Counterfactual Thinking and Other Forms of Mental Simulation

Syllabus

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Office hours: Mon: 9:30-11:00, Tues: 8:00-9:30 and by appointment

Days: Tuesday/Thursday
Time: 12:00 – 1:15
Location: Greene Hall 310
Course website: https://sakai.wfu.edu

Required Text
Course Reader (may be purchased at the University Bookstore).

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

Course Design and Objectives
Counterfactual thinking involves mentally simulating alternatives to reality. Counterfactual thoughts often reflect judgments about what might have been, could have been, or should have been. Social psychologists who study counterfactual thinking, and other forms mental simulation, try to understand the links between imagination processes and variables such as causal explanations for events, blame, responsibility, compensation, emotions, gambling behaviors, attitudes, persuasion, learning, and risk taking tendencies. This course is designed to give you the opportunity to engage more fully in the field of experimental psychology by reading, discussing, and evaluating primary research articles related to a particular topic (i.e., counterfactual thinking and other forms of mental simulation). Although I will introduce you to some of the critical issues, the real emphasis will be on “playing” with ideas by thinking and talking about concepts and research in this area.

The course has two primary objectives: 1) to increase your awareness of the importance of counterfactual thinking, and other mental simulation processes, in thinking, feeling, and behaving; and 2) to increase your ability to review original sources, to present those ideas to your classmates, and to think about the relevance of this material to your own life.

Required Readings
Readings are made available in the Course Reader. These readings will serve as a framework for the course. Please bring to class either a hard copy of the readings, or your computer, so that you can reference the material. The quality of your work (i.e., Midterm Exam 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 Sakai regularly for updates on course matters
- 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 - 100%  A 93 - 97%  A- 90 - 92%  B+ 88 - 89%  B 83 - 87%  B- 80 - 82%
C+ 78 - 79%  C 73 - 77%  C- 70 - 72%  D+ 68 - 69%  D 63 - 67%  D- 60 - 62%  F <60%
Points are earned in five ways:

- **Reaction Essays (10 points each x 7 = 70 points; 14%)**: 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 work groups by…”
  - “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…”

Note: Only seven Reaction Essays are required. To make our lives a bit easier, you are being spotted 30 points. Beginning with week 2, Reaction Essays are due on the first class session of each week.

- **Class Discussion and Participation (100 points; 20%)**: 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?

- **Paradigm Demonstration and Discussion (100 points; 20%)**: This exercise will provide you with some presentation experience as well as an experiential way of learning more about experimental procedures used in social psychology research today. During one session of class, you will be required to pair with one or more students to conduct a demonstration of an experimental paradigm described in a research article. I will provide the article (see the readings marked with PDD in the Readings and Schedule below). Many of the articles include multiple experiments, but you only need to demonstrate one, or a modified “hybrid” of multiple experiments.

During your demonstration, you can use the entire class or a single volunteer (whichever is more feasible, given the time constraint). Focus on demonstrating the method (procedures). Afterwards, describe the hypothesis used by the researchers and the background information (you do not have to use PowerPoint, but it may help). Then you should briefly discuss what is typically found from the paradigm (the results). If at all possible, tally and present the class results. In the interest of time, the procedures used during class may be modified from what is described in the article. In such cases, inform the class of how the demonstration was modified from what the researchers employed. With the remaining class time, lead a discussion about the topic. Make sure to prepare discussion questions based on the reading; these questions should be provocative and integrative questions that will engage the class.
- **Midterm Exam (100 points; 20%)**: 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 exam will be short-essay.

- **Final Paper (130 points; 26%)**: Due at the final class meeting, is a 7-8 page final paper. The paper should be double-spaced, formatted using APA-style, include a Title-Page and References; do not include an Abstract. The paper must include at least seven references of published articles, books, or chapters (no internet articles). You may write one of two types of papers: 1) a theoretical review of a particular topic of interest to you (these types of papers often take the form of a question or set of questions that are answered using the existing literature); or 2) a brief experimental proposal including a theoretically-drawn hypothesis and a brief description of methods and procedures. By the end of the second week of class, you are required to submit to me three possible titles of your paper (e.g., “The Effect of Sports Commentary Counterfactual Thoughts on Viewer’s Perceptions of Fairness”). 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).

**Sakai**
You are expected to become familiar with the Sakai Academic Suite [https://sakai.wfu.edu](https://sakai.wfu.edu). Sakai 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 will be posted on Sakai. Announcements or changes will be announced on Sakai as well.

**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.

**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 Sakai.
Readings and Schedule

Week of: Topic(s) and Required Reading(s): PDD = Paradigm Demonstration and Discussion

1 Jan 13 Introduction

2 Jan 20/22 Distinctions of Counterfactual Thinking

NO CLASSES Jan. 18 – MLK Day

3 Jan 25/27 Functionality of Counterfactual Thinking

NO CLASS Jan. 27 – SPSP Conference

4 Feb 1/3 Affect

5 Feb 8/10 Temporal Factors of Mental Simulation

Midterm Exam, Thursday, Feb. 10
6 Feb 15/17  **Judgments of Causality**  

7 Feb 22/24  **Imagination Inflation**  

8 Mar 1/3  **Goals, Performance, Risk Taking and Confidence, and Other Topics**  

**Final Meeting: Thursday, March 3**