**George Mason University**

**Psychological Factors in Aging, PSYC 415**

**Spring 2019**

**Instructor Information**

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**Course Information**

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| Course: Psyc 415 | Credits: 3 |
| Meeting Day(s): Online | Meeting Time(s): Online |

**Course Description and Objectives**

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| The primary goal of this course is for students to understand the psychological factors of aging and the encompassing cognitive, biological, physical, and social changes that occur during the aging process. This course will cover how to follow a healthy lifestyle and how to cope with aging. Material will be drawn primarily from the gerontology field in the form of scientific literature, and supplemental material may be drawn from philosophy.  A secondary goal is for students to gain critical skills in interpreting peer-reviewed research literature, which is why this course will require careful reading and digestion of journal articles instead of a specific textbook. Although this course is fairly self-directed, it is a great intro into how graduate courses are structured, which require a significant amount of self-discipline and patience in learning to read scientific literature. My hope is that you gain a respect for reading scholarly material and a greater level of comfort in being able to understand scientific literature.  Lastly, this course is designed to be experiential. An experiential approach posits that by experiencing or doing, we are more likely to remember and better understand. In this vein, my goal is not for you to regurgitate information, but to interweave academic information with hands-on experience. My hope is that students gain a more meaningful understanding of aging. As such, students will be required to conduct one experiential learning assignment interviewing an older adult (detailed below) and will have the opportunity for additional interaction with aging populations.  **As a result of this course experience, a student should be able to:**   * Distinguish between major theoretical perspectives in the area of gerontology. * Contrast the various theoretical perspectives according to how they view major controversies and issues in gerontology. * Evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of the various techniques used to study the aging population. * Understand physical, cognitive and socioemotional development of older adults. * Articulate various gerontology terms and concepts. * Apply developmental concepts and theories to everyday relationships and situations. |

**Course Readings**

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| Our course material will be available via Open Learning Resources.  Since this is a 400-level course, I have chosen to have you read 1-3 professional journal articles each week, as well as watch several TED Talks. This course assumes that you have mastered basic concepts in statistics and research methods from your previous psychology course requirements. I have tried to balance the articles in terms of reports on basic research, reports on applied research, and literature reviews which integrate theory and research. Readings may change slightly and/or few excerpts from books may be added to the syllabus as the course progresses. Students will be notified the week before a reading is due if the syllabus changes. |

**Class format/Technology use**

This course is a discussion-based online seminar and is reliant on the participation from all students. Given this format, it is imperative that everyone come prepared to participate for each “class” session. Preparation involves completing the readings, video assignments, preparing discussion posts and replying to and extending upon others’ discussions. Students will be expected to access and use Blackboard each week for discussion and assignments. Important class information, such as the syllabus and weekly readings will be posted here.

Reading materials and links to videos can be found under the Course Content page on BB in the appropriate folder for that week (e.g., BB homepage > Course Content tab > Week 1). Each week’s discussion board can be found on the Discussion Board tab. The Syllabus quiz, Final Project Decision assignment, Mid-term Project dropbox, and the Final Project dropbox will be located on the Assignment page.

Required knowledge of technology for this course includes an ability to access materials in BlackBoard and/or sent via email to your GMU address. Please double-check prior to the start of class that you have access to BlackBoard.

**Course requirements and assignments**

This course is online, which means a great deal of responsibility rests on each individual. To succeed in this course, you will need to stay on task and maintain a schedule/timeline that allows you to complete material in a timely fashion. Several assignments will be available at the beginning of the semester, and students may work ahead. Discussion board posts and thought papers, however, have final due dates and times that must be followed. Unless you contact me IN ADVANCE and receive approval, LATE WORK WILL NOT BE ACCEPTED.

# Assessment Method

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| Homework/ Exams / Discussion | Point Value | Final Grade Scale |
| **Homework** (5 @ 20 pts. each) | 100 pts. |  |
| **EXAM 1** | 50 pts. | **A = 403+ pts.** |
| **EXAM 2** | 50 pts. | **B = 358+ pts.** |
| **Poster project** | 50 pts. | **C = 313+ pts.** |
| **Discussion Board** (8 @ 25 pts. each) | 200 pts. | **D = 268+ pts.** |
| Extra credit | Additional points | **F = 267 and below** |
| **TOTAL** | **450 Pts.** |  |

**Grades will be calculated as follows:**

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| **Grade** | **Percentage** | **Grade** | **Percentage** |
| A | 93-100% | C+ | 77-79% |
| A- | 90-92% | C | 73-76% |
| B+ | 87-89% | C- | 70-72% |
| B | 83-86% | D | 65-69% |
| B- | 80-82% | F | Below 64% |

**Codes of Academic Integrity and Student Conduct**

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| George Mason University has an Honor Code, which requires all members of this community to maintain the highest standards of academic honesty and integrity. All violations of the Honor Code, including cheating and plagiarism, will not be tolerated and will be reported to the University Honor Committee and/or penalized. The instructor for this course reserves the right to enter a failing grade to any student found guilty of an honor code violation. Information that must be used from an outside source must be cited in correct APA format. The Honor Code is available at: http://oai.gmu.edu/the-mason-honor-code-2/ All violations of the Honor Code will be reported to the Honor Committee.  Students are required to uphold the Code of Academic Integrity and the Code of Student Conduct. Students who violate either of these codes may receive a failing grade in the class. Regarding assignments and exams, students should always observe the highest standards of academic honesty and integrity. Your academic work should be the result of your efforts, thoughts, and ideas. When writing papers or assignments, you should use an appropriate citation style consistently, indicating exactly where you are quoting, or have been inspired by, the work of others.  Cheating on any assignment or exam will result in possible disciplinary actions against you (the student), and all cases of academic misconduct will be referred to the Student Honor Council at George Mason University.  Examples of conduct meriting such disciplinary actions include, but are not limited to, the following: (1) cheating on an exam, either with or without assistance of another student or students, (2) submitting as your own work a paper that is either wholly or partially plagiarized, such a purchasing a paper from an internet site or superficially rewriting the work of others without proper citation, or (3) collaborating with fellow students on assignments or exams for which you were instructed to work alone.  <https://oai.gmu.edu/mason-honor-code/>  Should you need accommodations for assignments/exams due to a verified, documented learning or physical disability please inform me of your situation so that proper accommodation procedures are followed. Disability Resource Center (DRC) at 703-993-2474. All academic accommodations must be arranged through that office. <https://ds.gmu.edu/> |

**Syllabus and course logistics:**

Your first assignment in the course will be to answer a series of questions about the syllabus and logistics of the course. This is due by Tuesday, January, 29th and is designed to ensure that all students have fully read over the material necessary to proceed in the course. You are allowed to use your course materials during this quiz. The purpose is not to test your memorization of the information but to ensure that you have read everything required for success in the course. You have only ONE CHANCE to take this quiz, so check your answers before submitting.

**Introduction post: GRADED**

By the end of the first week of class on Saturday, January 26th at 11:59PM, your introduction post is due. I would like to hear why you are taking this course. Please provide the following information and answer these questions (do not be afraid to be brutally honest!):

1. Year in school
2. Degree program – major, minors, etc.
3. 2 Fun facts about yourself
4. What made you interested in this course?
5. What do you hope to learn generally? What burning question do you have about aging?
6. What is your comfort level with reading scientific journal articles?
7. What in terms of aging are you most excited?
8. What scares you about growing older?
9. What’s one thing you would like to change about yourself or your style of living to promote healthier aging? (This question may not be easy to answer right now, but I hope you keep it in mind as we progress through the course!)

**Final-Project Decision:** By Friday, February 1st, please complete the “Final-Project Decision” document under Class Assignments by 11:59PM. Here, you will tell me if you want to complete volunteer work OR write 5 thoughts papers on professional journal articles of your choice (NOT the assigned readings) around topics covered in class. If you are completing thought papers, you are able to submit your first thought paper on September 7th. This thought paper can relate to Week 1 or Week 2. You CANNOT submit thought papers for both weeks.

# \*\* Discussion Board and Participation Policy \*\*

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| Due to the online format of this class, you will not attend any classroom lectures. Class participation, to include participation in the discussion board, individual class work, and respectful interaction between the instructor and students are emphasized in this course.  **Participation:** The class participation for this course is designed within the framework of online classes and is intended to support the learning process. Being active and involved in the discussion board is considered your “participation” in this course, and students are expected to participate fully in all course activities. To complete this course successfully you do NOT have to be online at a particular day or time. However, the course follows a weekly schedule. Students are expected to complete all the work assigned for a particular week and to observe all deadlines throughout the semester. In case of illness, emergency, religious holidays, or participation in official college functions, students remain responsible for completing the requirements of the course. Again, ***late assignments will not be accepted unless approved by the instructor ahead of time. Home computer problems will not result in a deadline extension.***  **Discussion Board:** Each week you will be responsible for posting one original comment to the discussion board… this will be based on an important issue from the weekly reading/s, and these will be labeled “Week 1, 2, etc.” This will make it easier for you to track the discussions. Each week will begin on Sunday and **close by 11:59pm Saturday (Saturday going into Sunday).** This means you have seven (7) days to complete your discussion board work. The discussion board is set up to be a “reflection loop.” In other words, you will need to post an original response by Monday or Tuesday of each week; this posting is worth a maximum of ten (15) points. You will then need to respond to at least two of your classmates’ posts between Wednesday and Saturday. Each of these postings is worth a maximum of five (5) points. Thus, you could earn a maximum of 25 points per week by participating on the discussion board. Maximum points for the discussion board are 300 (15 for the original postings; 5 for each of the two minimum responses to your classmates’ posts; for a maximum total of 25 points per week). There will be a total of 12 discussions throughout the term. Early posts create more discussion, so I do encourage posting early in the week. Below is the grading rubric for the discussion board. Your responses should be in paragraph format and although the conferences are somewhat informal, spelling and grammar are still important. “I agree” will not count as a post. \*\*DO NOT WAIT UNTIL SATURDAY TO POST YOUR INITIAL DISCUSSION. THIS DOES NOT ALLOW FOR GENUINE EXCHANGE AMONGST THE CLASS.  Original posts:  Original posts will be graded based on amount of thought demonstrated and relevance to the subject matter. Original posts that are both **thoughtful** and **relevant** to the article/topic for that week will receive full credit; whereas, original posts that are lacking one of these will have points deducted, and original posts lacking both of these may be scored a 0. Furthermore, please DO NOT summarize the readings; you will lose significant points. Most original posts will be between 500-700 characters. These posts will build on material presented in the article, and might, for example, describe your reaction to the journal article, connect the findings to real-world experiences, supply thought-provoking questions that the material raised for you, challenge the authors’ conclusions, or potentially (and respectfully) raise a controversial opinion or counter-opinion to the article’s main idea. Posts may include reference to the videos or additional readings for a given week, but *they must also* include reference to at least one of the scientific articles assigned for that week’s topic.  Replies:  Replies to other posts must extend the thoughts expressed in the original post – they **cannot** be simple restatements or statements of agreement or disagreement (such replies will result in 0 points for that post). At the same time, there is no need to be overly lengthy. Most original posts and replies will be between 200 and 500 characters.  \*\*The amount of characters for each discussion post are not requirements, just guidelines – some perfectly acceptable posts may be longer or shorter\*\*  **NOTE:** You will only be able to post for the current week. If you forget to post the previous week, then you lose your opportunity to earn any points for that week. (You can post as many times as you like each week. The more you post, the more you participate, and the higher your grade will be). Reminder: **The discussion board will close each week by Saturday at 11:59pm (EST) (Saturday going into Sunday).**    *Netiquette:* You will be communicating with one another via the discussion board. It is likely that you will not always agree with the opinions of your fellow classmates. Disagreement is fine, but you will need to respect others’ views. Thus, personal attacks and derogatory comments will not be tolerated. If, however, you do disagree with someone, then I expect you to state your position in an articulate fashion on the discussion board.    Grading Rubric:   |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | 0 Points | 3 Points | 6 Points | 9 Points | 12 Points | 15 Points | | Does not respond to postings; does not participate freely. No effort to participate in learning community as it develops. Didn't post in each required topic for each week. | Does not respond to most postings. Does not make effort to participate in learning community as it develops; seems indifferent. Comments or questions were not responsive to the discussion questions. | Occasionally makes meaningful reflection on group’s efforts; marginal effort to become involved with group. Comments or questions provided some evidence that the participant had read the course material. | Frequently attempts to direct the discussion and present relevant viewpoints for consideration by group; interacts freely. Comments or questions enhanced the quality of discussion (i.e., suggested new perspectives on an issue, asked questions that helped stimulate further discussion, etc.) | Consistently responds to posting; demonstrates good self-initiative. Frequently attempts to motivate the group discussion; presents creative approaches to topic. Participant posted a significant response in the form of comments and or questions to all required conference topics posted for that week. | Exceeds all expectations when responding to posts. | |

**Online Links of Help/Interest:**

Writing Center: <http://writingcenter.gmu.edu/>

Library: <https://masononline.gmu.edu/student-resources/library/>

# Topical Outline

# Every effort will be made to keep to this schedule; however, the instructor reserves the right to alter or amend it as necessary. The schedule is subject to change as the course progresses; and as much advance notice as possible will be provided when this occurs.

**\*\*discussions are due by 11:59pm Saturday\*\* and do not appear on the syllabus\*\***

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| **Week** | **Topic** | **Assignments\*\*** |
| Week 1  8/27-8/31 | Why Study Aging? Demographics and “Myths” About Aging | Dionigi (2015);  Kotter-Gruhn et. al (2009);  Thornton (2002)  TED Talk: Let’s End Ageism  **DUE 8/31: Introduction Post (in addition to weekly post due on Sunday)** |
| Week 2  9/3-9/7 | Theoretical Frameworks and Conceptual and Methodological Issues | Weiss & Lang (2012);  Levinson (1986)  **DUE 9/4: Syllabus Quiz**  **DUE 9/9: Final Project Decision** |
| Week 3  9/10-9/14 | Social Cognition | Schoemann & Branscombe (2011) |
| Week 4  9/17-9/21 | Personality Theory for Aging | Hooker & McAdams (2003)  Lockenhoff et al. (2009) |
| Week 5  9/24-9/28 | Basic & Higher Order Cognitive Functions | Kraft (2012)  TED Talk: How I’m preparing to get Alzheimer’s |
| Week 6  10/1-10/5 | Social Ties, Stress, and Mortality | Birditt, Fingerman, & Almeida (2005);  Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton (2010);  Luong, Charles, & Fingerman (2011) |
| Week 7  10/8-10/12 | Cognitive Aging | Drag & Bielieuaska (2009)  Video: Mario Martinez on Aging |
| Week 8  10/15-10/19 | Physical Activity | Pahor et al. (2014);  Trost et al. (2002);  Podcast/Video TBD |
| Week 9  10/22-10/26 | Mental Health Issues and Treatment | Jimemez et al. (2013);  **DUE 10/26: Mid-Term Project** |
| Week 10  10/29-11/2 | Influences on Retirement Planning | Lusardi & Mitchell (2007);  Podcasts on Saving for Retirement |
| Week 11  11/5-11/9 | Global Aging Trends | NIH reports: Global Aging Report (2011) &  An Aging World (2015) |
| Week 12  11/12-11/16 | Successful Aging | Riechstadt et al. (2010);  Cartensen (2006);  Bulow & Soderqvist (2014);  TED Talk by Laura Carstensen (author of 2nd article): Older people are happier |
| Week 13  11/19-11/23 | **Thanksgiving Break!** | **Enjoy!** |
| Week 14  11/26-11/30 | Death and Dying | Stroeb, Schut, & Stroebe (2007);  Bratt, Stenestrom, & Rennemark (2016);  TED Talk: Let’s talk about dying |
| Week 15  12/3-12/7 | Elder Abuse & Medicare | Johannesen & LoGiudice (2013) |
| Week 16  12/10-12/14 | Reading Days/Exam Week | Work on Final Project/Last Thought Paper on Topic Not Covered  **DUE 12/13: Final Project** |

**Mid-Term Project:** You will complete a biographical study of an older person. You will be writing a biography that reconstructs the past and integrates it with the present relating to concepts we have covered (or will cover) in this course. For this course we are using guided biography as a way of learning from an older person about the psychology of adult development and aging. Information about this project is detailed below. This assignment should be considered a learning process. You will do well if you show appropriate interest and incorporate relevant research reviewed in class.

**Final Project:** You can either 1) Volunteer in an institution that serves persons 65 and older **OR** complete 5 thoughts papers on professional journal articles that are relevant to the topics covered. Information and guidelines about these projects are detailed below.

**GUIDELINES FOR PROJECTS**

Term projects must include a component that addresses the academic perspective of the psychology of aging. Term projects **must** be typed double-spaced and APA formatted.

**I. Biographical Study of an Older Person**

A biography is the personal history of an individual life written by another person. This biography will be one that reconstructs the past and integrates it with the present using thematic outlines or topics. Several major themes have been identified as significant in the fabric of developing and maturing lives: family, career, health, sex role development, experiences with death, and social relationships. For this course, you will be writing a biography as a way of learning from an older person about the psychology of adult development and aging. Students will not simply report the facts from their interviews but will try to identify themes in the life of their interviewee. We are not, however, using guided biography as a research technique or as a clinical intervention.

Below are a number of suggested topics or themes that you may want to touch on in conduct­ing your guided biography of some person 55 years or older.Please do not limit yourself to the questions listed, try to come up with additional questions that may be relevant to them, and most important, let the conversation flow where it may:

* What is your family history?
* How has family influenced your life?
* Describe the history of your principal career (work or homemaker).
  + Successes
  + Failures
  + Trials and difficult situations from which you learned
* What roles have finances played in your life?
* How has education impacted your life?
* Describe your 3 most influential relationships throughout life.
* What is your health history?
* How would you describe the history of your self-development?
* What experiences have you had with death, and how have they affected how you live your life?
* What is the history of your loves and hates?
* Describe the development of your life in terms of meanings, values, ethics and goals.
* What regrets do you have, if any, about how you have led your life?
* Have you developed a philosophy of aging and/or of life that you feel helps you when times get difficult for you?
* What advice would you give to future generations of people to help them age “success­fully?”
* Would you like to make any final comments about how your life has unfolded or about your participation in this guided biographical course exercise?

Selection of Person

You may choose to do this exercise with any person of your choice (age 55+). Be sure that you inform him/her of the circumstances under which you are conducting the guided biography. Try to pick a person who you think will help you to learn a lot about the psychology of adult development and aging.

Gathering Data for the Guided Biography

Data should be collected using a set of probes. Do not try to collect all of the data in one inter­view. *Explain at the beginning that several interviews will take place*. Let the person do most of the talking. Be alert to spontaneous opportunities to alter your preestablished set of probes. Ask the person if he/she would mind if you taped the conversation. If no, use only a pad to take notes; if yes, tape the conversations and use a pad to make supplemental notes to yourself.

If you sense that the person is getting uncomfortable with the interview, ask him/her if he/she wants to stop. If his/her uneasiness continues, then stop. If the person tries to engage you in a quasi-therapeutic dialogue, remind him/her that the purpose of the exercise is education and that you are not trained as a clinical psychologist.

Write Up

Present your write-up in the following format: 12-pt Times New Roman font; double spaced; 5-10 pages; APA formatted:

A. The circumstances under which you know this person and why you chose him or her;

B. Overview of the person’s current life situation;

C. Biographical sketch of the individual’s history from childhood to the present;

D. Themes, values, and special topics;

E. Interweaving of course material with their life: exploration of one or more aspects of this person’s life form the academic framework of the psychology of aging (**note: this section is most important)**; you should try to relate the themes of the interview and major findings to topics covered in class (you may need to take a cursory look at topic to be covered)

F. What you learned from this exercise that you intend to think about in terms of your own developing and aging.

\*\*Guided biographies are graded based on *inter-weavings*, which involve discussing how the themes, values, and special topics pertaining to the person interviewed intersect with the academic treatment of the psychology of aging.

**II. Volunteering with an Older Person**

You can explore other options for doing volunteer work via the Volunteer Fairfax website (<http://volunteerfairfax.civicore.com)>. Alternatively, you can arrange your own volunteer experience with an agency or facility that serves older people such as the Area Agency on Aging, a senior center, a life care residential community, a hospital, or a nursing home.

Participant observation is a technique used by qualitative researchers who study a culture *by participating in the culture and observing what happens*. Often, participant observa­tion is used to obtain a ‘thick’ description of a culture and to develop concepts to explain the rules that govern the observed behavior. For instance, participant observation studies in the 1960s in the culture of hospitals revealed that terminal patients were often treated differently from patients expected to live. Basically, terminal patients were treated as if they were already dead. This description of how terminal patients were treated formed the basis for the concept that, in hospitals, social death often preceded physical death. For this course, participant observation could be used as a way of learning about the culture of aging in a specific setting.

I suggest that you volunteer for at least 15 hours, spread out over 7 to 8 weeks. As a participant observer, you would keep a diary which constitutes your field notes. The diary would be divided into two sections: a) observations of what happened and b) analysis of the rules and concepts that might explain the actions of the actors in the setting. When participant observers go ‘native’ in their own culture, they must take the perspective that they are writing for an audience that consists of strangers that have never been there. You may choose to do a series of “diary” entries about specific experiences or one “diary” entry about the entire volunteer experience. The written portion of this assignment should be 5-10 double spaced pages—enough to demonstrate thoughtful reflection on the experience.

Topics that are often covered in the descriptive/observational diary entry would likely include:

1. How you gained entry into the environment
2. The physical environment
3. The social environment
4. The perspective of different types of key informants (e.g., older person, social worker, administrator, staff member, visitor)
5. Topics of conversation
6. Event sequences that depict the daily way of life
7. The language used by insiders--slang expressions, tone, manner of speech, speech barriers, etc.
8. Nonverbal behavior
9. Emotions that arose in the situation
10. How you left the environment

Topics that are often covered in the analytic part of an ethnographic study include:

1. Surprises
2. Rules for participating in the culture
3. Concepts that explain how the culture operates
4. Forces that shape the culture
5. Implications for understanding the phenomena being studied
6. How to improve the institution or service (e.g., strategies to improve the care provided in nursing homes)
7. Personal reflections on your experience as a participant observer--what have you learned from this experience about older people and the setting that they occupy?
8. Links to academic concepts related to the psychology of aging

Volunteer experiences are graded based primarily on the analytic portion of the paper.

**III. Thought Papers (5)**

In lieu of volunteer work, you can complete 5 thought papers around topics covered in class. On each week that you choose to submit a thought paper, it is due on Friday at 11:59 PM. For thought papers, you should pick a professional journal article that relates to one of the topics covered during the week. **You are only allowed to submit 1 thought paper per week.** Thought papers should be 1.5 double spaced pages. You should summarize the article, report on its findings and then provide a reaction to the paper. This reaction can be a critique, sharing what you learned, or what surprised you, etc. You can also incorporate information from current events, other research, and/or personal experience. Student are also encouraged to describe a future study that they would design as a follow-up to the study about which they read. Be creative!