted to test the hypothesis described in Smith’s (2002) article involves...”
- “The theory described in Smith’s (2002) article could be used to improve productivity in...”
- “The theory in Smith’s (2002) article helped me to analyze an experience that I once had in a group conflict situation that was hard for me to understand at the time...”
- “I disagree with the interpretation of the findings described in Smith’s (2002) article...”

❖ **Class Discussion and Participation (100 points):** The learning experience in this course will involve sharing of thoughts during class discussions (focused on the required readings). Come to class willing and prepared to voice your thoughts and opinions; please ask questions during class. The Reaction Essays serve the goal of making you think about the readings before you come to class and prepare you for class discussion. As you are reviewing an assigned reading, writing your Reaction Essays, and thinking about upcoming class discussions, the following questions should help to guide you: What is the main research question of the article? What is the answer or conclusion that the article provides for this question? What evidence is used in support of this conclusion? Is this evidence sound? What questions do I still have about this paper? What aspects of the paper remain unclear? Are there weaknesses in the methodology, statistics or conclusions? Are there any other aspects of the article that draw criticism or cause concern?

❖ **Video/Audio Bullshit Analysis (50 points):** For this assignment, you will watch a TED Talk video, a TEDx Talk video, a podcast, or a YouTube video (having a minimum of 10 minutes of content) and write a 2-page (double-spaced) critique of the video, reflecting on core issues discussed in the video. Provide a reference or link to your selection. You should provide a very brief summary of the content and apply class principles in analyzing it. Select a video or podcast involving content about an issue that has global relevance (poverty, hunger, good health and well-being, quality education, gender equality, clean water and sanitation, affordable and clean energy, work and economic growth, industry/innovation and infrastructure, reduced inequalities, sustainable cities and communities, responsible consumption and production, climate action, life below water, life on land, and/or peace/justice and strong institutions. For more information on these issues, visit the sustainable development goals adopted by world leaders of the United Nations at: <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>.

Conduct a critical, bullshit analysis of the video. Feel free to come to me for suggestions, and please watch/listen to something that you have not previously seen/listened to.

Questions to consider in your analysis:

What are you uncertain about regarding this issue?

How might the content of the article differ from that of an expert’s perspective on the issue?

What percentage of the content do you perceive to be bullshit? - provide examples (maximum of 3).

What are the descriptive norms related to the issue?

What are the injunctive norms related to the issue?

What aspects of the issue affect quality of life?

What consequences does bullshit surrounding the issue have?

Does the presenter provide clarity for the main argument(s) being made? How so?

How does the presenter know what he/she knows?

How could arguments, claims, ideas presented by the presenter be tested experimentally?

When bullshit is evident, what appears to be its purpose or functions?

Are there good reasons to believe what is argued/pushed by the presenter? What are they?

If you were to grade the presenter’s work, what grade would you give the presenter?

❖ **Organizational Bullshit vs. Evidence-Based Communication Role Play (50 points):** Objective:

To contrast, compare, understand and articulate the differences between organizational bullshit and organizational evidence-based communication. Task: Your task is to work with your classmates (6-8 members) on a role play of an organizational meeting, whereby organizational members share information and make a decision, and create two separate videos of the role plays (3-5 minutes each). Imagine that your organization is set to make an important decision that may affect an important issue of global relevance, and there are multiple proposals on the table. Create a video-recorded portrayal of two meetings that are identical in their situation portrayed (e.g., the problem), but very different in their mode of communication. One video should be full of bullshit and one video should be full of the anti-thesis of bullshit, evidence-based communication.

Your videos should include:

- A very brief statement of the organization you portray (your organization should have a name).
- It should be clear what kind of problem or challenge is on the table, the decision(s) that are necessary to address the problem/challenge, and the proposal(s) on the table.
- The processes portrayed in the two videos should play out into two different decisions to help make the links between communication modes and decisions salient and clear.

Issues of global relevance: poverty, hunger, good health and well-being, quality education, gender equality, clean water and sanitation, affordable and clean energy, work and economic growth, industry/innovation and infrastructure, reduced inequalities, sustainable cities and communities, responsible consumption and production, climate action, life below water, life on land, and/or peace/justice and strong institutions. For more information on these particular issues, visit the sustainable development goals adopted by world leaders of the United Nations at:

<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>

❖ **Final Quiz (80 points):** There are several conceptual, factual, and applied concepts that will be discussed in the assigned readings and during class time. I'll need to know that you understand these concepts and can apply them. The format of the quiz will be short-answer essay.

❖ **Final Paper (150 points):** Due at the final class meeting, is a 7-8 page final paper. Select a theoretical topic of particular interest to you and form a clear research question that is not entirely answered by the existing literature. Your paper should be structured as a brief experimental proposal, including a theoretically-drawn set of hypotheses and a detailed description of methods and procedures. Your proposed study must include at least two independent variables and one independent variable must be directly manipulated. The 2 x 2 design and mediation designs are common and highly appropriate designs for this paper. The paper should be double-spaced, formatted using APA-style, include a Title-Page and References; include an Abstract. The paper must include at least seven references of published articles, books, or chapters (no internet articles). By the end of the second week of class, you are required to submit to me three possible titles of your paper (e.g., "Implicit Social Behavior in Athletic Competitions"). I will then decide which paper I want to read. Make sure that all three titles reflect three different topics. Think specific for this paper.

Attendance

Class attendance will not be monitored. However, due to the participatory and interactive nature of this course, consider your attendance mandatory. Studies show that class time is the most efficient use of a student's time when it comes to learning material. Unless by reason of extenuating circumstances or participation in religious or civic observances, your attendance is expected at all times.

Lecture Notes

Lecture notes are not provided. Much of the lectures will be interactive, involving class-discussion related to the topic, thought experiments, and experimental procedure demonstrations. If you must miss a lecture, please get notes from a classmate (if they are willing).

Canvas

You are expected to become familiar with the Canvas academic suite <https://canvas.wfu.edu/>. Canvas is an online course environment that allows Wake Forest University faculty and students to create, integrate, and maintain web-based teaching and learning resources. Grades, announcements or course changes will be posted on Canvas.

Cheating and Plagiarism

Although I don't expect there to be any problems, cheating and/or plagiarism will not be tolerated. When you signed your application for admission to Wake Forest University, you agreed to live by the honor system. As part of the honor system, you agreed to abstain from cheating, which includes plagiarism. You are accountable to the following from the Student Handbook: "Plagiarism is a type of cheating. It includes: (a) the use, by paraphrase or direct quotation, of the published or unpublished work of another person without complete acknowledgment of the source; (b) the unacknowledged use of materials prepared by another agency or person providing term papers or other academic materials; (c) the non-attributed use of any portion of a computer algorithm or data file; or (d) the use, by paraphrase or direct quotation, of on-line material without complete acknowledgment of the source."

Pagers, Beepers, and Phones

Please make sure that your pagers, beepers, cell phones, noise horns, cow-bells, and other equipment that are likely to be disruptive and counterproductive to learning experience, are turned off during class.

Students with Special Needs

Please let me know if you are a student with special needs such as visual impairment, hearing impairment, or a learning disability.

Contingency Plan

In the event that the university closes due to pandemic or other disaster, please review and study the required readings. Reading quizzes (distributed over Canvas, if the internet is available; or by postal mail if the internet is not available) must be completed to test your comprehension of the readings. Complete all required work (to be distributed either through Canvas, e-mail, or postal mail) listed on the schedule and send the solutions to: John Petrocelli (petrocjv@wfu.edu), if the internet is available; or if the internet is not available to: John Petrocelli, P.O. Box 7778, Winston-Salem, 27109. You will be mailed or e-mailed a midterm and final examination that should be taken closed book, without access to papers, persons, or other resources. The return date for the examination will be specified in the mailing. If the internet is available, Professor Petrocelli will be available for normal office hours by e-mail.

Disclaimer

Consider this syllabus a binding contract of your responsibilities. As with most other courses, I do reserve the right to modify the schedule as deemed necessary. Any changes made to the schedule or policies within this syllabus will be announced in class and on Canvas.

Readings and Schedule

Week/Day(s): Topic(s) and Required Reading(s):

1 Jan 14/16: Introduction to Bullshit, Bullshitting, and Calling Bullshit

Introduction to Bullshit, Bullshitting, and Calling Bullshit

Frankfurt, H. (1986). On bullshit. *Raritan Quarterly Review*, 6, 81-100.

Brem, S. K., & Rips, L. J. (2000). Explanation and evidence in informal argument. *Cognitive Science*, 24, 573-604.

2 Jan 21/23: Antecedents of Bullshitting and Pseudo-Profound Bullshit Receptivity

Petrocelli, J. V. (2018). Antecedents of bullshitting. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 76, 249-258.

Pennycook, G., Cheyne, J. A., Barr, N., Koehler, D. J., & Fugelsang, J. A. (2015). On the reception and detection of pseudo-profound bullshit. *Judgment and Decision Making*, 10, 549-563.

3 Jan 28/30: Bullshit Detection

- Sagan, C. (1995). The fine art of baloney detection. In C. Sagan, *The demon-haunted world: Science as a candle in the dark* (pp. 201-218). New York: Random House.
- Tufte, E. (2001). Graphical integrity. In E. Tufte, *The visual display of quantitative information, 2nd ed.* (pp. 53-77). Cheshire, CT: Graphics Press.
- Tufte, E. (2001). Chartjunk: Vibrations, grids, and ducks. In E. Tufte, *The visual display of quantitative information, 2nd ed.* (pp. 107-122). Cheshire, CT: Graphics Press.
- Kampen, J. K., & Tamás, P. (2014). Should I take this seriously? A simple checklist for calling bullshit on policy supporting research. *Quality and Quantity: International Journal of Methodology*, *48*, 1213-1223.

4 Feb 4/6: Media and Bullshit

- Brassington, I. (2011). Media bullshit in the assisted dying debate. *Medical Law International*, *11*, 227-238.
- Morgan, W. J. (2010). Bullshitters, markets, and the privatization of public discourse about sports. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *53*, 1574-1589.
- Nielsen, R. K. (2015). Social media and bullshit. *Social Media + Society*, *1*, 1-3.

Video/Audio Analysis - Due

5 Feb 11/13: Publishing Bullshit

- Ioannidis, J. P. A. (2005). Why most published research findings are false. *PLoS Medicine*, *2*(8), e124, 696-701.
- Nissen, S. B., Magidson, T., Gross, K., & Bergstrom, C. T. (2016). Publication bias and the canonization of false facts. *eLife*, *5*, e21451, 1-19.
- Matthews, R. (2000). Storks deliver babies ($p = 0.008$). *Teaching Statistics*, *22*, 36-38.

6 Feb 18/20: Policy and Bullshit

- Belfiore, E. (2009). On bullshit in cultural policy practice and research: Notes from the British case. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, *15*, 343-359.
- Michaels, D., & Monforton, C. (2005). Manufacturing uncertainty: Contested science and the protection of the public's health and environment. *Journal of Public Health*, *95*, S39-S48.

Organizational Bullshit vs. Evidence-Based Communication Role Play - Due

7 Feb 25/28: Coping with Bullshit

- Jussim, L., Crawford, J. T., Anglin, S. M., Stevens, S. T., & Duarte, J. L. (2016). Interpretations and methods: Towards a more effectively self-correcting social psychology. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *66*, 116-133.
- Lewandowsky, S., Ecker, U. K. H., & Cook, J. (2017). Beyond misinformation: Understanding and coping with the "Post-Truth" era. *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition*, *6*, 353-369.

- **Final Quiz (Online)**
- **Final Paper Due**