

## Alternative assignment descriptions

### **News article reviews:**

Find and read a news article (not a news brief, editorial, commentary, etc.) that relates to the concepts of this course. It cannot be from a private web site without an editorial process. It must be published from the current academic term. See me if it is not.

When relating the content of the article to the concepts of this course, the article may not explicitly provide any relations. In this case, tell me what you think. Be reasonable. You don't have to be right, but be specific. There is no "correct" answer, yet this doesn't mean anything goes. You will have to justify your answer. Make sure you clearly identify the relations you are addressing.

Here are some news and science web sites. You can find other sites and links on my web site:

[www.abcnews.com](http://www.abcnews.com)  
[www.apa.org](http://www.apa.org)  
[www.apa.org/monitor/](http://www.apa.org/monitor/)  
[www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk)  
[www.cbs.com](http://www.cbs.com)

[www.cnn.com](http://www.cnn.com)  
[www.csicop.org/si/online.html](http://www.csicop.org/si/online.html)  
[www.herald.com](http://www.herald.com)  
[www.msnbc.com](http://www.msnbc.com)  
[www.npr.org](http://www.npr.org)

[www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)  
[www.projectcensored.org](http://www.projectcensored.org)  
[www.sciam.com](http://www.sciam.com)  
[www.theworld.org](http://www.theworld.org)  
[www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com)

Below is the format for the article review. Clearly identify each section.

- (0) Identify the source of information (publication, date, page #)--where can this information be found for anyone who is looking? Attach a copy of the article.
- (1) Briefly summarize the article--what is it about—what are the main points?
- (2) Identify a psychological concept from this course. Describe how the content of this article relates to the psychological concepts covered in this course. In the example below, it is about accuracy of eyewitness testimonies.
- (3) Describe some of the potential dangers of not recognizing, understanding or being aware of this psychological concept from #2. (If you cloned yourself at the beginning of the term, and your clone did not take this course, what difference in thinking or behavior would you two have?)
- (4) Describe how this issue relates to a second psychological concept (it may or may not be covered in this particular course). If this second concept is not from this course, you may need to explain it. If the issue is mostly about eyewitness testimonies, how is it related to something else, such as the availability or confidence heuristic.
- (5) Describe how the main point of this issue to a different issue or context. For example, if it a political issue, describe how it relates to health issues or economics.
- (6) Briefly, based on your reading and understanding of psychology, briefly provide some additional information about the issue that is not covered that would provide some depth or context of this issue or what are new questions that can be asked after reading this article (you don't have to answer these questions, just ask them).

### Source

[www.abcnews.com/sections/us/DailyNews/eyewitness\\_testimony.html](http://www.abcnews.com/sections/us/DailyNews/eyewitness_testimony.html) It's him--or it?, December, 2, 1999.

### (1) Summary

Another inmate has been freed after DNA evidence was used, which is a more reliable form of evidence than eyewitness testimony. In the 40 cases cited in this article, 36 were overturned with DNA evidence. This article describes some of the general problems of using eyewitness testimony such as confidence in the eyewitness's ability to identify and recognize suspects. Even though the witnesses are extremely confident in their ability to remember, eyewitness testimony tends to be very unreliable. In addition, non-verbal cues by officers may suggest a guilty individual, making eyewitness testimony not an independent form of evidence.

The article describes some methods of reducing errors in eyewitness testimony such as having a double-blind interview where the officer doing the interview does not know if the suspect is in the line-up and telling the witness the person may not be in the line-up. Even though this is necessary, many police officers are not aware of the cues they give to the witness regarding a suspect.

### (2) Relation to a psychological concept

In chapter 5 (Memory), we studied how memory works. Many memories are reconstructions of bits and parts of what we remember, schemas and stereotypes and how we are questioned about the memory. What we remember may or may not be exactly how it occurred.

### (3) Impact of not recognizing this psychological concept

Memory helps us in many ways. However, we need to know its limitations. Quite often our memory is correct, but in some instances it is wrong. An eyewitness is usually very confident in their ability to remember and recognize a person and details of a crime. However, confidence is unrelated to the accuracy of the memory. When the consequences of being wrong are high, we ought to be careful about relying solely on eyewitness testimony, overweighing eyewitness testimony, and ignoring other evidence.

#### (4) Relation to one other psychological concept (I provide more)

Availability heuristic--Psychologists have known about the limitations of our memory and the problems of being unaware of this limitation since Elizabeth Loftus did her well known experiment over 40 years ago at the University of Washington in 1974. Unfortunately, this limitation is not widely known, and not considered a problem because people cannot easily recall examples where misidentifications have put an innocent person in prison, been on network news, or in our educational curriculum, thus it is not memorable or available in our memory, and hence perceived not to be a problem.

Confidence heuristic--One of the ways we infer the accuracy or truthfulness of a statement is how confident the person is when expressing that statement--the more confident the person sounds, the more likely we will believe him or her. The less confident they sound, the less likely we will believe him or her. In some cases, eyewitnesses express undue confidence in their ability to remember specific details. When a juror hears a testimony, they are more likely to believe an eyewitness if they sound confident, rather than having some doubts about their ability to remember.

Other possible relations: Representative heuristic, schemas, hindsight bias, self-presentation, demand characteristics.

#### (5) Relation to other issues

While the original story is about eyewitness testimony, this could relate to interpersonal relationships. We may be confident in our memory of our past. When we hear another family member give a different story, it may be that one or both of us have imperfect memories. Instead of accusing the other person of lying, we should recognize that memories are not perfect and look for the possibility that one or both of us are not correct and look for independent evidence to support our memories. Without independent means to corroborate claims, the only means of assessing the accuracy of these memories is whether they sound plausible, or fit our prior beliefs.

#### (6) Information that would help provide a context or depth to this article

Psychologist Gary Wells notes that in more than 1,000 convictions of people who turned out to be innocent, the largest factor leading to these false convictions are eyewitness testimonies.

Although many people express undue confidence in their memories, there may be legal and social issues that encourage people to express confidence in their ability to remember accurately. First some people believe that the goal of a lawyer is to win the trial--not to uncover "the truth". This can mean that a lawyer will encourage a witness to be confident and elaborate on the reasons why they are 100% sure of their identification. After all, don't we pick lawyers who are win trials? Second there is a belief that a person with a good memory and does not question their ability to remember

is intelligent. Unfortunately, this is partially true. An intelligent person usually has a good memory because they can retrieve information and relate concepts. One who has good memory is not necessarily intelligent. Sounding confident makes us look better than we might be. In addition, one characteristic that differentiates experts and novices is the tendency for experts to question their own judgment.

Something to think about: Why do people believe eyewitness testimonies over DNA evidence, when DNA evidence is more accurate?

### **Identify applications and examples of the course:**

In this assignment, you will illustrate that you can relate this course to real life. To demonstrate you understand the concept and can see how it relates to the "real world", you will need to illustrate four things.

- (1) Identify the psychological concept from this course you are writing about.
- (2) Define and describe that psychology concept from #1.
- (3)
  - (a) Briefly describe an example of this psychological concept. Provide enough description and context to help the reader understand this example. Do not simply redefine that concept or use that concept in a sentence.
  - (b) Briefly explain why this is an example of the psychological concept you identified.
- (4) Briefly describe the importance of understanding this psychological concept. Describe the change in thinking or behavior now that you know about this psychological concept.

### **Example:**

- (1) Reinforcements and punishments
- (2) Reinforcements increase behavior and punishments decrease behavior.
- (3) Context of an example of reinforcements and punishments: I was listening to NPR last month and they were talking about the Super Max prison that is being build/just built in Wisconsin. The Super Max prisons are for the more violent criminals and will spend 23 hours a day in solitary confinement. This isolation is thought to be a punishment for the inmates who keep on creating "trouble", however trouble is defined. The only way to get out is through good behavior. The prisoners will be rewarded with the vague reward of getting out. Unfortunately, from the prisoner's perspective, they want is social contact with other people. In order to obtain this goal, the inmates will often be disruptive to get the guards attention. From the perspective of the guards, the prisoners are being punished—hoping to reduce disruptive behavior. However, from the prisoner's perspective, this social interaction is better than no interaction. The inmates perceive this interaction as their goal and achieved it. The interaction is not perceived as punishment, but a reward for them—it makes any type of social interaction more likely, which will unfortunately continue the cycle of disruptive behavior and solitary confinement.

This is a basic example of reinforcements and punishments. Although the guards perceive their actions as punishing, hoping to reduce bad behavior, the

inmates perceive the action as reinforcing. Their disruptive behavior gets them social interaction and hence will only act to increase their disruptive behavior.

- (4) Importance of recognizing this psychological concept: The Super Max prison seems like a good idea, but how it is put into practice will not be very effective in rehabilitating inmates because the inmates see their disruptive behavior as reinforcing, and hence increases that behavior. Without seeing the reinforcing nature of the inmates behavior, we will develop policies of rehabilitation that are not very effective, and in the long run can cost us more money, false beliefs about the motivation of criminals, and the nature of criminal behavior.