

Psychology 417a: Existential Psychology
Section 002, Winter 2023
West Mall Swing Space Rm 309

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Introduction

This course will explore the relatively new and growing field of existential psychology. While existentialism originated as a branch of philosophy that targeted people's subjective experiences about how they could lead their best lives, it has more recently emerged as a topic of empirical psychological research. We won't be considering any philosophical texts in the class, but we will be delving into the psychological literature that explores some questions that were initially raised by existential philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus, Soren Kierkegaard, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Friedrich Nietzsche. The course will explore existential questions such as: *How can people make sense of their lives? What are the bases of leading a meaningful life? How does our cultural environment shape how we consider what kinds of lives to live? How do people cope with having the freedom to choose? How can people confront the challenges of recognizing their own mortality? How do people respond when their life seems absurd? How do people construct a life-narrative?* These are difficult questions and we will be investigating them from a variety of different approaches. The goals of the course are to introduce you to the field of research on existential psychology, stimulate critical thinking and analytic skills more generally, and help you to think about your own pursuits of a meaningful life from a more psychologically-informed perspective.

Take a look at the reading list below. You'll note that **this course has a heavy reading load**. We'll be reading many original journal articles, which may sometimes be quite dense and challenging. This is a 4th year class and it is a fair bit of work. You'll need to read a different paper before every class and be well-prepared to discuss it. The class is a seminar, so unlike other lecture classes, you will be expected to regularly take part in the class discussions, give a brief presentation to the class about a specific reading, and write a lengthy paper. Unless for some reason you need this particular course to graduate, you should be taking it because you're interested in the subject material, find it exciting, and want to have fun with it. As an instructor, I will do my best to help you explore these interests. Please be an active participant and I hope you find this class informative, engaging, and enjoyable.

Recommended Prerequisite: Psychology 308

Required Readings:

Most of the readings for this course will be original journal articles and draft chapters of a related book that I'm currently writing. These will all be made available to you under the "Files" link in the course's Canvas page.

We will also be discussing one small book in class that is available at the UBC bookstore (cheaper versions are also available for Kindle, or many used copies are also available at Amazon): Viktor Frankl (1946). *Man's search for meaning*. Boston, MA: Beacon.

Class Readings, Calendar, and Discussion Leaders

Date	Reading	Discussion Leaders
Jan. 10	Tu	Course Introduction
12	Th	Koole, S. L., Greenberg, J., & Pyszczynski, T. (2006). Introducing science to the psychology of the soul: Experimental existential psychology. <i>Current Directions in Psychological Science</i> , 15(5), 212-216.
17	Tu	Chapter 3, "Becoming an Existential Ape," from Heine, S. J. (in preparation). <i>Navigating the absurd: The science of existentialism</i> .
19	Th	McAdams, D.P. (2001). The psychology of life stories. <i>Review of General Psychology</i> , 5, 100-122.
24	Tu	Pyszczynski, T., Solomon, S., & Greenberg, J. (2015). Thirty years of terror management theory: From genesis to revelation. <i>Advances in Experimental Social Psychology</i> , 52, 0065-2601.

- 26 Th Sedikides, C., Cheung, W. Y., Wildschut, T., Hepper, E. G., Baldursson, E., & Pedersen, B. (2018). Nostalgia motivates pursuit of important goals by increasing meaning in life. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 48*, 209-216.
- 31 Tu Chapter 4, "What it is Like to Experience the Absurd," from Heine, S. J. (in preparation). *Navigating the absurd: The science of existentialism*.
- Feb 2 Th Dasen, P. R. (2000). Rapid social change and the turmoil of adolescence: A cross-cultural perspective. *International Journal of Group Tensions, 29*, 17-49.
- 7 Tu Frankl, V. (1946). *Man's search for meaning*. Boston, MA: Beacon.
- 9 Th Costin, V., & Vignoles, V. L. (2020). Meaning is about mattering: Evaluating coherence, purpose, and existential mattering as precursors of meaning in life judgments. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 118*, 864-884.
- 14 Tu Baumeister, R. F., Vohs, K. D., Aaker, J. L., & Garbinsky, E. N. (2013). Some key differences between a happy life and a meaningful life. *Journal of Positive Psychology, 8*, 505-51
- 16 Th Kim, J., Holte, P., Martela, F., Shanahan, C., Li, Z.,

... & Hicks, J. A. (2022). Experiential appreciation as a pathway to meaning in life. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 6, 677–690.

21 Tu **Reading Break**

23 Th **Reading Break**

28 Tu *******Midterm*******

Mar 2 Th Steele, C. M., Spencer, S. J., & Lynch, M. (1993). Self-image resilience and dissonance: The role of affirmational resources. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 64, 885-896.

7 Tu Chapter 5, “The Struggle to Stay Good,” from Heine, S. J. (in preparation). *Navigating the absurd: The science of existentialism*.

9 Th Bloom, P. (2021). Chapter 5, “Meaning” In *The Sweet Spot*, (pp. 143-173). New York: Ecco.

14 Tu Movie: *Wild* (2014). Dir: Jean-Marc Vallee; Based on a book written by Cheryl Strayed. Watch first 75%.

16 Th Movie: *Wild* (2014). Dir: Jean-Marc Vallee; Based on a book written by Cheryl Strayed. Finish remaining 25%. Class Discussion.

21 Tu Schlegel, R., Hicks, J. A., Arndt, J., & King, L. A.

(2009). Thine own self: True self accessibility and meaning in Life. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 96, 473-490.

- 23 Th Jost, J. T., Banaji, M. R., & Nosek, B. A. (2004). A decade of system justification theory: Accumulated evidence of conscious and unconscious bolstering of the status quo. *Political Psychology*, 25, 881-919.
- 28 Tu Chapter 6, “The Quest for an Orderly World,” from Heine, S. J. (in preparation). *Navigating the absurd: The science of existentialism*.
- 30 Th Oishi, S., & Diener, E. (2014). Residents of poor nations have a greater sense of meaning in life than residents of wealthy nations. *Psychological Science*, 25, 422-430.
- Apr 4 Tu Janoff-Bulman, R. (1992). Chapter 3, “Trauma and the terror of our own fragility.” In *Shattered Assumptions* (pp. 49-69). New York: Free Press.
- 6 Th Folk, D., Rutjens, B. T., Van Elk, M., & Heine, S. J. (2023). Dare to know! The existential costs of a faith in science. *Manuscript submitted for publication*.
- 11 Tu Chapter 7, “Reckoning with the Hereafter,” from Heine, S. J. (in preparation). *Navigating the absurd: The science of existentialism*.

- 13 Th Pennebaker, J. W., & Seagal, J. D. (1999). Forming a story: The health benefits of narrative. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 55, 1243-1254.

Assignments

Daily Readings and Discussion Questions (20% of Grade).

Each student will prepare for the class by completing each reading beforehand and preparing 1 discussion question based on it. The discussion questions **are due by 11 am** on the day of each class and should both be entered under the assignments link and emailed to each of the two student presenters over Canvas. Much of the class discussion will revolve around the questions that you suggest. Good discussion questions should do one of the following:

- target a *critique* of the ideas presented in the paper – for example, you could discuss the validity of the findings, challenge the arguments that were made, or question the conclusions that are drawn.
- consider the *implications* of the author’s arguments or findings.
- *relate* the ideas in the paper to other ideas that you’ve encountered, either through other readings in this course, or to other readings that you’ve read elsewhere.

There are a total of 22 readings in class. **You will need to submit discussion questions for 20 of those** (meaning you can skip 2 readings without penalty. You can choose which ones to skip. You won’t submit a discussion question for the film that we’ll watch). If you submit more than 20 discussion questions, only the first 20 will receive grades. If your discussion question arrives after 11 am (but before class) you’ll lose half points for it. If your question arrives after class, it will receive a zero.

Discussion Leading (10% of Grade)

Each class we will read an article/chapter/book or see a film. For each reading approximately two students will team up as the discussion leaders for that reading (we won’t have discussion leaders for the film that we watch). First, they will work together to come up with a brief (2-5 minute) synopsis of the reading to facilitate class discussion. The two students will split the presentation of the synopsis, so each student will describe half of it. These presentations should summarize what are the main arguments or findings of the papers that you have read. Finally, the discussion leaders will then direct the subsequent discussion of the reading by raising some of the discussion questions that were sent to them by their classmates.

Class Participation (20% of Grade)

You are expected to attend each class, do the readings prior to each class, and be prepared to participate in the class discussions. I will take daily attendance and if you miss a class, you won't get class participation points for that day. I will allow you to miss up to 4 classes for illnesses and other matters without it affecting your grade. I encourage you to try to participate in each of the class discussions, and I will try to moderate the discussions so that they are not overly dominated by a few vocal people.

Midterm Exam (25% of Grade).

The midterm will be an in class essay-based exam. You will be asked to respond to a broad question that will require you to review and integrate some of the key ideas that we will have discussed in class prior to the midterm. The midterm will be held in class on February 28th, right after reading break.

Research Proposal (25% of Grade)

Your assignment is to complete a written proposal of a feasible study relevant to existential psychology (broadly defined). Ideally, you should aim for something simple—manipulate one or two variables in a simple experiment or examine a simple regression study, where you explore how different variables are related to each other. Try to come up with the simplest way of testing your research hypothesis. You won't actually conduct the study. Try to design a study that you think would receive ethical approval from a university ethics board (that is, don't propose anything too outlandish), and you can imagine that you have plenty of research funds that would allow you to conduct it.

Your paper should be written in APA style, in the sense that you should include an Intro, a Method, and a Discussion section (there aren't any results to include in a Results section). For more detail on this, see: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/560/01/> In your introduction you should describe your research question, a brief but relevant literature review, and propose a clear hypothesis. Next, your paper should describe the method that you would use to investigate your research finding. Typically, an actual paper would also include a results section, but since you're not running your study, you won't have any results. Instead, please provide a graph of your hypothesized results. Last, in your discussion section you should discuss what you could conclude if your study results would actually support your hypothesis. You should also discuss any limitations in your study design which would affect what conclusions you could draw.

Your paper should be no more than 10 pages, double spaced, in 12 pt., Times New Roman, margins no less than 1 inch (the TA will not read anything after the 10th page). Please also include a full reference section after your 10 page paper. The paper is due on the last day of class, April 13th.

Your paper needs to be submitted through Turn-it-in before you submit it to class. This service ensures that students aren't plagiarizing their work by copying and pasting from existing material, or by borrowing from papers from previous students. It's a serious academic offense to plagiarize. All of your paper should be based on your own original writings. There will be deductions or you will receive a failing grade if your work has been deemed "plagiarized."

To submit your paper through Turn-it-in, visit http://turnitin.com/en_us/home.

If you haven't used Turn-it-in before, you'll need to create a user profile. If you already have a profile from a previous class, you can use that.

The Class ID is 37224419 and the class enrollment password is 417-002. You'll need those to sign up.

You will receive a digital receipt when you submit your paper through Turn-it-in. Add this to your paper and then upload your paper on Canvas by April 13th. **There will be a late penalty of 10 points per day late.**

Grading Scheme:

/8 Introduction

Do you start out with a question, problem or idea, catching the reader's interest? Do you set the reader up with the basic idea early on?

Do you develop enough background on the topic of interest to catch readers up to speed without drowning them in facts? Is it clear what the 'grandfather/grandmother' article was in your area, and what landmark publications followed from that?

Do you set up a question that has yet to be examined? Is it clear why it's worth examining that question? What does the reader stand to learn?

Do you set up one or more plausible hypotheses regarding your research question? What is the likely outcome according to theory?

/8 Methodology

Have you operationalized your research question in a clear, concrete, and conceptually valid manner?

Does your writing make it clear when you transition from the abstraction of theory to the specifics of operationalization?

Do you present enough detail about the methods so that the reader could conduct the experiment themselves?

Do you cite all materials you borrow/adapt from previous research?

/4 Graph of Predicted Results

Do you clearly and legibly present hypothesized key findings, label things well, provide an appropriate title?

Can a naïve person correctly interpret your findings from the graph and title alone without reference to the text?

/5 Overall writing style

Do you write clear sentences and refer to things in unambiguous ways?

Do you use active voice (participants did X, we conducted the study) rather than passive voice (X was provided to the participants, a study was conducted)?

Do you structure your paper logically, with a flow from general idea, through past relevant work, to your specific hypotheses?

Do you define key terms and cite appropriately?

Do you draw the reader in with vivid examples or a puzzling paradox or a socially important question? Do you make the reader care about the work?

Evaluation

The breakdown for your grade will be as follows:

Evaluation	Date	Percent of Final Grade
Midterm	February 28	25%
Research Proposal	April 13	25%
Discussion Questions (20 of them)	Throughout Term	20%
Discussion Leading	Throughout Term	10%
Class Participation	Throughout Term	20%

Extra Credits

I am encouraging students to participate in any studies that are being conducted in the Psychology Department. You can receive up to **three extra credits** for your grade by participating in experiments offered in the Psychology Department. The department grants these extra credits at a rate of one per hour of experimental participation. Each credit is worth one percent towards your final grade. You can sign up for studies by visiting <https://ubc-psych.sona-systems.com/>. If you prefer, you can earn these same extra credits by completing a library-writing project, in which you read and summarize a peer-reviewed research article. See <http://psych.ubc.ca/internal/human-subject-pool/> for more information about the extra credit options.

Departmental Policy on Distributions of Grades in all Psychology Classes

All psychology courses are required to meet the grade distributions as described below. This is done in order to “maintain equality among sections and conformity to University, Faculty and Department norms”. Thus scaling of grades may take place for any assignment in which the class average is either below 71% (in which case points will be added to bring the class average up to 71%) or above 75% (in which case points will be subtracted to bring the class average down to 75%). You will be notified if any scaling has taken place whenever you receive a grade for an assignment. If any scaling does occur in the class it will not impact your extra credits –extra credits that are earned through study participation will be added to your grades AFTER the scaling.

Psychology 400-level courses

Class Performance	Mean	Standard Deviation
Good class	75	13
Average class	73	13
Weak class	71	13

*Note: These are the expected distributions for large classes. In small classes, the class mean and standard deviation can be expected to be considerably more variable. On average, the class means for small 400 level classes should approximate these, but it's possible that

individual class means and standard deviations might depart slightly from these expected distributions in either direction.

University Values and Policies

UBC provides resources to support student learning and to maintain healthy lifestyles but recognizes that sometimes crises arise and so there are additional resources to access including those for survivors of sexual violence. UBC values respect for the person and ideas of all members of the academic community. Harassment and discrimination are not tolerated nor is suppression of academic freedom. UBC provides appropriate accommodation for students with disabilities and for religious and cultural observances. UBC values academic honesty and students are expected to acknowledge the ideas generated by others and to uphold the highest academic standards in all of their actions. Details of the policies and how to access support are available at <https://senate.ubc.ca/policies-resources-support-student-success>

UBC students with disabilities who have registered with the Disability Resource Centre will be provided with accommodations. The University accommodates students whose religious obligations conflict with attendance, submitting assignments, or completing scheduled tests and examinations. Please let your instructor know in advance, preferably in the first week of class, if you will require any accommodation on these grounds. Students who plan to be absent for varsity athletics, family obligations, or other similar commitments, cannot assume they will be accommodated, and should discuss their commitments with the instructor before the drop date. Details of the policies and how to access support are available at <http://www.calendar.ubc.ca/vancouver/index.cfm?tree=3,329,0,0>

Students have the right to view their marked examinations with their instructor, providing they apply to do so within a month of receiving their final grades. This review is for pedagogic purposes. The examinations remain the property of the university.

If you miss marked coursework (assignment, exam, participation in class) and are an Arts student, review the Faculty of Arts' academic concession page and then complete Arts Academic Advising's online academic concession form, so that an advisor can evaluate your concession case.

If you are a student in a different Faculty, please consult your Faculty's webpage on academic concession, and then contact me where appropriate.

Psychology Department's Position on Academic Misconduct

Cheating, plagiarism, and other forms of academic misconduct are very serious concerns of the University, and the Department of Psychology has taken steps to alleviate them. In the first place, the Department has implemented software that can reliably detect cheating on multiple-choice exams by analyzing the patterns of students' responses. In addition, your two assigned short papers will be uploaded on to Turn-It-In to ensure that there is no material copied into it from anything else on the web.

In all cases of suspected academic misconduct, the parties involved will be pursued to the fullest extent dictated by the guidelines of the University. Strong evidence of cheating or plagiarism may result in a zero credit for the work in question. According to the University Act (section 61), the President of UBC has the right to impose harsher penalties including

(but not limited to) a failing grade for the course, suspension from the University, cancellation of scholarships, or a notation added to a student's transcript.

All graded work in this course, unless otherwise specified, is to be original work done independently by you. If you have any questions as to whether or not what you are doing is even a borderline case of academic misconduct, please consult your instructor. For details on pertinent University policies and procedures, please see Chapter 5 in the UBC Calendar (<http://students.ubc.ca/calendar>) and read the University's Policy 69 (available at www.universitycounsel.ubc.ca/policies/policy69.html). Academic Dishonesty: Please review the UBC Calendar "Academic regulations" for the university policy on cheating, plagiarism, and other forms of academic dishonesty. Also visit www.arts.ubc.ca and go to the students' section for useful information on avoiding plagiarism and on correct documentation.

The University accommodates students with disabilities who have registered with the Disability Resource Centre. The University accommodates students whose religious obligations conflict with attendance, submitting assignments, or completing scheduled tests and examinations. Please let your instructor know in advance, preferably in the first week of class, if you will require any accommodation on these grounds. Students who plan to be absent for varsity athletics, family obligations, or other similar commitments, cannot assume they will be accommodated, and should discuss their commitments with the instructor before the drop date.

Students should retain a copy of all submitted assignments (in case of loss) and should also retain all their marked assignments in case they wish to apply for a Review of Assigned Standings. Students have the right to view their marked assignments with their instructor, providing they apply to do so within a month of receiving their final grades. This review is for pedagogic purposes. The examination remains the property of the university.