

PSY428H1S (Winter 2025): Critical Psychology

Lectures: Thursdays 12-3 pm in RW 143

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Required readings and videos: All are accessible within Modules on Quercus course page

Overview

In his 2001 book *Return to Reason*, the philosopher Stephen Toulmin pointed to the intellectual cost of institutionalized or “disciplinary” training: “Problems begin when people forget what limits they accepted in mastering the systematic procedures of their disciplines. Once forgetfulness sets in, the ground is prepared for misunderstandings and cross-purposes: the selective attention called for in a disciplined activity is elevated to the status of being ‘the one and only right way’ of performing the tasks in question, and the possibility of approaching them from a different standpoint, or with different priorities, is ignored or, as we may say, ‘bracketed off.’” My own experience as an academic psychologist leads me to agree with Toulmin. Our education (training?) of undergraduate and graduate students increasingly emphasizes formal research methods without the critical reflexivity needed to understand the assumptions, implications, and limitations of those methods. Students trained in this manner become adept at *doing* something called research, but ill-equipped or even motivated to understand the justification for, and broader significance of, what they are doing and, as it happens, not doing.

In Plato’s *Apology*, Socrates proclaims that “the unexamined life is not worth living for human beings.” This dictum might also be applied to scientific practice: The unexamined science is not worth doing. For Socrates, examination meant “testing” our beliefs and commitments through dialogical questioning and the exercise of reason. It is that kind of critical questioning that this

course hopes to encourage in students. My intention is to help undergraduates develop a deeper understanding of psychological science and their participation in it.

Critical psychology begins with the moral recognition that taking responsibility for our science and what it becomes over time requires sustained interrogation of ourselves and our practices. This involves reflecting not only on our individual actions but also the institutional significance of psychology for our society and culture. Through select readings, videos, and class discussion, this course aims to bring the background and context of psychological research into view so that we better understand the choices implicit in our work. Only then can these choices be subject to critical questioning in relation to real or imagined alternatives. The goal is not to steer students toward prescribed questions, sanctioned answers, or favoured ideological positions, but to help them develop the confidence, vision, and conceptual ability to ask penetrating questions that they never thought to ask before. How they then pursue those questions is up to them.

Evaluation

Evaluation is based on **two in-class tests** (February 13 and April 3 from 12:10-2:55 pm), **a personal narrative essay** (due by 12:10 pm on March 27), and **two thought papers** (due by 12:10 pm on January 30 and March 20). The first test accounts for 30% of the course mark, the second test for 25%, the personal narrative essay for 35%, and the thought papers for 5% each.

Tests (30% and 25%). The second test will address only those topics covered **after** the first test. Both tests will be hand-written in class in essay format in standard U of T test booklets. Access to notes, readings, and electronic devices will **not** be permitted during the tests.

Example test questions from previous years are available [here](#) to aid students in their preparations. These will provide familiarity with the sort of broad and encompassing questions that will be asked. Both tests will consist of three such questions, each worth 10 marks. Students in this course are given the fullest latitude to bring together, interpret, and integrate content from the readings, lectures, and videos in responding to each of the test questions. Course content should be used to justify and support the position taken on the issue and the claims made in that regard. Students will not be evaluated on their positions and claims per se, but on how well they support them. The focus of evaluation is on quality of argument, and how extensively and effectively course content is used in that regard. Students are expected to “make a case” in answering each question and will be judged on how convincingly they do so. Each test question response will be evaluated holistically, as a unified argument, and assigned a mark of 0-10. Quality will be assessed according to three equally weighted criteria. These are:

1. comprehensive use of relevant content from readings and lectures
2. sound interpretation and effective integration and application of that content
3. clear articulation of a summary position based on (1) and (2)

According to this scheme, there are no categorically “right” or “wrong” responses, only better and worse arguments for various positions that might be taken. Few important and enduring questions in the study of mind, society, and culture can be approached otherwise.

Both tests will be marked by the TA. Marks for the first test will be posted on Quercus within two weeks, along with the TA's brief evaluative comments on each response. First test booklets will be returned at the end of class on February 27. Marks and comments for the second test will be posted on Quercus within three weeks. Second test booklets can be claimed by visiting the TA during a one-hour handback session the details of which will be announced on Quercus when the marks are posted.

Any concerns or questions about individual marks should be discussed with the TA **within two weeks** of their posting. The instructor should be approached about a specific mark assigned by the TA **only** in cases where there is a well-founded allegation of bias/prejudice or gross error of judgment. In such cases, the instructor will evaluate the test response independently and decide on a final mark. Note that this final mark may be lower than, higher than, or the same as the original mark and is not open to further appeals to the instructor. Guidance on what to improve on in preparing for and writing the second test can be sought from the TA at any time during their weekly office hours.

If you are forced to miss a test due to illness or other adversity beyond your control, be sure to **email me within one week** of the test date to request a make-up test. Your request must be accompanied by **one** of the following: 1) proof of submission on [ACORN's](#) Absence Declaration Tool (note that this can only be used once per semester); 2) a properly completed [Verification of Illness \(VOI\) form](#); 3) a letter from your College Registrar's office; or 4) a letter from your Accessibility Services advisor. Claims that illness or adversity prevented adequate *preparation* for the test will not suffice in most cases. Late requests will **not** be considered. Make-up tests will be written in the Department of Psychology at a pre-arranged time. Make-up test requests that are denied will result in a test mark of zero. Please note that missing a term test is a serious matter. Make-up tests will only be offered in clearly legitimate and properly documented cases, in accordance with the guidelines of the Faculty of Arts and Science.

Personal Narrative Essay (35%). I would like you to conceive of your learning in this course as a narrative -- a personal story. To promote this framing, this assignment requires you to describe your engagement with the required readings, lectures, and videos as it developed over time from January 9 (start of the course) to March 20 (the week before the essay is due). Here are the instructions for the essay:

"Describe your personal journey in this course so far. Discuss your personal reactions to the readings, lectures, and videos from January 9 to March 20. Describe how the content of these readings, lectures, and videos has changed and/or reinforced the way you understand yourself and the world around you."

Note that a narrative essay is a story set in **time**. As such, it is best to start by engaging with the content of the introductory lecture of January 9 and work forward in time to the readings, lecture, and video that comprise the From Psychology to Self-Help module. The essay should also be **personal**, as much about **yourself** as about the content of the course. It should focus on how you negotiated with and were affected by the concepts, claims, and perspectives presented. This includes what you agreed and disagreed with, what you understood and did not understand, how certain ideas held significance for the details of your own life, how they made you feel, what they

revealed to you, the questions or concerns they generated, and how they bore on your communication and relations with others.

Narrative essays will be marked by either the instructor or the TA. They will be evaluated on the depth, quality, and consistency of engagement with the readings, lectures, and videos, as well as the cogency of reasoning and quality of writing. With regard to consistency, broken or discontinuous narratives that reveal only partial engagement with the course by failing to incorporate **all** topics explored from January 9 to March 20 will receive lower marks than more complete narratives. Equally, narratives that reveal full engagement with the readings, lectures, **and** videos -- in proportion to the amount of content comprised by each (there is far more reading and lecture than video content) -- will receive higher marks than those revealing full engagement with only one or two of these three sources of content.

The essay should consist of 2,000-2,500 words excluding the title page and references. With regard to references, there is no need to cite more than the required readings, my lectures, and the videos. Even so, you are free to cite sources external to the course if you feel it is appropriate. Just be sure not to refer to external content **at the expense of** discussing your engagement with assigned course content. Devote your thoughts and words to the latter. Do not include an abstract. Note that this is **not** a research paper. It is a personal essay requiring focused self-reflection and careful writing. Give it the time and attention it deserves. Be sure to number your pages, double-space your text, and use 12-point Times New Roman, Arial, or Calibri font. References should be in APA format (refer to *Publication Manual of the APA*, 7th ed.). There are no other formatting or structural requirements. The essay should be submitted on Quercus before the deadline of 12:10 pm on March 27. Late essays will be accepted with a mark deduction of 5% per day. Be sure to submit your essay as a Word file (.doc or .docx).

Marks for the personal narrative essay will be posted on Quercus within three weeks of the submission deadline. Any concerns or questions about individual marks should be taken up with the marker (either the instructor or the TA) **within two weeks** of posting.

Thought Papers (5% each). The two thought papers are structured opportunities for you to relate the issues explored in the videos to your own life and the lives of those close to you. They are personal explorations, not scholarly reports, and should not include any formal references or citations. Each paper must be 500-600 words in length. Each should be based on any **one** of the videos assigned in the course. You are completely free to choose which two videos to base your thought papers on.

The question to be addressed in each thought paper is:

What are the main arguments offered in this video? Do you feel that these arguments have validity as applied to your own life and/or the lives of those you know well? Why or why not?

The main arguments offered in the videos vary in their complexity. Some may require more space than others to summarize effectively. Take care, however, not to devote too much space to summarizing. Write as succinctly as needed. Keep in mind that the objective of the thought papers is **personal application**. Accordingly, make sure that at least half of your 500-600 words are given to exploring how the argument relates to the specifics of your own life and/or the lives of those

close to you. The benefit of this exercise lies in how effectively you are able to use the words of another as both a mirror and a lamp for viewing and interpreting yourself.

Thought papers will be evaluated on the extent to which they reveal good understanding of the video, the depth and insightfulness of personal application, and the quality of writing.

The first thought paper should be submitted on Quercus by 12:10 pm on January 30. The second should be submitted on Quercus by 12:10 pm on March 20. Emailed papers will not be accepted. Late papers will not be accepted unless arranged with the instructor **before** the deadline because of justifying personal circumstances. Please plan and work accordingly.

Thought paper marks will be posted on Quercus within two weeks of their submission deadline. Any concerns or questions about individual marks should be taken up with the instructor **within two weeks** of posting.

Course Policies

Plagiarism Detection. Normally, students will be required to submit their papers to the University's plagiarism detection tool for a review of textual similarity and detection of possible plagiarism. In doing so, students will allow their papers to be included as source documents in the tool's reference database, where they will be used solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism. The terms that apply to the University's use of this tool are described on the [Centre for Teaching Support & Innovation's](#) website.

Writing. The ability to write effectively is key to academic and professional success in the information age. To find resources aimed at helping you develop your writing skills, start by visiting [Writing at the University of Toronto](#).

Grading Policy. Please note that all course marks are tentative until approved by the Department Chair and the Dean's office, and recorded by the Office of the Faculty Registrar. For more information on what grades mean at U of T, please see <http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/general/grading-policy>.

Penalties for Lateness. Late thought papers will not be accepted unless arranged with the instructor prior to the deadline in light of justifying circumstances. Late personal narrative essays will be accepted with a 5%-per-day penalty.

Email Policy. Please check the syllabus before sending me or the TA an email. You will find answers to many of your questions there. Feel free to email me or the TA any other questions or concerns, or attend our drop-in office hours.

Religious Accommodation. As a student at the University of Toronto, you are part of a diverse community that welcomes and includes students and faculty from a wide range of cultural and religious traditions. For my part, I will make every reasonable effort to avoid scheduling tests, examinations, or other compulsory activities on religious holy days not captured by statutory holidays. Further to University Policy, if you anticipate being absent from class or missing a major course activity (such as a test) due to a religious observance, please let me know as early in the

course as possible, and with sufficient notice (at least two to three weeks), so that we can work together to make alternate arrangements.

Students with Disabilities or Accommodation Requirements. Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. If you have an acute or ongoing disability issue or accommodation need, you should register with Accessibility Services (AS) at the beginning of the academic year by visiting <http://www.studentlife.utoronto.ca/as/new-registration>. Without registration, you will not be able to verify your situation with your instructors, and instructors will not be advised about your accommodation needs. AS will assess your situation, develop an accommodation plan with you, and support you in requesting accommodation for your course work. Remember that the process of accommodation is private: AS will not share details of your needs or condition with any instructor, and your instructors will not reveal that you are registered with AS.

Academic Integrity. All students, faculty and staff are expected to follow the University's guidelines and policies on academic integrity. For students, this means following the standards of academic honesty when writing assignments, collaborating with fellow students, and writing tests and exams. Ensure that the work you submit for grading represents your own honest efforts. Plagiarism—representing someone else's work as your own or submitting work that you have previously submitted for marks in another class or program—is a serious offence that can result in sanctions. Speak to me for advice on anything that you find unclear. To learn more about how to cite and use source material appropriately and for other writing support, see the U of T writing support website at [Writing at the University of Toronto](http://writing.utoronto.ca). Consult the Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters for a complete outline of the University's policy and expectations. For more information, please see <https://www.artsci.utoronto.ca/current/academic-advising-and-support/student-academic-integrity> and <http://academicintegrity.utoronto.ca>.

Specific Medical Circumstances. Students who are absent from academic participation for any reason (e.g., COVID, cold, flu or other illness/injury, family situation) and require consideration for missed academic work should report their absence through [ACORN](#) (Profile and Settings menu), a [Verification of Illness \(VOI\) form](#), or letter from their College Registrar or Accessibility Services advisor. Students should also inform the instructor of their absence.

If an absence extends beyond 14 consecutive days, or if you have a non-medical personal situation preventing you from completing your academic work, you should connect with your College Registrar. They can provide advice and assistance reaching out to instructors on your behalf. If you get a concussion, break your hand, or suffer some other acute injury, you should register with Accessibility Services as soon as possible.

Digital Devices in Class. Technology can support student learning, but it can also become a distraction. Research indicates that multi-tasking (texting or going online) during class time can have a negative impact on learning. Out of respect for your fellow students in this class, please refrain from using laptops or mobile phones for entertainment during class. Do not display any material on a laptop which may be distracting or offensive to your fellow students. Laptops may be used only for legitimate classroom purposes, such as taking notes, downloading course information from Quercus, or working on an assigned in-class exercise. Checking social media,

email, texting, games, and other online activities are not legitimate classroom purposes. Such inappropriate laptop and mobile phone use is distracting to those seated around you.

Departmental Guidance for Undergraduate Students in Psychology. The Department of Psychology recognizes that, as a student, you may experience disruptions to your learning that are out of your control, and that there may be circumstances when you need extra support. Accordingly, the Department has provided a helpful [guide](#) to clarify your and your instructor's responsibilities when navigating these situations. This [guide](#) consolidates Faculty of Arts & Science policies for undergraduate students in one place for your convenience. As an instructor in the department, I will follow these recommendations in supporting you. I recommend that you also consult them to learn more about your rights and responsibilities before reaching out to me.

Academic Resources

English Language Learners (ELL) Program: <http://www.artsci.utoronto.ca/current/advising/ell>

ELL offers a range of programs/workshops/resources to assist all Arts & Science students who wish to improve their English language skills (including reading, listening, speaking, and writing). Please visit their website for more information about these resources.

Other Resources

Student Life Programs and Services (<http://www.studentlife.utoronto.ca/>)

Academic Success Services (<http://www.studentlife.utoronto.ca/asc>)

Counselling and Psychological Services (<http://www.studentlife.utoronto.ca/hwc>)

Readings, Lectures, and Videos

Some of the readings are challenging and require close attention. The effort invested will be repaid with a deeper understanding of the subject matter. Allow yourself sufficient time to read and reflect on the material. Read to discern the main arguments, positions, and/or frameworks presented by the authors, not to memorize incidental details, illustrations, or references. Make notes accordingly. As you read, you should be asking yourself the following questions:

- What major questions, concerns, or issues are being addressed in this reading?
- What are the authors claiming about these?
- What are the logical, conceptual, or empirical justifications for these claims?
- Do I agree or disagree with these claims? Why?
- How would I express my position in dialogue with others?

Finally, be charitable toward yourself. Failing to understand each and every point made by a writer does not reflect inadequacy -- yours or the writer's -- when the topic, style, or disciplinary references are unfamiliar to you. Be patient and focus on comprehending the general argument,

even if you are unable to grasp some of the non-essential extensions, tangents, connections, illustrations, or applications.

[WikipediaLinks to an external site.](#) is a free online resource that can help clarify many of the concepts and ideas mentioned in the readings and elsewhere in the course. Refer to it as needed. Additional online resources you may find useful are the [Stanford Encyclopedia of PhilosophyLinks to an external site.](#), the [Internet Encyclopedia of PhilosophyLinks to an external site.](#), Ian Parker's (2015) [Handbook of Critical Psychology](#), the [Wiley Handbook of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology](#) (2015), the [Routledge International Handbook of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology](#) (2022), and Amy Kind's (2020) [Philosophy of Mind: The Basics](#). The last four of these can be accessed through [University of Toronto Libraries](#).

The required reading for any given week must be completed in its entirety *before* attending the lecture, which will be difficult to follow and participate in otherwise. Similarly, the assigned video for that week must be watched in its entirety *before* the lecture.

My lecture for any given week is both complementary and supplementary to the readings and video for that week. This means I will present much that is **not** mentioned in the readings and video, even while I clarify and expand on some of the concepts, claims, and perspectives that **are**. To the extent that you find value in the lecture, it will be precisely because of this nonredundancy.

There are no preprepared notes for my lectures. You are responsible for taking your own notes. Focus on pulling out key concepts and points from the discourse, translating them into your own voice, and relating them to your personal circumstances and background knowledge. The small number of sparse PowerPoint slides I use are mainly headings, emblematic images, and quotes that serve as topical guideposts for the lecture. They are not at all a textual substitute. In fact, I suspect that viewing my minimalist slides without listening to the lecture would be more mystifying than illuminating. Even so, the slides will be posted on Quercus within a day of each lecture for those who would perhaps like to use them as study aids.

This is an **in-person** course and consistent class attendance and participation are expected. Lectures will **not** be recorded and made available online for passive, asynchronous viewing. That would undermine the purpose and value of a small-group, upper-year course that aims to foster participatory dialogue and social learning. **I strongly recommend that you negotiate a partnership with a fellow student early on and share each other's class notes for any lectures either of you is forced to miss.**

Finally, note that this is **not** a course you can “coast” through or “cram” for overnight. If you fail to keep up with the reading and video schedule, attend weekly lectures, and complete assignments on time, you are bound to end up frustrated and disappointed with your experience in this course. Please plan accordingly.

Schedule

January 9 – Introduction

Read: Course syllabus

January 16 – What is Critical Psychology?

Read: Yanchar, S. C., Slife, B. D., & Warne, R. (2008). Critical thinking as disciplinary practice. *Review of General Psychology*, 12, 265-281.

Read: Teo, T. (2021). History and systems of critical psychology. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Psychology*. Oxford University Press.

Watch: Edward O'Neill (2016) on the solving problems by changing perspective (8:17 min)

Note: All required readings and videos for this course are accessible through the course Modules.

January 23 – The Rhetoric of Psychology

Read: Billig, M., & Marinho, C. (2015). Rhetoric and psychology: Ending the dominance of nouns. In J. Martin, J. Sugarman, & K. L. Slaney (Eds.), *The Wiley handbook of theoretical and philosophical psychology: Methods, approaches, and new directions for social sciences* (pp. 117-132). John Wiley & Sons.

Read: Slaney, K. L., & Wu, C. A. (2022). Metaphors, idioms, and clichés: The rhetoric of objectivity in psychological science discourse. In B. D. Slife, S. C. Yanchar, & F. C. Richardson (Eds.), *Routledge international handbook of theoretical and philosophical psychology* (pp. 453-472). Routledge.

Watch: David Huron (2014) on the rhetoric of science (8:38 min)

January 30 – Psychology's "Double Hermeneutic"

Read: Hacking, I. (2007). Kinds of people: Moving targets. *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 151, 285-318.

Read: Sugarman, J. (2009). Historical ontology and psychological description. *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*, 29, 5-15.

Watch: American Bar Association's (2017) *Hidden Injustice: Bias on the Bench* (11:50 min)

Thought paper 1 due.

February 6 – Crises, Past and Present

Read: Wieser, M. (2020). The concept of crisis in the history of Western psychology. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Psychology*.

Read: Malich, L., & Rehmann-Sutter, C. (2022). Metascience is not enough – A plea for psychological humanities in the wake of the replication crisis. *Review of General Psychology*, 26(2), 261-273.

Watch: PBS Nova's (2017) *What Makes Science True?* (14:59 min)

February 13 – Test 1 (in class)

February 27 – The Neuroscientific Turn

Read: Schwartz, S. J., Lilienfeld, S. O., Meca, A., & Sauvigné, K. C. (2016). The role of neuroscience within psychology: A call for inclusiveness over exclusiveness. *American Psychologist*, 71, 52-70.

Read: Hyland, M. (2023). *A history of psychology in ten questions (2nd ed.)*. Routledge. (pp. 153-177)

Watch: Adina Roskies (2021) on neuroscientific vs. folk psychological explanation (8:15 min)

March 6 – Diagnosing Psychiatric Diagnosis

Read: Paris, J. (2024). Psychiatric diagnosis 10 years after the publication of DSM-5: Update of its impact on the legal system. *Psychological Injury and Law*, 17, 99-104.

Read: Faucher, L., & Goyer, S. (2015). RDoC: Thinking outside the DSM box without falling into a reductionist trap. In S. Demazeux & P. Singy (Eds.), *The DSM-5 in perspective: Philosophical reflections on the psychiatric babel* (pp. 199-224). Springer.

Watch: Allen Frances (2023) on psychiatric overdiagnosis (39:43 min)

March 13 – Whose Psychology?

Read: Magnusson, E., & Marecek, J. (2022). A critical interpretative psychology of gender. In B. D. Slife, S. C. Yanchar, & F. C. Richardson (Eds.), *Routledge international handbook of theoretical and philosophical psychology* (pp. 308-329). Routledge.

Read: Bizumic, B. (2018). *Ethnocentrism: Integrated perspectives*. Routledge. (pp. 137-149)

Watch: SciShow Psych (2017) on psychology's WEIRD bias (4:35 min)

March 20 – From Psychology to Self-Help

Read: Nehring, D., Hendriks, E. C., Kerrigan, D., & Alvarado, E. (2016). *Transnational popular psychology and the global self-help industry: The politics of social change*. Palgrave Macmillan. (pp. 17-29)

Read: Cabanas, E., & Illouz, E. (2019). *Manufacturing happy citizens*. Polity Press. (pp. 111-145)

Watch: Barbara Ehrenreich (2010) on the dark side of positive thinking (10:22 min)

Thought paper 2 due.

March 27 – Retrospective

Personal narrative essay due.

April 3 – Test 2 (in class)