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## PSYCHOLOGY OF SUPERSTITION

### **Textbooks:**

*Subliminal: How Your Unconscious Mind Rules Your Behavior* by Leonard Mlodinow

*50 Great Myths of Popular Psychology* (2010) by Lilienfeld, Lynn, Ruscio, & Beyerstein.

Additional readings may be assigned, made available on Blackboard, some handed out in print.

### **The Psychology of Superstition:**

(3 credit hours): “An examination of non-critical thinking and human tendencies to believe unlikely (and impossible) claims about the human experience, with a special focus on beliefs on the fringe of serious psychology. Issues addressed in the course include popular beliefs about parapsychology, magic, alien abduction, personality testing, and the mental processes that support these beliefs.”

*Other courses assume you know too little; this course assumes you know too much.* The Psychology of Superstition is a course about why the human mind is prone to superstitious, magical, illogical, and just plain faulty thinking, and what we can do to separate truthful or potentially truthful beliefs from erroneous ones. We’ll be looking at popular beliefs that science has shown to be false, but we’ll especially look for the origins and supports of superstitious, magical, and illusory thinking, which we find both within the normal functioning of the human mind and within the realm of social influence.

**Warning:** We all have beliefs (“knowledge”) that we think are true, but are false. Some of yours will probably become the target of our investigations in this class. Becoming defensive is normal, but emotional; try to not let your emotions interfere with our attempt to learn about false beliefs and their underpinnings. Rest assured that I also have such beliefs, and am not immune to the faults of insufficient skepticism.

**A little background:** Personally, I have a strong belief (which is supported by a lot of psychological research) in the almost unlimited capacity of the human mind (including my own) *to deceive itself*— a feat often magnified, but also luckily minimized, by the influence of other human minds (i.e., others mislead us, but they also often set us straight). This ability of the mind to deceive itself takes many forms, ranging from barely significant misperceptions (such as seeing red when it’s really brown) to important life-and-death conclusions (like those expressed by confident eye-witnesses while condemning innocent murder suspects, or believers in alternative healing who forgo science-based vaccinations or treatments, or physicians who miss seeing leftover medical equipment inside patients on X-rays).

Of course, there are many components to our self-deceiving ways. Some of these components are mental, and some are social. Mental components include errors we make in perception, the reconstructive nature of memory, our frequent poor command of logic, the influence of the mental biases and shortcuts, the influence of our emotions, our searches for meaning and control in life, and so on. Social components include direct influence from other people, our desire to look good in others’ eyes, our use of power with respect to others, and our attempts to construct reality with the people around us. Many of the components that contribute to self-deception are actually beneficial to our functioning in a wide variety of ways, but they just weren’t meant to distinguish all forms of relationships between events (“why did it happen?”), and so we wind up with erroneous beliefs. This course will investigate all of this, and will emphasize the methods of thinking and inquiry that help to reduce superstitious, magical, and illusory thinking.

The departmental **Course Learning Outcomes** state that successful students should be able to:

- \* Report on the basic components underlying the human tendency to believe false conclusions, including mental processes and social factors.

- \* Differentiate between scientific explanations and non-scientific and pseudo-scientific explanations of phenomena, to compare skeptical, cynical, and gullible orientations to phenomena.
- \* Explain the role of science literacy in our society as it relates to the development of healthy skepticism.
- \* Generate proposals to use scientific tools to analyze popular claims, and recognize when scientific tools are correctly applied or misapplied to refute or support specific claims.

A secondary outcome, as always, is to contribute to the student's general education: developing the attitudes and behaviors (especially those expressed through written communication) that are necessary to survive in college, and to become college educated people.

## Grades:

There will be five short-essay styled quizzes and your combined quiz grade is worth **60%** of the final course grade. We'll have one formal term paper worth **20%**, and a few pass-fail homework assignments worth **15% total** (combined). Attendance and active involvement in class is worth **5%** of your total grade. You'll need a total grade of 93 for an A, 90 for an A-, 87 for B+, 83 for B, 80 for B-, 70 for C-, and so on when all is completed.

Don't *not* submit an assignment: the score of zero has a tremendous effect on overall grades.

(Anyone using documented testing accommodations must inform me one week before the quiz.)

**The term paper and written homework assignments** will be detailed in class. *Some guidelines:*

**The formal term paper** should be 1000–1500 words in length. Use double-spaced typing throughout the paper. I grade it based on thought content, clarity, and English (grammar, syntax, spelling, organization, etc.). See the tips for writing at the end of this syllabus.

**Homework** will be infrequent, but will require approximately one single-spaced typed essay in response to a prompt handed out in class. Copies of assignments (including the term paper, above) will be placed in our course shell in Blackboard (in case you miss receiving it in class). If you turn your homework in on time and get a low grade, you may resubmit it (rewritten, within a week) for a better grade.

**Tests** in this course will *sample* your knowledge and understanding of the material studied in the sections covered by each test (e.g., test 3 will only cover material subsequent to test 2, but will have only a few questions rather than a thorough quizzing of all topics; anything studied or assigned is “fair game” for a test, though I might decide, in class, to eliminate some material from tests). Tests will be short answer style.

## IN CLASS FOR THE SEMESTER

If all goes well, we'll be on campus the entire semester and there will be no online requirements. This class will meet in person and I usually lecture by describing things, raising ideas, asking questions, making fun, and occasionally writing words or drawing diagrams on the board. I don't summarize the readings for you. I'll lecture and we'll all discussing things both in an introductory fashion and in greater depth. Do not skip class.

If all does *not* go well and we are forced once again to vacate campus, the online class in Blackboard will become our home. It will rely on your participation to discussion questions, where we will try to simulate in-class discussion (so I will be a frequent contributor, replying to you and trying to get us into more detail and depth in any topic we're examining). Your participation online will then be in place of homework, in terms of grading. But let's hope we don't have to resort to this.

## MICHAEL S. OFSOWITZ

Born and raised here in the Rochester area. Studied psychology and sociology at The University of North Carolina-Charlotte, before going to Tulane University (New Orleans) for graduate study in social psychology. I joined Monroe Community College in the fall of 2002, and spent 13 of the preceding years teaching to (mostly) Americans in Germany (in military environments) with the University of Maryland. I teach psychology (intro, social psych, behavior mod, superstitions, research methods) and have also taught sociology (intro, social

problems, social psych, self, American society). I'm widowed, have one child (a son), enjoy French and Middle Eastern food, cooking, forests, racquetball, softball, literary fiction, and comedy, and I also speak German. I'm a full professor here at MCC. Feel free to call me anything polite (Mike, Michael, Mr. Ofsowitz, professor, even "teach"; ... just about anything but "sir"). I have a web site at <http://sites.monroec.edu/mofsowitz>.

## **Office Hours:**

Normally I say, come see me whenever you feel like it. I'm easy to visit. But I'll have limited on-campus time due to the virus. Still, don't let your frustrations or confusions get the upper hand; if you're having problems in class, come visit or email me. Of course, you don't have to have problems to seek me out: there are no prerequisites to "office visits." If necessary, we can arrange a personal Zoom session online.

## **And a little note-taking advice:**

Take notes. Take lots of notes. Even when you seem to be following a clear discussion that you completely understand, write down something to help you remember it and details that were in the discussion. Every now and then in this class we'll have fun discussions that will go fast, and some will even be silly, but mostly they'll contain ideas that you'll have to remember. Active note-taking is an important part of the learning/remembering process. Don't write my exact words, though: write the gist of the ideas (and if it triggers thoughts of your own, write those down as well). Rewrite your notes at some point. Take notes from your readings, too. It would be very nice if you'd be willing to share notes with students who are occasionally absent from class (it's easy to share a photo of your notes by text, etc.).

## **Laptops:**

Psychological research has clearly shown that note-taking via laptop is less effective than note-taking by pen/pencil. Unless you have a handwriting disability, you should avoid taking notes on a laptop. If you do use a laptop in class, *do not surf the web, play games, watch videos, etc.* And also, try to write the gist of what's being said in class, like I just described above; laptop notes tend to be more verbatim, which is less helpful.

## **Quirks about the way I grade:**

A checkmark (✓) is a good sign. It means "yes," or "right," or "good." If I actually write "good," I really mean it; I use superlatives ("great paper," "excellent") rarely. On the whole, when I grade your written work, I point out weaknesses and errors in the optimistic hope that you'll learn to correct them in the future. It also expresses my assumption that your self-esteem is not so fragile that it'll crush under the weight of a short series of corrections from a college teacher. Expect to have your mistakes corrected; it's good for you. But it doesn't represent what I think of you as a person; if you behave politely in class I respect you thoroughly, no matter how good or bad your writing or test-taking skills. The comments and grades only refer to the quality of the work you submitted, not to the quality of you as a person.

## **Recordings:**

Audio: only with explicit written permission from your professor. Photo/video: not permitted. Do not post any recordings on the web

# Psychology of Superstition

## OUTLINE OF LECTURES AND ASSIGNMENTS:

(The dates below represent the start of each week only. "Myths" refers to the 50 Myths text, and most refer to the numbered myth; "Subliminal" refers to the Mlodinow book. The additional readings are all in Blackboard. I will try to get them printed for class distribution, but that might not happen. You should read all material prior to the class scheduled so that you'll be prepared to participate in class discussions. You should re-read assignments after class so that it'll really sink in. Most additional class handouts will be available on Blackboard after being distributed in class.)

| <u>Class weeks</u> | <u>Topic (&amp; reading)</u>  |
|--------------------|---|
| Week 1 (1/24):     | Introduction to superstitions and pseudoscience (reading by Sagan, "Why we Need to Understand Science").  |
| Week 2 (1/31):     | Mind and reality, some basic psychology (Myths: Intro through p.12, + 1, 2; <u>Subliminal: Prologue</u> ; reading by Lambrozo "Truth About Left Brain/Right Brain").  |
| Week 3 (2/07):     | Organizing principles and schema ( <u>Subliminal: chapter 1</u> ) <u>QUIZ</u> .   |
| Week 4 (2/14):     | Schema 1: "I know what I saw." (Myths: 11, 12; <u>Subliminal: chapter 3</u> ; reading by Chabris and Simons, "Why our Memory Fails Us") <i>Winter Break follows</i>   |
| Week 5 (2/28):     | Schema 2: "Seeing is believing." ( <u>Subliminal: chapter 2</u> ).  |
| Week 6 (3/07):     | Schema 3: "We can't all be wrong" (Myths: 19, 28, 18, 42; <u>Subliminal: chapter 4 [but skip 91-96] &amp; chapter 5</u> ). <u>QUIZ</u> .  |
| Week 7 (3/14):     | Schema 4: "Anything's possible." (Myths: 1, 3, 4, 20, 22; reading by de Zengotita "Believing Whatever").  |
| Week 8 (3/21):     | Schema 5: "Everything happens for a reason." (Myths: Intro from p.13, 25, 32, 46; <u>Subliminal: chapter 7</u> ; readings from NY Times, "Hot Hand"; Gilovich, "Superstition and the Regression Effect"; Kahneman, "Fast/Slow") |
| Week 9 (3/28):     | Schema 6: "It's common sense." (Myths: 7, 8, 16, 27, 28, 29, 50; reading by Esfahani Smith, "One Head, Two Brains") <u>QUIZ</u> .   |
| Week 10 (4/04):    | Schema 7: "It's not rocket science." (Myths: 1, 15, 47, 21)   |
| Week 11 (4/11):    | Schema 8: "That can't be all there is to it." (Myths 5, 49, 13; reading by Shermer, "Why Smart People..."); <i>Spring Break follows</i> .   |
| Week 12 (4/25):    | Science: "A candle in the dark" (reading by Sagan, "Fine Art of Baloney Detection") <u>QUIZ</u> .   |
| Week 13 (5/02):    | Science, cont. <i>Withdrawal deadline</i>   |
| Week 14 (5/09):    | Schema 9: "I know what I like." ( <u>Subliminal: chapter 9</u> ).   |
| Week 15 (5/16):    | Psychics, Aliens, ESP, leftovers (reading by Shermer, "Psychic for a Day"). <u>LAST QUIZ</u> <i>Last day of class is Friday, May 20.</i>  |

## The finer print

### A note on absences and make-ups:

Very simply, if you want to learn the material, you need to come to class. MCC requires that I report attendance, since it might affect eligibility for financial aid. Their computers also monitor the attendance reports and may send warnings (if you have too many absences) that sound as if I prompted them, but they are automated and written by staff. If you miss a test, you must make it up ASAP. Make-up tests must be completed within one week from the original date, unless valid excuses (medical emergency, business travel, military deployment) keep you from returning to class. (Such absences require documentation.) *If you feel ill, don't come to campus.* If you're going to miss class, send me an E-mail.

### Incomplete (grade of I):

The grade of I, or incomplete, is available for special cases where a student is unable to finish the course by the scheduled end of the term. To receive an I, students who are having problems finishing the course as scheduled must fulfill the following requirements: 1) 60% of the graded assignments must be completed at the time of the request; 2) 60% of the class sessions must have been attended by the end of the course; 3) the student must provide evidence of a valid reason for not finishing the graded assignments by the end of the course; 4) the student must request an incomplete in writing, prior to the last day of the course, and this request must include the reason for the extension and a date by which the work for the course will be completed (which should not exceed one week from the expiration of the reason for the I). Granting the grade of I, and setting a date for its completion remain at the total discretion of the instructor. For students who are unable to finish the course as scheduled, alternatives to the grade of I include the W (withdrawal, see below) and the F (failure).

### Plagiarism and cheating:

Plagiarism is academic dishonesty. In other words, it's a big word for cheating. If you're caught plagiarizing, or cheating in some other form, you may wind up failing the assignment and being reported to the college. The most common form of plagiarism is using someone else's work as if it were your own. That is, by copying the *work* of another person and presenting that work as if *you* wrote it, you are plagiarizing. To avoid plagiarism you should learn how to paraphrase and how to use *quotation marks*. Basically, if you copy anything word-for-word from a previously published source (a book, a magazine article, etc.), using *three or more consecutive words*, you must put the passage within quotation marks and show where the material came from with a citation. If you put someone else's *ideas* into *your own words* (and not just a rearrangement of the original words) you don't need the quotation marks but you still need to cite your source. Citing your source is necessary, but often not sufficient to avoid plagiarism.

Under no circumstances should you ever use the work of a fellow student in any of your written work. You must write your own product. Anything else is down-right cheating. Also, if you plan on using something that you had once written for another course as a piece of work for credit in *this* course, you must get prior approval.

I highly recommend that you get an English manual of some sort to help you avoid some of the common mistakes that result in accusations of plagiarism. *Diana Hacker's Pocket Style Manual* is one such guidebook. I also have a web page on plagiarism on my web site.

### Respect:

- **Don't use your phone during class** (unless looking up something for class).
- Try to be patient with fellow students and assume they have good intentions. Listen to what they're saying.
- Don't dominate discussions: allow time for others, who might be shier than you, to respond.
- We're playing with ideas in class, so don't assume people believe what they're talking about.
- Take a joke, but don't insult anyone (or at least insult everyone equally and in good taste).
- Treat the classroom as a confidential situation, and don't gossip about it.
- Speak in the first person; recognize that your opinions are your own and that you don't speak for others.
- Be nice (respect others), try to learn something (respect college), and take responsibility for your future (respect yourself). If need be, at least fake it, and consider it a professional responsibility.

### Learning Centers:

The Writing Center itself no longer exists, but its services have been integrated into the Tutoring and Academic Assistance Center (TAAC, 11-261 at Brighton, Learning Commons at Downtown); it accepts walk-in and appointment sessions. If your writing is at all weak, I *highly* recommend that you make use of the tutoring services at the TAAC. It's there to help you. Watch the feedback I give you on homework assignments: I might refer you to the Writing Center, and I expect you to go there for tutoring if I do. If you have broader reading, study habit, or language problems, the TAAC is also the place to go. The Electronic Learning Center is located in room 11-106.

## SOME TIPS FOR WRITING ESSAY ASSIGNMENTS

1. Always *think* before writing. Don't write a paper without thinking first. Jot down your ideas, then sort through them; they are not sacred, so discard those of little value, and arrange the others in some logical order, using an outline for organization.
2. Avoid *plagiarism* at all costs. When you copy words, an idea, or other information from another source, you *must* give credit to the original source. Failure to give credit for ideas, information, or words is called plagiarism, and may lead to failure on the assignment, or if intentional and repeated, failure in the course. (When you use the exact same words as you find in another source, such as a textbook, use quotation marks ["..."] in your paper around the copied selection when the selection is three successive words or more. If you alter the exact wording only a little, you can be in big trouble, so either copy exactly and quote, or paraphrase cleanly.) See tip five, below, for sources showing you how to give credit where credit is due, and also the "[Plagiarism](#)" page on my web site (under "Writing"). Seriously.
3. Begin your essay with a clear introduction. Your introduction should do two things: 1) it should introduce *the reader* to the topic while clarifying key concepts you bring in; and 2) it should show *the reader* what your intentions are for the remainder of the paper while transitioning to the main body. End the essay with a conclusion that summarizes the paper, and draws it to a natural, clean close.
4. Be clear about what you are writing. Clarity demands that you understand what you are talking about and that you communicate it to a reader who is not reading your mind, but is reading your writing. A terse style, or one using terminology carelessly, does not make for clear writing. Also, try avoiding wordy phrases. If necessary, work on your use of punctuation, past and present tense problems, the active voice, and other aspects of the English essay (see point 5).
5. Use an English handbook to learn what you need to learn about basic writing mechanics. In addition to the rules, they show plenty of examples. Diana Hacker's *A Pocket Style Manual* is a good source, as are the *Harbrace College Handbook*, Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*, the *American Psychological Association (APA) Publication Manual*, the *Chicago Manual of Style* and other such sources (including <http://www.refdesk.com/factgram.html>). Use a dictionary *and* spell-check for spelling and a thesaurus to improve your vocabulary. Visit the Writing Learning Center for tutoring.
6. Avoid sexist or biased language. Be polite to groups of people. But avoid using "he or she" or "s/he."
7. Cite your sources and show your bibliography in proper APA format (see point 5, and my web site).
8. *Proofread* what you've written. Once you're down to your final draft (which should be your *third* or *tenth* time editing your paper, not second), give it a final, careful proof. If needed, make corrections on the final draft in pencil before you turn it in. If you find too many errors, rewrite once more.
9. Double-space term papers. This means using a 2-line spread for a 12-point font. (Use an 11 or 12-point font. A 12-point Garamond is usually a good choice.) Do *not* add empty spaces between paragraphs as in a business letter. *Indent* the start of each *paragraph* half an inch. Leave margins around the entire text of the paper (about 1"). Do *not* align the text to the right margin of the paper (don't "right-justify" or "full justify").
10. Number all the pages in the upper-right corner, flush with the right margin. APA style requires a "running head" on each page, all uppercase, and starting on the left margin. It is a shortened title.
11. In my classes only: you don't need a title page. Instead, you can start your paper with the title, and then put your name on the next line. Staple the pages together yourself (don't ask me to do it for you; I'm not your secretary). No plastic folders! Paper (e.g., manila) folders are acceptable.
12. **Follow the guidelines above!**