Psychology of a Meaningful Life: Cultural Variations
Psychology XXX (CRN XXX) ~ Summer 2020

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IMPORTANT: This class will be “taught in Canvas”. This means that all important communication, course materials, readings, study guides, project guides, etc. will be found in our course Canvas site, and not the assigned Blackboard site.

To learn how to use Canvas, please visit the following Canvas tutorial: https://canvas.uoregon.edu/courses/26168

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Welcome to Barcelona and to the Psychology of a Meaningful Life: Cultural Variations! I look forward to our time together. In this class, we will approach the science of a meaningful life with three major themes in mind: (1) the scientific bases of a meaningful life; (2) cultural variations in approaches to a meaningful life; and (3) scientific methods in the study of a meaningful life. Each of these themes is summarized below.

(1) Course Theme One: Scientific Bases of a Meaningful Life
This course will explore the theoretical and empirical bases of the psychology of a “meaningful life.” Within the field of psychology, indeed, in most social sciences, scientific attention has turned toward the exploration and understanding of what constitutes the building blocks of individual and community well-being — the behaviors that research suggests will support our health and happiness, and foster positive connections with other people. In this course, we will read, consider, and discuss theoretical and empirical approaches to a wide range of human behaviors thought to underlie a meaningful existence. The following are among the core topics to be studied during this course:

Diversity: Diversity refers both to an obvious fact of human life—namely, that there are many different kinds of people—and the idea that diversity drives cultural, economic, and social vitality and innovation. Decades of research suggest that intolerance hurts our well-being—and that individuals thrive when they are able to tolerate and embrace the diversity of the world.

Altruism: Altruism is when we act to promote someone else’s welfare, even at a risk or cost to ourselves. Though some believe that humans are fundamentally self-interested, recent research suggests otherwise.

Compassion: Compassion literally means “to suffer together.” Emotion researchers defined compassion as the feeling that arises when you are confronted with another’s suffering and feel motivated to relieve that suffering.

Gratitude: Gratitude has two key components: an affirmation of goodness and a recognition that goodness exists in us, others and in sources outside of ourselves that we may not full understand. Research has shown that people able to recognize goodness are self and others often achieve goodness in their lives.

Mindfulness: Mindfulness means maintaining a moment-by-moment awareness of our thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and surrounding environment, through a gentle, nurturing lens. Mindfulness is one of the most studies therapeutic approached in clinical psychology and psychiatry today.
Awe: Awe is the feeling we get in the presence of something vast that challenges our understanding of the world. When people feel awe, they may use other words to describe the experience, such as wonder, amazement, surprise, or transcendence.

Empathy: The term empathy is used to describe a wide range of experiences. Emotion researchers generally define empathy as the ability to sense other people’s emotions, coupled with the ability to imagine what someone else might be thinking or feeling.

Forgiveness: Psychologists generally define forgiveness as a conscious, deliberate decision to release feelings of resentment or vengeance toward a person or group who has harmed you, regardless of whether they actually deserve your forgiveness.

Happiness: One of the basic emotions, happiness and what are the true sources of happiness (money, power, love, friendship) remain an important open question and driving source of research in many academic disciplines, in particular, psychology.

Social connection: The concept of social connection pertains to the feeling that we belong to a group and generally feel close to other people. Scientific evidence strongly suggests that this is a core psychological need, essential to feeling satisfied with your life.

With each of these topics – diversity, altruism, compassion, gratitude, mindfulness, awe, empathy, forgiveness, happiness, and social connection – we will read primary theories and research from the fields of neuroscience, development psychology, social psychology, and clinical psychology to better understand the science of a meaningful life. One major objective of this class is to bridge the gap between scientific knowledge and our own personal ability to appreciate and apply the facets of a meaningful life to our own lives.

(2) Course Theme Two: Cultural Variations in Approaches to a Meaningful Life
You are taking this class in Barcelona, Spain, one of the oldest and most durable cultures in the world. As we consider the scientific bases of a meaningful life, we will critically consider cultural differences in societies’ approaches to many of the same questions. Specifically, we will compare and contrast the American approach to contemporary life with that of the Spanish/Mediterranean approach. The American culture has been described by a variety of social scientists as individualistically oriented, prioritizing independence and achievement over interpersonal connection and social harmony. Many have argued that this has contributed to the American success story, both as a country and at the level of individual citizens. Others, however, have argued that this orientation has led to a moral and spiritual decline that corresponds with a host of negative outcomes, including, decreased life expectancy, mental health disabilities and suicide, and social isolation. What are the bases of a meaningful life in America in the 21 Century. In this class, we will consider this question, especially in light of life in Spain.

Like many other Latin cultures, the Spanish culture prioritizes interconnectedness and social harmony as central cultural goals. This orientation has contributed the society’s emphasis on family, social harmony, and the forgoing of independent gain for the sake of the collective good. We can see these priorities in social practices such as the “siesta”, which provides families for the opportunity for extended midday repose, prolonged summer work leave, and an emphasis on organized religion and spirituality that provided the bases for many communities. Spain has struggled economically, however, prompting social critics to questions it cultural priorities.

During this term, we will hear from several Spanish social scientist working in Barcelona. Guest speakers will help us to better understand Spanish psychology and will be asked to consider the Spanish approach to questions of what constitutes a meaningful life. Additionally, students will be able to experience first hand life in Spain and will, as a part of the course, engage in active reflection on the ways in which their experiences in Barcelona are syntonic or dystonic with their experiences as American. Although the central aim of the course is to enrich students understanding of the scientific and cultural bases of a meaningful life, the opportunity to take such a course while living abroad will also provide a rich opportunity to personally and collectively consider how one actively cultivates a meaningful life for themselves.
(3) **Course Theme Three: Scientific Methods in the Study of a Meaningful Life**

Psychological research methods comprise a wide variety of approaches to the study of many aspects of the human condition. During this course, we will consider how scientists have approached the study of a meaningful life. This will include a critical analysis of study designs (e.g., experimental vs. observational), research tools (e.g., qualitative vs. quantitative), and sources of information (e.g., from the biological to the societal). As with all course in psychology, it is vital that students gain a appreciation of the discipline's use of the scientific method when addressing questions of central importance to human welfare.

**LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

In addition to providing a solid scientific knowledge-base regarding the subject-matter, the course will help you learn to think more usefully and critically (i.e., carefully) about these core aspects of human behavior -- something useful in psychology and human services professions, but also in many areas of life. More specifically: You can learn to identify patterns in motivation and emotion, key sources or causes of them, their relation to each other and to personality tendencies, and the effect of all these on behavior. The following are the course's learning objectives and outcomes:

1. To examine human behavioral patterns that underlie what different cultures consider a "meaningful life." In addition to the elements of a meaningful life (e.g., happiness, altruism, social connection), this will include consideration of personality, emotion and motivation with the goal of extracting a knowledge-base from scientific studies on these topics, which will facilitate identification of these patterns in everyday life.

2. To explore competing theories and perspectives on the psychology of a meaningful life.

3. To explore contrasting cultural approaches, specifically the American vs. Spanish approach to a meaningful life.

4. To develop skills in reading, evaluating, and synthesizing research on the subject matter of this course, that can be applied to other subject matters as well.

5. To apply knowledge regarding the psychology of a meaningful life not only to psychology and human services professions, but also in many areas of everyday life.

6. To communicate clearly and effectively about psychological topics based on understanding strengths and limitations of empirical evidence.

**ESTIMATED STUDENT WORKLOAD**

When you complete this course, you will earn X credits toward your degree. X credits is the equivalent of X hours of work across the term, or X hours per week for X weeks. You will spend X hours in class each week. The other X hours will be spent completing assignments. There are numerous reading assignments for this course (about X hours total for the course). Other work will come from the writing assignments (about X hours total for the class), including personal reflection pieces, group project, and the script for an audio podcast. X hours per week will be devoted to class-related filed trips around Barcelona. There is also work (some X hours) preparing for a final exam.

**COURSE READINGS**

There is no text for this course. Readings for this course will consist of a combination of original research articles, book chapters, and news/media stories. Throughout the course, we will also take advantage of a number of podcasts that have been produced with the question of "what constitutes a meaningful life" in mind. All readings will be posted as .pdfs on the course's Canvas site.
Students are required to read the assigned readings in advance of class time for the class they are assigned (as indicated in the schedule).

Readings for the course will comprise a mix of published scientific briefs, often written for the general public, as well as a carefully selected set of theoretical and empirical papers (chapters or journal articles). It is felt that the former will facilitate an understanding of the latter, and lectures and class discussions will help to solidify student understanding of the readings.

**COURSE REQUIREMENTS**

- **Attendance & reading (15%)**: attendance is required and active engagement in class discussions will be as critical to student learning as it will be to the overall richness of the class. Due to the seminar-like format of the class (e.g., discussions following instructor didactics) there is an emphasis on attendance and participation, AND careful reading of the assigned readings before a given class meeting.

- **Daily personal reflection pieces & questionnaires/quizzes (35%)**: On a near-daily basis, you will write a very short (approximately 1 paragraph, less than 1 page) reflection about your considerations of a core class theme. These pieces will ask you to consider how you typically experience a specific aspect of a meaningful life in your day to day existence and, importantly, how you might be experiencing this aspect while living and studying in Barcelona. For example, when we cover the topic of awe, you might compare and contrast how you experience awe living in Oregon, with its natural beauty, vs. the experiences you are having in Barcelona, including its stunning architecture, coastal geography, etc. There will be approximately 20 daily reflection pieces required from you during the course of the term. In addition, we will complete a number of related psychological questionnaires at multiple times during the semester to observe the evolution in your ideas and attitudes. These questionnaires (e.g., Berkeley Awe Inventory) have been used to research the empirical bases of the psychology of a meaningful life.

- **Final Exam (25%)**: There will be a final exam for the course worth 25% of your grade. This exam will comprise multiple choice, short-answer and longer-essay prompts designed to ensure that you are developing a working grasp of the concepts, terminology, theory and scientific evidence needed to engage in thoughtful discussions about the scientific basis of a meaningful life. A study guide for this exam will be circulated via CANVAS one week in advance of the exam.

- **Final Group Podcast Project (25%)**: Working in groups of X to X people, you will complete your own podcast that presents how you’ve approached the goal of a meaningful life while living in Barcelona. In your podcast (note: a full description of this requirement will be provided at a later date), you will delve into some aspect(s) of a meaningful life from scientific, cultural, and personal perspective based on your time and experiences in Barcelona. During our last meeting, we will air our recorded podcasts for the members of our class.

**Summary of Course Requirements and Point Distribution**

- Attendance/reading/QOD (15%): 15 points
- Personal reflection writings and quizzes (35%): 35 points
- Exam (25%): 25 points
- **Group Podcast (25%)**: 25 points
- **TOTAL (100%)**: 100 Points
SCHEDULE OF CLASS TOPICS, ACTIVITIES, AND READINGS:

WEEK 1:

Day 1: Introduction to the Psychology of a Meaningful Life: Theory & Evidence


Day 2: American Culture


Day 2: Spanish Culture


WEEK 2:

**Day 1: Diversity**


**Day 1: Altruism**


**Day 2: Compassion**


**Day 2: Gratitude**


WEEK 3

**Day 1: Mindfulness**


**Day 1: Awe**


**Day 2: Empathy**


**Day 2: Forgiveness**


WEEK 4

**Day 1: Happiness**


**Day 1: Social Connection**


**Day 2: Mental & Physical Health**


**Day 2: Course Wrap-up**

**GRADING AND COURSE EXPECTATIONS**

Grades will be assigned as follows: A = 90-100%, B = 80-89%, C = 70-69%, D = 60-69%, F < 60% (with minus and plus grades assigned at appropriate cutoffs).

The grading system used in this course is as follows:

**A** – Outstanding performance relative to that required to meet course requirements; demonstrates mastery of course content at the highest level.

**B** – Performance that is significantly above that required to meet course requirements; demonstrates mastery of course content at a high level.

**C** – Performance that meets the course requirements in every respect; demonstrates an adequate understanding of course content.

**D** – Performance that is at the minimal level necessary to pass the course but does not fully meet the course requirements; demonstrates a marginal understanding of course content.

**F** – Performance in the course, for whatever reason, is unacceptable and does not meet the course requirements; demonstrates an inadequate understanding of the course content.
Accommodations: Appropriate accommodations will be provided for students with documented disabilities. If you anticipate needing accommodations in this course, please make arrangements to meet with me soon.

Academic Honesty: Unless it is specifically connected to assigned collaborative work, all work should be individual. Evidence of collusion (working with someone not connected to the class or assignment), plagiarism (use of someone else's published or unpublished words or design without acknowledgment) or multiple submissions (submitting the same paper in different courses) will lead to the Department's and the University's procedures for dealing with academic dishonesty.