BUSF 38903 / PSYC 38903
Current Topics in Behavioral Science III
Winter 2016

Course time: Wednesdays, 8:30 – 11:30
Course location: Harper Center (Booth School of Business), Room 3A
Course website: https://chalk.uchicago.edu

INSTRUCTORS
Ed O’Brien (eob@chicagobooth.edu)
Anuj Shah (Anuj.Shah@chicagobooth.edu)

BRIEF COURSE DESCRIPTION
This is a graduate seminar for Ph.D. students interested in behavioral science. The course will be divided into two parts. The first part (taught by Ed O’Brien) will cover the basic assumptions of social cognition that pervade typical research questions in behavioral science. The focus will be on core psychological principles, so to utilize them in understanding a variety of domains like wellbeing, social judgment, and social prediction. The second part (taught by Anuj Shah) will consist of readings and discussions about how to apply insights from behavioral science in the world. We will consider how psychology’s greatest applied hits are used in the field, as well as ideas that are becoming more common in applied settings, and ideas that have been overlooked. The focus will be on parsing the psychology, rather than on field experiment methods.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS
The two main course components are the weekly class discussions and a Research Proposal.

Class Participation: ~50% All students and auditors are expected to:
-Complete all of the assigned readings before class
-Prepare a short (~one paragraph) thought paper each week
-Discuss your reactions to the readings during class
-Lead class discussion by synthesizing thought papers and generating discussion questions (actual number of times depends on course enrollment)

Research Proposal: ~50% All students taking the course for credit are expected to:
-Think of two original research ideas that are (at least somewhat) related to a topic covered in class. One idea should relate to the topics covered by Ed O’Brien in Weeks 1-4. One idea should relate to the topics covered by Anuj Shah in Weeks 6-9.
-Prepare two short presentations to get feedback from the class in Weeks 5 and 10.
-Write one short (8-page minimum) research proposal on one of your two original ideas. The paper should describe the topic and the design of at least one study to test the hypotheses empirically (due March 16th at 12:00pm).
COURSE POLICIES

This Ph.D. seminar is intended to help you advance your own research interests. We will work together to further our understanding of how to conduct good research in psychology, how to raise interesting questions about what we read, how to present and explain that information to others, and how to develop an original research idea that adds to our knowledge of psychology.

Specifically, you are expected to:

1. **Attend class.** It’s hard to contribute and learn from others if you’re not in class.
2. **Do the reading.** This is not a lecture course. Discussion with your classmates is crucial for learning, so you will need to come to class prepared to discuss something with the rest of us. You will not be asked to memorize any terms, concepts, or formulas; rather, you should spend your time thinking of interesting questions or implications of the papers you read.
3. **Respect others’ time.** This includes getting to class on time and handing in your thought papers on time so that the discussion leaders can prepare for the in-class discussion each week.

All readings are available in the Course Documents folder on the Chalk course website. *Note that some of the readings will be working papers, some of which our colleagues have asked us not to distribute beyond the class. So please do not cite any working paper outside of class without checking with us first.*

COURSE DEADLINES

**Mondays, 5:00pm:** By 5:00 each Monday in Weeks 1-4, you should email your thought paper to Ed and the discussion leader(s). By 5:00 each Monday in Weeks 6-9, you should email your thought paper to Anuj and the discussion leader(s). A schedule of who is leading each week will be posted on Chalk.

**NOTE:** There is one exception to the weekly thought papers. For Week 6, you will instead write about three real-world problems. Find three popular press articles or identify three policies or businesses that either (1) Discuss applying psychology and behavioral science to solve a problem or (2) Describe a problem where you see the potential to use psychology and behavioral science to solve the problem. That is, you’ll identify three distinct problems where psychology might be applicable or has been applied. Write a short paragraph for each article that describes (a) The problem and (b) Potential “psychological bottlenecks” driving the problem. Do not merely restate what the article says, but brainstorm on your own instead.

For example, as many of you know, OPower works with utility companies to help lower energy usage by sending reports of how much energy you are using relative to your neighbors. The problem? How to reduce energy usage. The psychological bottlenecks? People do not really understand how much energy they are using (what does a kilowatt-hour even mean?). OPower provides meaningful feedback on how much energy people are using and leverages social norms to make people care. But other bottlenecks might be that people forget to set their thermostats, or the concrete consequences of high energy usage are not salient.

**Wednesday, March 16th, 12:00pm:** Email final proposals to Ed and Anuj.
**Week 1 (1/06/2016): Mental construal and thinking yourself happy**

Suppose I ask you to just “be happy” with your life. What would you do? How would you go about making your life look as good as possible, without actually getting to change anything about it? In Week 1, we’ll discuss the basics of how the mind works, thinks, and evaluates the world, using judgments of wellbeing as a case study.


In-class handout (no need to read beforehand):


**Week 2 (1/13/2016): Thinking dynamically**

Next, in Week 2, we’ll situate these basic processes under the light of actual daily experience. People don’t merely think about the world in static isolation; things change, and evaluative impressions must be updated accordingly. We’ll discuss roadblocks to keeping things straight.


Finally, these two papers may suggest opposing fixes. Most interesting to read back to back:

**Week 3 (1/20/2016): Bias, and what it means**

*Behavioral scientists love to talk about “biases” in how people think, feel, and behave. In Week 3, we’ll examine a few such factors (some classic, some recent) that do appear to alter the basic principles covered so far, and we’ll more generally discuss the meaning of the term “bias” itself.*


**Week 4 (1/27/2016): The “social” of social cognition**

*For better and for worse, everyday life inevitably involves other people; one’s own mind can never think in a vacuum. Finally, in Week 4, we’ll discuss the uniquely powerful role that other people play in how we come to ultimately perceive and navigate the world, including wrapping things back into the psychology of happiness.*

READING LIST FOR SECOND HALF

We’ll start by reading about some of the most often used theories in an applied behavioral scientist’s toolkit. We will then move on to explore other theories that are emerging as useful in applied settings, as well as theories that have been overlooked. I have loosely organized these as a tour through psychologies of the self, of others, and of how we think about the situation.

Each week, there will be at least three goals in the discussion. We’ll start by parsing the psychological theories themselves, considering the strengths and weaknesses of the ideas and the experiments behind the ideas. We’ll then consider how these ideas have been applied, and how they could be sharpened or supplemented. We’ll then think about other ways to apply these psychologies (drawing on the list of problems you generate prior to Week 6).

Week 6 (2/10/2016): The greatest hits
(4) Alcott, H. Social norms and energy conservation. *Journal of Public Economics, 95*, 1082-1095. [do not worry about the economics, read it for the psychology and experiment]
(6) Karlan, D., McConnell, M., Mullainathan, S., Zinman, J. Getting to the top of mind: How reminders increase saving. *NBER Working Paper No. 16205*. [do not worry about the economics, read it for the psychology and experiment]

Week 7 (2/17/2016): Thinking about ourselves

**Week 8 (2/24/2016): Thinking about others**

**Week 9 (3/2/2016): Thinking about the situation**