

# PSY 392C/D: Contemporary Issues in Psychology (Spring 2024)

## Misinformation, BSing, and Calling BS Syllabus

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**Days:** Tuesday/Thursday  
**Time:** C: 9:30 – 10:45 / D: 11:00 – 12:15  
**Location:** Greene Hall 310  
**Course website:** <https://canvas.wfu.edu>

### Course Description

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

### Course Objectives and Learning Outcomes

This course is an opportunity to engage more fully in the field of experimental psychology by reading, discussing, and evaluating primary research articles related to particular topics (i.e., the behavior of bullshit, detecting bullshit, and confronting bullshit). You will be introduced to critical issues with an emphasis on thinking and talking about new ideas and concepts in this research area. The course involves a critical analysis in perspective taking of human systems (e.g., cultural, economic, political, and built), which operate in observable patterns. Beyond increasing awareness of the importance of the social psychology of bullshit and bullshitting, increasing abilities to review original sources, presenting those ideas, and thinking about the relevance of this material to your own life, learning outcomes include:

- An understanding of empirical findings in social psychology and how major research designs address different questions and hypotheses
- An ability to formulate social psychological problems/questions, to determine the degree to which an explanation is supported by reasoning/empirical evidence, to perceive alternative explanations and to determine what evidence is needed to choose between them, to synthesize empirical evidence and psychological concepts, and to critically evaluate existing explanations and generate new ideas
- An ability to locate social psychological research information, to design and conduct research, to use statistical techniques to analyze information, to evaluate statistical information and quality of research
- An ability to use professional writing conventions and effective written/oral communication skills
- An ability to recognize the relevance of social psychology to everyday life and appreciate the importance of social psychological science to answering fundamental questions
- An ability to critically evaluate claims made in social psychological research
- An understanding of how social psychologists form questions and design experiments in ways that can test their hypotheses statistically

### Required Readings

Petrocelli, J. V. (2021). *The life-changing science of detecting bullshit*. St. Martin's Press. (L-CSDBS)

All other Required Readings are made available on Canvas and serve as a framework for the course. Please bring to class a copy of the readings (digital or printed), so as to easily reference. The quality of your work 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 Canvas regularly for course updates
- Complete all course requirements
- Complete a student course evaluation

## Grading

Your letter grade for this course is determined by the percentage of total points (450 possible) earned throughout the semester. A letter grade will be assigned on the basis of the following scale:

A+ 98.00 – 100%    A 93.00 – 97.99%    A- 90.00 – 92.99%    B+ 88.00 – 89.99%    B 83.00 – 87.99%  
B- 80.00 – 82.99%    C+ 78.00 – 79.99%    C 73.00 – 77.99%    C- 70.00 – 72.99%...    F <60%

Points are earned in six ways:

❖ **Reaction Essays (10 points each x 5 = 50 points):** You will be assigned to write a Reaction Essay to all of the readings scheduled for each week. Submit a two-page paper in reaction to the readings for the week. Essays may be single-spaced (approx. 1,000 words) or double-spaced (approx. 500 words) but not to exceed two pages (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..."
- "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..."

❖ **Class Discussion and Participation (100 points):** 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?

❖ **Video/Audio Bullshit Analysis (50 points):** For this assignment, you will watch a TED Talk video, a TEDx Talk video, a podcast, or a YouTube video (having a minimum of 10 minutes of content) and write a 2-page (double-spaced) critique of the video, reflecting on core issues discussed in the video. Provide a reference or link to your selection. You should provide a very brief summary of the content and apply class principles in analyzing it. Select a video or podcast involving content about an issue that has psychological and global relevance (e.g., poverty, hunger, good health and well-being, quality education, gender equality, clean water and sanitation, affordable and clean energy, work and economic growth, industry/innovation and infrastructure, reduced inequalities, sustainable cities and communities, responsible consumption and production, climate action, life below water, life on land, and/or peace/justice and strong institutions).

Conduct a critical, bullshit analysis of the video. Feel free to come to me for suggestions, and please watch/listen to something that you have not previously watched/listened to.

Questions to consider in your analysis:

What are you uncertain about regarding this issue?  
How might the content of the article differ from that of an expert's perspective on the issue?  
What percentage of the content do you perceive to be bullshit? - provide examples (maximum of 3).  
What are the descriptive norms related to the issue?  
What are the injunctive norms related to the issue?  
What aspects of the issue affect quality of life?  
What consequences does bullshit surrounding the issue have?  
Does the presenter provide clarity for the main argument(s) being made? How so?  
How does the presenter know what he/she knows?  
How could arguments, claims, ideas presented by the presenter be tested experimentally?  
When bullshit is evident, what appears to be its purpose or functions?  
Are there good reasons to believe what is argued/pushed by the presenter? What are they?  
If you were to grade the presenter's work, what grade would you give the presenter?

❖ **Final Presentation: TED Talk Video (150 points):** Objective: To contrast, compare, and understand the differences between bullshit and evidence-based communication, and to restrict communication to evidence-based information. Task: Create your very own TED Talk (7 minutes). Submit a video of the final talk. You may edit the talk any way you like. The TED Talk should be on a topic of your choice, but it should be your very own. Unlike most TED Talks, it should be clear that the claims in your talk are based on existing logical, systemic, semantic, or empirical knowledge and/or evidence. One option is to turn the content you selected for the Video/Audio Bullshit Analysis assignment into a talk that actually uses evidence-based reasoning and communication; that is, a revised version of what you believe the talk you selected for the Video/Audio Bullshit Analysis assignment should have included. Try to make it look like a TED Talk (e.g., no sitting).

Your TED Talk should be a minimum of 5 minutes and maximum of 7 minutes. The first part of your TED Talk should detail a problem, issue, or call to action. The second part of your TED Talk should focus on how experimental psychology would speak to the problems/issues you raise in the first part of your TED Talk. How are science and evidence part of the solution to the problem(s)?

The experimental proposal should include a theoretically-drawn set of hypotheses and a brief description of methods and procedures. Your proposed study must include at least one true, independent variable; that is, at least one independent variable must be directly manipulated. The moderation design (e.g., a 2 × 2 design) and the mediation design are highly appropriate and encouraged designs. Among other aspects of your presentation, such as clarity and detail, you will be graded on how well you substantiate your hypotheses with relevant theory or previously published findings, how well you utilize the existing literature to structure your proposed experiment, and how well you explain that science is part of the solution to the problem you discuss. Your research question, and hypothesis(es) should be clear. Detail the purpose of the experiment, answering: Why would the research be important to issue(s) raised in your talk and what are its potential applications? Include a 1-page paper outline of your experiment to accompany your TED Talk. Include a Figure or Table that illustrates your expected findings.

Recommended Reading:

Anderson, C. (2016). *TED talks: The official TED guide to public speaking*. New York: Mariner Books.

❖ **Final Quiz (100 points):** 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 quiz will be short-answer essay.

## **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).

## **Canvas**

You are expected to become familiar with the Canvas academic suite <https://canvas.wfu.edu/>. Canvas 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, announcements or course changes will be posted on Canvas.

## **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 Canvas.

## Readings and Schedule

### Week/Day(s): Topic(s) and Required Reading(s):

#### 1 Jan 18: Introduction to Bullshit, Bullshitting, and Calling Bullshit

Introduction to Bullshit, Bullshitting, and Calling Bullshit

Discussion: Oblivious Leadership

[Simon Sinek | Most Leaders Don't Even Know the Game They're In](#)

#### 2 Jan 23/25: Bullshit, Explanation, and Evidence

L-CSDBS, Introduction: What is Bullshit? (pp. 1-25).

Frankfurt, H. (1986). On bullshit. *Raritan Quarterly Review*, 6, 81-100.

Brem, S. K., & Rips, L. J. (2000). Explanation and evidence in informal argument. *Cognitive Science*, 24, 573-604.

Discussion: Where is there explanation or evidence?

[Jordan B. Peterson | On 12 Rules for Life](#)

[Richard Dawkins | The Enemies of Reason](#)

#### 3 Jan 30/Feb 1: Consequences of Bullshitting

L-CSDBS, Chapter 1: Costs of Bullshit (pp. 27-60).

Petrocelli, J. V. (2021). Bullshitting and persuasion: The persuasiveness of a disregard for the truth. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 60, 1464-1483.

Petrocelli, J. V., Seta, C. E., & Seta, J. J. (2023). Lies and bullshit: The negative effects of misinformation grow stronger over time. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 37, 409-418.

Discussion: Is this bullshit harmless, bad, or dangerous?

[Andrew Tate | Motivational Speech](#)

[Magnus Walker | Go with Your Gut Feeling - TEDxUCLA](#)

#### 4 Feb 6/8: Who Falls for Bullshit?

L-CSDBS, Chapter 2: Bullibility (pp. 61-99).

Pennycook, G., & Rand, D. G. (2020). Who falls for fake news? The roles of bullshit receptivity, overclaiming, familiarity, and analytic thinking. *Journal of Personality*, 88, 185-200.

Lin, Y., Zhang, Y. C., & Oyserman, D. (2022). Seeing meaning even when none may exist: Collectivism increases belief in empty claims. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 122, 351-366.

Discussion: Why might people fall for this bullshit?

[Rhonda Byrne | Mindset Shift You Need to Activate The Law of Attraction/Money Will Flow like Crazy](#)

[Deepak Chopra | The Oprah Winfrey Show: Conversations with Oprah](#)

## 5 Feb 13/15: Antecedents of Bullshitting

L-CSDBS, Chapter 3: When and Why People Bullshit (pp. 100-132).

L-CSDBS, Chapter 4: Bullshit Artists (pp. 133-165).

Jerrim, J., Parker, P., & Shure, N. (2019). Bullshitters. Who are they and what do we know about their lives? *Institute of Labor Economics, IZA DP No. 12282*.

Petrocelli, J. V. (2018). Antecedents of bullshitting. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 76*, 249-258.

Discussion: Why did they bullshit us?

[Barbara Arrowsmith-Young | The Woman Who Changed Her Brain – TEDxToronto](#)

[Adam Neumann | His First Public Interview Since Leaving WeWork](#)

Video/Audio Analysis – Due

## 6 Feb 20/22: Bullshit Detection

L-CSDBS, Chapter 5: Bullshit Detection Wheelhouse (pp. 166-199).

L-CSDBS, Chapter 6: Expert Bullshit Detectors (pp. 200-233).

Stall, L. M., & Petrocelli, J. V. (2023). Countering conspiracy theory beliefs: Understanding the conjunction fallacy and considering disconfirming evidence. *Applied Cognitive Psychology, 37*, 266-276.

van der Linden, S., & Roozenbeek, J. (2020). Psychological inoculation against fake news. In R. Greifeneder, M. Jaffé, E. J. Newman, & N. Schwarz (Eds.), *The psychology of fake news: Accepting, sharing, and correcting misinformation* (pp. 147-169). Psychology Press.

Discussion: Are they still bullshitting us?

[Andrea Pennington | Become Who You Really Are – TEDxIUM](#)

[Dr. Dan Wilson | Joe Rogan's Worst Misinformation Yet, with RFK Jr.](#)

## 7 Feb 27/29: Calling Bullshit and Replacing Bullshit / TED Talks

L-CSDBS, Conclusion: Life Without Bullshit (pp. 235-254).

McIntyre, L. (2021). How do you change someone's mind? (pp. 59-80). In L. McIntyre, *How to talk to a science denier: Conversations with flat earthers, climate deniers, and others who defy reason*. MIT Press.

Motz, B. A., Fyfe, E. R., & Guba, T. P. (2023). Learning to call bullsh\*t via induction: Categorization training improves critical thinking performance. *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition, 12*, 310-324.

Discussion: How does intention seeking play a role in what we see?

[Heider and Simmel \(1944\) Illusion](#)

Final Presentations: TED Talk Videos

## 8 Mar 5: TED Talks

Final Presentations: TED Talk Videos

Final Quiz (Online)