Psychology 2510-101

Psychology Honors Colloquium

How to Think about Weird Things

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Class meeting: TR 11-12:15, 305 Smith-Wright

In the classroom, theories and beliefs are encountered in tidy compartments where supportive and contradictory evidence is organized for the student. Outside the classroom we are assailed by a barrage of information from a variety of sources that attempt to get us to buy into (figuratively and literally) questionable beliefs about the nature of the world and how we function. The purpose of this course is to provide you with skills to help you critically evaluate provocative claims about human behavior.

Weird beliefs come from our attempts to make sense of the world. We will begin by talking about the functions of beliefs, and noting that we are exposed to weird beliefs from childhood. One reason that people hold to weird beliefs comes from well-known problems we have in evaluating evidence. Some of these problems may be described as "cognitive illusions," where we overemphasize some observations and underemphasize other observations. Other problems come from the fact that so much of our knowledge comes from other people, and the social transmission of knowledge introduces additional distortions. We will review these problems and discuss general strategies for evaluation of evidence.
The purpose of this course is to improve your thinking skills through healthy skepticism. Some people confuse skepticism with cynicism, the belief that all behavior is explained by base or selfish motivations. Other people confuse skepticism with a general ridiculing of beliefs. A skeptic is a person who realizes that claims are open to doubt. A skeptic is a person who believes that one should evaluate the strength of the evidence for a belief. Some beliefs are easily doubted because they are contradicted by so much evidence. Other beliefs are not easily doubted because there is so much supporting evidence. The interesting cases are beliefs that are somewhere in between, where the evidence is questionable or lacking. As healthy skeptics, we will try to decide what evidence would support or contradict a belief. The ultimate goal of this course is to make you a wiser consumer of the information you encounter in and out of the classroom.

**Course Format and Class Requirements**

This class is a seminar for students in the honors program. Seminars have a small number of students because there is supposed to be lots of discussion. Seminars require active participation to be successful. There will be assigned reading material for each class. You must do the assigned reading to make your contributions useful. The following requirement is designed to help our class time to be productive and will count towards your participation grade.

**Class Participation**

You may be asked to prepare a 1-2 paragraph reaction paper for a reading assignment. The paragraph(s) should identify and summarize some point in the reading that you found interesting, confusing, or questionable. Then you should expand on your point in further detail. This could include application to other material in the course or
observations in daily life. I will begin that class by asking some people to read their reaction paper as a stimulus to elicit class discussion.

Alternatively, I may ask you to find another example of some point from book in other sources. In some cases, I may substitute a short (1 or 2-question) quiz as a check that you did the reading.

**Topic Presentation**

The first half of the course will cover general material about human reasoning. After Fall Break, pairs of students will lead a class in discussion of a particular topic. I am going to give you a wide range of choice. You can present on psychological topics like biorhythms, facilitated communication, EMDR therapy, repressed/recovered memories, or subliminal messages. Your books contain chapters analyzing beliefs in ESP and alternative medicine. You can choose to do a presentation on these types of topics. You can use the James Randi book for ideas on older weird beliefs or you can analyze more current weird beliefs as found on the web.

The presenters should provide a reading assignment to introduce the topic. Presentations will be done using PowerPoint and a copy will be posted on the class website for later use in the course. Each presentation should include a history of the claim, a full description and listing of the evidence for the claim and evaluation of the quality of the evidence. Suggestions should be made for evidence that would be relevant and the best way to obtain that evidence.

**Final Paper**

This paper will be due towards the end of the course. The general assignment will be to write a paper with a theme that integrates the first and second half of the course.
For example, if you conclude at the end of the course that social forces were more important than cognitive factors in explaining why people hold weird beliefs then explain this conclusion using examples from the PowerPoint presentations. (This is the purpose of putting the presentations on line.) The paper should be about 4-5 pages long in APA format.

**Grades**

Class participation will count 50% of your grade because participation is so important for a successful seminar. Participation will be measured through the quality of your reaction papers and your comments during class. The reaction papers will be weighted more heavily since they should be a better measure of your individual work.

The presentation will count 20% and the paper will count 25%. The final 5% is reserved for me to take into account your performance in ways not counted by the other assignments.

**Reading Material**


Other material will appear on the class website as we progress through the semester.