

Psychology of Happiness
Columbia University
Department of Psychology
Summer 2009: May 26 - July 3
Monday-Wednesday 1pm-4:10pm

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Course Description:

During most of the 20th century, the science of psychology ignored the study of optimal functioning (e.g., happiness and life satisfaction). Traditionally, cognitive psychology centers around information processing mechanisms, social psychology centers on emotion, person perception, and individual differences, and clinical psychology focuses on psychopathology. In recent years, a new area of study began to focus on well-being and happiness. This new subfield – referred to as *positive psychology* – intends to enhance the human strengths and virtues that make life meaningful and allow individuals and communities to thrive. Therefore, it uses the scientific method to identify roadblocks to happiness, as well as cognitive distortions in our ability to evaluate and predict our own happiness. This course is designed to explore and critically evaluate the main concepts and theories of positive psychology and the research behind these concepts. In doing so, this course will build on themes within the psychology department, such as the understanding of psychology as a scientific field, the application of experimental methods to study of human emotions and behavior, and the interaction of cognition and emotion in creating our subjective human experience. The format of the course will be didactic (in the sense that students will be introduced to new materials and will gain knowledge), experiential (students will be asked to both objectively and subjectively evaluate empirical findings), and interactive (the course will rely on student participation and class discussion). In addition, assigned readings (as detailed below) will be given weekly, and short weekly reaction papers will be collected throughout the semester, to ensure student engagement with the material.

Course Requirements:

The initial three classes will provide a foundation in the psychology of well being, and encourage students to question whether happiness can be measured, how it might be increased, and why it might be of interest to psychologists. These initial classes will consist of an introductory lecture led by the instructor followed by group discussions. During each of the following weeks, we will discuss the topic listed for the class period. Each member of the seminar will have the opportunity to be responsible for one topic. The student will select the readings for the topic (in consultation with the instructor) and present them in class. All members of the seminar will be expected to read the articles assigned each week and prepare a reaction paper (described below) for each class.

Reaction Papers

Students should be familiar with all assigned readings for each class, and come to class prepared to discuss their thoughts on the material, having written a reaction paper for the class. The "reaction paper" should include at least one comment on the week's readings. The comment could be a criticism, a discussion of the strength of evidence, or other creative commentary on the material – as long as it is rooted in the readings and based on evidence and logic. Reaction papers should also include at least one proposed topic for class discussion. Reaction papers should be 1-2 pages in length.

Class Participation

Students are expected to attend all sessions. All readings should be completed prior to class, and students should come to class prepared to discuss the readings. Inadequate preparation and/or unexcused absences will cause you to lose participation points. You will be evaluated on the quality of your contributions.

Here are some ideas of what high quality comments may involve:

- A consideration of issues addressed in assigned readings and previous class discussions and lectures
- A unique, but relevant, perspective
- A contribution to moving the discussion and analysis forward
- An increment on others' comments
- A transcendence of the "I feel" response. That is, it includes some evidence, argumentation, or recognition of inherent tradeoffs

Integration Papers

In two longer papers, students will choose any two issues, measurements, or theories that we have discussed in the course (from different classes) and integrate them to make a unique research prediction. Alternatively, students may choose to collect personal data - selecting any two issues discussed in class, and demonstrating an integration of the evidence presented in class into their own lives. Students will present their papers on the last day of class.

Both papers should be 5-6 pages in length (no longer), double-spaced.

- The first integration paper will be due on the fourth week of class.
- The second integration paper will be due on the last day of class.

Grading

Grades will be computed according to the following breakdown:

- 40% 10 reaction papers
- 30% Class Participation/Attendance
- 30% Two integration papers