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Seminar on Social/Personality Psychology – PSYCH 375

“Health, learning and virtue will insure your happiness; they will give you quiet conscience, private esteem and public honor.”

-- Thomas Jefferson, 1788



Spring 2013

Seminar: Positive Psychology – PSYCH 375

Positive psychology is the science of understanding human strengths and the practice of promoting these strengths to help people psychologically and physically. Psychology has grown to accept the view that stressful circumstances do not inexorably lead to negative prognoses. Positive psychology explores factors that make life worth living and the human strengths that enable individuals to confront challenges, appreciate others, and regard daily experiences as meaningful. As a new subfield of psychology, positive psychology provides a distinct contrast to the negative focus of the disease-model approach that traditionally dominated much of the discipline. We will read, discuss, and critique books and articles dealing with current issues in positive psychology, including defining happiness and the nature of the good life, subjective well-being, human strengths and virtues, finding meaning, emotions, flow, and optimism. Regular attendance and active class participation are essential aspects of the seminar. Students will write reaction/thought papers, do a research review paper wherein they design a project dealing with some aspect of positive psychology.

This class will meet on Monday and Wednesdays from 11:45am to 12:55pm.

Required books:

Snyder, C. R., Lopez, S. J., & Pedrotti, J. T. (2011). *Positive psychology: The scientific and practical explorations of human strengths* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. ISBN: 978-1-4129-9062-2 (PAPER)

Todd, R. (2008). *The thing itself: On the search for authenticity*. New York: Riverhead Books. ISBN-13: 978-1594483844

Stegner, W. (2002). *Crossing to safety*. New York: Modern Library. ISBN-13: 978-0375759314

Recommended book (optional) for PS 375:

Dunn, D. S. (2011). *A Short Guide to Writing about Psychology* (3rd ed.). New York: Pearson Longman. (paper)

Course Requirements

Class participation and attendance. This class requires constant attendance, active participation, critical discussions of the readings, and appropriate and open-minded reactions to the opinions and experiences of class members. I expect that you will attend each and every class, and that you will come prepared to talk about—and question—what you read. I will be passing out a sign-in/attendance sheet at the beginning of every class. If you miss more than 3 classes, then your final course grade will be lowered accordingly.

Exam. Given the focus on reading, discussion, and writing in this class, there is only one exam, the final. The final exam will be a take-home exam comprised of essay questions dealing with course material. You will choose two questions to answer from a list of 8 or so questions (each question will be worth 50 pts). I expect that you will craft carefully written and thoughtful answers to each question (i.e., you should use and cite materials from course reading, discussion, and so on). The due date for submitting the exam will be announced later, once the final exam schedule is established.

Writing assignments. There are 9 short writing or paper assignments for this class (a 10th is optional and will count for extra credit). Due dates are noted in the class schedule. Late papers will drop a full letter grade immediately and an additional letter grade for each subsequent day. The assignments are described in detail later in this syllabus.

Research paper. You will write one final paper for this course. Your paper should be 10-15 pages in length. The paper should be written in APA style, as described in the new, 6th edition of the *Publication Manual* and/or *A Short Guide to Writing about Psychology* (3rd ed.). I anticipate that although you will apply information we discussed in class, you will also need to do outside research and incorporate other sources—primarily recent journal articles—into your paper. Although the topics are more applied, that is, related to “real world” issues, I will be grading your work on how well you relate your chosen topic to empirical research from positive psychology and social psychology. **I will need to know your paper topic by Wednesday, February 27th, the last class before spring break (of course, you may inform me earlier than that date). The paper is due in class on Wednesday, April 10th. Take careful note of this due date and plan your research and writing accordingly.** The first three topics were adapted from a course on positive psychology taught by Dr. Jamie Kurtz of James Madison University.

Topic 1: Throughout this course, we have discussed many topics that relate (or fail to relate) to people’s subjective well-being (SWB), or happiness. Both our reading and the research done to date is far from exhaustive, thus there are topics we will not have time to cover or have not been examined empirically. Examples include sports, exercise, creativity (e.g., art, music, writing, performance), meditation, religion, drugs, even food (e.g., chocolate). People may well have their own theories about how these activities or things influence their happiness, but are they correct? Design a study or a series of studies to examine the role of your chosen factor in the study of SWB.

Topic 2:

“I don’t know why we are here, but I’m pretty sure that it is not in order to enjoy ourselves.” – philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951)

Is happiness really the ultimate goal and true sign of a life well-lived? What about good health, wisdom, meaning in life, spirituality, self-actualization, creativity, or even—from an evolutionary perspective—passing on your genes? Select one factor (it need not be from this list) that you believe is a marker of a well-lived life. Review the literature on this factor and how it has been measured in the past, and then propose a study or a series of studies that examine how this factor promotes “the good life.”

Topic 3: Is there a social trend or problem plaguing our society that could benefit from an application of research from positive psychology? Examples include the high divorce rate, job dissatisfaction, homophobia, economic stress, rampant materialism, and the obesity epidemic, among others (feel free to suggest one of your own choosing—just check with me). Identify and describe a social problem, and then justify why you believe that research from positive psychology and/or social psychology related to happiness, well-being, and any related constructs may be able to shed light on it. Design a research program to investigate the issue, and propose an intervention in which people can be taught how to apply “positive” research findings to begin to address the problem in their lives. Hypothesize how the treatment/intervention would affect not only people’s well-being and happiness, but also how it would help solve the specific problem or issue they face.

Topic 4: Read and react to the quote from Thomas Jefferson that appears on the first page of this syllabus. Given what you have read, learned, and discussed about positive psychology this semester, are the factors Mr. Jefferson cites (“Health, learning, and virtue”) actually related to our happiness? And are “quiet conscience, private esteem, and public honor” key parts of the good life? Perhaps Jefferson is on to something and the definition of subjective well-being might benefit from some expansion. In any case, design a study or two aimed at determining the empirical validity of Jefferson’s observations, focusing on how the development of our private selves can, in turn, be used to benefit the public welfare. Be sure to use research from positive and/or social psychology in the course of your answer and to support your research program.

Topic 5. Can money and material goods or wealth lead to genuine happiness? Ample research in both psychology and behavioral economics indicates that material goods and wealth do not make us happy for very long. Yet people continue to believe that more money, lottery winnings, new “toys”, and the like, will make them happy. How can research from positive psychology be constructively used to explain this paradox? Review the relevant literature and then offer a rationale for ways to convince people to reduce their avarice for objects and wealth. If you want to go the extra mile, design an experiment to test whether an educational intervention could be designed and tested to reduce people’s material longings.

Grading weights for final course grade. Final grades will be weighted as follows:

Writing assignments (total)	= 30%
Final exam (take home)	= 20%
Class participation	= 20%
Research paper	= 25%

Office hours. My office hours at Moravian for Spring 2013 are:

Monday	10:15-11:15am
Wednesday	1:30-3:00pm
Friday	8:30-10:00am

When necessary appointments for other times may be scheduled.

Note about the syllabus. Readings should be completed before class on the dates noted herein. I reserve the right to alter the syllabus should the need arise. You will note that there are days noted when class will not be meeting—this usually means that I will be out of town. I anticipate that you will use the time as suggested here in the syllabus, completing whatever assignments are indicated, including writing or submitting required papers.

Plagiarism and cheating. Your work must be your own. The College has a detailed plagiarism policy. I assume you are already familiar with it. I am happy to discuss it with you if you have questions. I will follow it to the letter. Please visit: <http://www.moravian.edu/studentLife/handbook/academic2.htm> to view the policy.

Disability issues. Students who wish to request accommodations in this class for a disability should contact Elaine Mara, assistant director of learning services for academic and disability support at 1307 Main Street, or by calling 610-861-1510. Accommodations cannot be provided until authorization is received from the Academic Support Center.

Class Schedule

Week One – Overview of the Course and Definitions – January 14 (M) and 16 (W)

(M) Introductions, syllabus, and “About Me” Questionnaires

(W) Defining positive psychology – SLP Chapter 1
Writing Assignment 1 Due

Week Two – Learning about Positive Psychology – January 21 (M) and 23 (W)

(M) *Martin Luther King Day – No Class Meeting*
 Perspectives: East & West – SLP Chapter 2

(W) Strengths and Virtues – SLP Chapter 3
Writing Assignment 2 Due

Week Three – Contexts for Positive Psychology – January 28 (M) and January 30 (W)

(M) Cultural Contexts – SLP Chapter 4
Writing Assignment 3 Due

(W) Life Stages – SLP Chapter 5

Week Four – Happiness – February 4 (M) and 6 (W)

(M) Pleasure and Happiness – SLP Chapter 6
Writing Assignment 4 Due

(W) Happiness continued . . .
Writing Assignment 5 Due

Week Five – Emotion and Cognition – February 11 (M) and 13 (W)

(M) Emotional Experience – SLP Chapter 7

(W) Self-Efficacy, Optimism, & Hope – SLP Chapter 8
Writing Assignment 6 Due

Week Six – Wisdom and the Mind – February 18 (M) and 20 (W)

(M) Wisdom – SLP Chapter 9

(W) Mindfulness and Flow – SLP Chapter 10
Writing Assignment 7 Due

Note: Midterm point of the semester – Friday, February 22nd

Week Seven – Prosocial Behavior– February 25 (M) and 27 (W)

(M) Empathy – SLP Chapter 11

(W) Research paper discussion – *your paper topic is due in class today* – please indicate your choice of topic (i.e., 1, 2, 3, or 4) on a piece of paper (preferably typed) with your name on it.

Spring break Assignment: *Do a Secret Good Deed* (see writing assignment 8)

Have a safe and relaxing spring break!

Spring Break – (Sa) March 2 thru (Su) March 10

Week Eight – Connections with Others and Our Expectations for the Future – March 11 (M) and 13 (W)

(M) Attachment and Love – SLP Chapter 12

(W) Mental Health – SLP Chapter 13
Writing Assignment 8 Due

Week Nine – The Search for Authenticity in Life – March 18 (M) and 20 (W)

(M) Read *Todd* Foreword and Part 1 – The Things of this World

(W) Read *Todd* Part II – There, There

Week Ten – Authenticity continued – March 25 (M) and 27 (W)

(M) Read *Todd* Part III – Weeping Nation

(W) Read *Todd* Part IV – The Unicorn in the Looking Glass
Complete paper assignment 9 for today's class

***Easter Recess – Begins Mar 29 (F) and ends April 1 (M) at 6pm**

Week Eleven – Environment – Apr 3 (W)

(W) Interventions? – SLP Chapter 14

Note: Friday, April 5th is the Last Day for Course Withdrawal with a “W”

Week Twelve – Positive Schooling and Good Work –Apr 8 (M) and April 10 (W)

(M) Positive Schooling – SLP Chapter 15

(W) Work – SLP Chapter 16

****Your research paper is due today in class****

Week Thirteen – A Positive Interpretation of Literature – April 15 (M) and 17 (W)

**As you read Stegner’s novel, analyze the characters and situations from a positive psychological perspective.*

(M) Read *Crossing to Safety* (Book I, chapters 1 – 11)

(W) Finish *Crossing to Safety* (finish the novel)

Note: Begin writing assignment 10, which is due Monday.

Week Fourteen – Seeking Balance in All Things – April 22 (M) and 24 (W)

(M) Me/We Balance – SLP Chapter 17

Writing Assignment 10 Due

Note: I will handout the take-home final exam during this class

(W) Going Positive – SLP Chapter 18

Writing Assignment 11 Due – THIS IS OPTIONAL

Final Exams – April 30 (M) – May 3 (F)

Final Examination (Take Home Test) is due during Finals Week. Due date and time: Wednesday, May 2nd at 1:30pm in my office. I will be happy to accept the exam earlier than that time.

Have a relaxing summer . . . if you are graduating, have a productive and meaningful life.

Short Writing Assignments

Don't be alarmed by the number of writing assignments. Most of these assignments are short—one page, single spaced reflections that are meant to be shared during class discussions.

You are responsible for writing and submitting 10 papers—an 11th assignment is offered as an optional bonus (i.e., an extra-credit writing assignment). The 10 papers are due on the date indicated in the syllabus. As these papers are brief, late papers will lose one full letter grade immediately and automatically (i.e., a B becomes a C, a C+ becomes a D+).

1. *What do you want to experience* (PME 1, p. 11 in SLP). Be sure to add your reactions to the exercise.
2. *Your strengths*. Select 1 of the 4 activities listed on page 56 and do it. Write your reaction paper about what you experienced and learned.
3. *Cultural influences on education*. Write a reflective answer concerning the issues raised in the PME on page 77 in SLP. Be sure to use concepts from the chapter to help make your points and explain your answer.
4. *Write your own definition of happiness*. Ideally, write your definition before you read the chapter (a paragraph is fine as long as you are clear and concise—hint: examples to illustrate your points usually help).
5. *Searching for joy and happiness*. Do the first or the third mini-experiments found on pages 122 and 123. Write a one-page reaction paper detailing what you learned regarding your PANAS scores or the views of others on happiness.
6. *Keeping time and balancing time*. Try your hand at either one of the “time” exercises presented in the PME on pages 194 and 195. Write a reflective paper about what you learned in the process. Can you modify how you use time?
7. *Flow*. How often, when, and where do you achieve the flow state? Describe the experience and what, if anything, your flow experience means to your life. If you don't achieve flow very often, should you want to? Why? Will you do anything about it?
8. *Do a secret good deed*. (I suggest you complete the deed sometime over spring break, but you can wait until you return to campus—note, however, that your one-page paper is due on **Wednesday, March 13th**). This assignment is adapted from one developed by Chris Peterson: How you act when no one notices is important, and in this exercise, you are asked to do something kind for someone else without attracting any attention to yourself or taking any credit whatsoever. The good deed can be small—like picking up trash in a neighbor's yard or putting a coin in an expired parking meter—but it should be done anonymously or secretly. If done for a stranger, the stranger may see the deed being done, but you, as do-gooder, should fade away as quickly and quietly as possible. If done for a friend or a family member, the recipient should not know who performed the deed. If asked about the good deed, you should feign ignorance and discreetly change the subject. We are all pretty experienced at this vis-à-vis our bad deeds, so those skills can presumably be used to good effect here. Write a one-page paper

- wherein you describe the deed, your reason for choosing it, the recipient's reaction (only if you witnessed it), and how you felt once you did the deed.
9. *What is authentic in your life?* What is authenticity? Are you leading and living an authentic life, which seems to be a challenge for Americans? Have Todd's arguments changed the way you think about authenticity? Write a one-page reaction to the book, issues raised within it, or in our class discussion of the authentic.
 10. *Crossing to safety*. Write a one or so page, single spaced paper about the what positive psychological ideas you saw in *Crossing to Safety*. Which characters exemplify positive psychological traits? Which characters, which traits? Did the two couples lead, respectively, the good life? Why or why not? Why did Stegner choose this title—what do you think it means to “cross to safety”?
 11. *Optional BONUS writing assignment-what is the theme song of your life?* Select a piece of music from any genre (e.g., rock, pop, hip hop, jazz, classical, Broadway—you get the idea) and explain why the music describes you (or why you would like it to). ***This bonus paper is due on or before the last day of class, Wednesday, April 24th.***