

# PSY 150

## Narrative and Cultural Psychology: Understanding the Arab-Israeli Conflict



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This course is specially constructed for an Off-Campus Programs Mayterm program to the Middle East (Israel, Syria, and Jordan) in 2009 led by Tom Fikes (Psychology) and Bruce Fisk (Religious Studies). Our intent is for this course to satisfy *the Thinking Globally* and *Competent & Compassionate Action: Communicating Cross Culturally* General Education requirement. In addition to Prof. Fikes' PSY-150, all students will also be enrolled in Prof. Fisk's RS 104: Jesus in the Gospels and the Land. Both courses are co-taught, with substantial overlap in readings to facilitate integration of material. RS 104 is being submitted for *Thinking Historically* GE category. Introduction to historical methods will further strengthen the cultural/narrative approach in the PSY 150 course.

### Synopsis

Cultural psychology is a branch of contemporary psychology that seeks to understand mind in the context of culture: mind and culture are co-constituted, co-determinative, and as such, understanding psychology from this perspective requires understanding culture. Narrative psychology is a closely allied field that studies the storied nature of psychological constructs: mind is constructed through narrative. The convergence of these two fields of psychology leads to the idea that mind is socially constructed, a notion at odds with all sorts of determinisms that have been prevalent in the history of philosophy of mind and psychology.

In this course, students are introduced to the basic principles of cultural and narrative psychology through selected contemporary and historically important readings. This approach to psychology is briefly compared and contrasted to other mainstream approaches, and is used as a framework for understanding the modern Arab-Israeli conflict in the Middle East. In addition to readings in narrative and cultural psychology, students will also read accounts of the conflict written from Western (American), Israeli, and Arab/Palestinian authors. While we are in the Middle East, students will continue to hear stories, both written and oral, regarding the issues surrounding Israel and Palestine. The explicit intent is to understand how Western, Israeli, and Arab culture is reflected in these stories, the ways in which these stories (and cultures) are similar, and the ways in which they differ. To this end, students will employ methods and concepts garnered from course readings in cultural/narrative psychology as they journal and discuss these stories. Discussions and course papers will center on the promise of such an approach to psychology for understanding and (ultimately) mitigating the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.

Because of the very limited time we will have together on campus prior to leaving for the Middle East, students will be required to read some of the material during the Spring 2009 semester prior to beginning of the course.

As a *Thinking Globally* GE course, we will take a comparative approach to understanding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, emphasizing the unique cultural lenses that Israelis, Palestinians, and other Middle-East people groups bring to the issues of land, religion, and regional politics. (Israel/Palestinian is an ethnic distinction; Jewish/Muslim/Christian divides the territory along religious and traditional lines).

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Through the analysis of written and spoken narratives, and through both formal and informal interaction with people in a variety of contexts Israel, Syria, and Jordan, we hope to contrast these various perspectives with the lenses that we ourselves bring (western media, Evangelical subculture). We will seek multiple perspectives within each ethnic/religious perspective, including Eastern, Armenian, and Coptic Christians, Zionist and secular Jews, and various traditions within Arab and Muslim traditions.

As appropriate for a *Competent & Compassionate Action: Communicating Cross-Culturally* GE course, we provide a variety of extended cross-cultural experiences, including home stays with Palestinian Christians in Bethlehem, Bedouin Arabs in Syria and Jordan, and Israeli Jews. The six weeks in Syria, Jordan, and Israel are explicitly designed to provide significant encounters with a wide variety of Middle Eastern people and cultures. Course assignments and experiences emphasize mutual understanding and appreciation, and the approach of narrative psychology invites and ensures meaningful dialog and seeing issues from perspectives other than our own. On-site assignments require collecting narratives from these diverse groups in face-to-face conversation throughout the trip, as well as regular group discussions surrounding these narratives and a final paper designed at understanding the various cultural-historical lenses through which these stories are constructed.

### Course Schedule

Prior to May 11	Pre-course readings
May 11 -15	Class meetings, readings, discussions
May 18 - June 21	Discussions and guest lectures in Jordan, Syria, and Israel
July 15	Final paper due

### Readings

**Burge, G.M. (2003). *Whose Land, Whose Promise? What Christians Are Not Being Told About Israel and the Palestinians*. Pilgrim Press.**

Shweder, R. A. (1989). Cultural psychology: What is it? In J. W. Stigler, R. A. Shweder, & G. Herdt (Eds.), *Cultural psychology: The Chicago symposia on culture and human development*, . New York: Cambridge University Press.

Schweder, R.A. & Sullivan, M.A. (1993) Cultural Psychology: Who Needs It? *Annual Review of Psychology*, 44, 497-523.

Ratner (1999). Three Approaches to Cultural Psychology: A Critique. *Cultural Dynamics*, 11, 7-31.

Markus, H.R., & Kitayama, S. (2003). Culture, Self, and the Reality of the Social. *Psychological Inquiry*, 14, 277-283.

Kitayama, S. (2002). Culture and basic psychological processes--Toward a system view of culture: Comment on Oyserman et al. (2002). *Psychological Bulletin*, 128, 89-96.

Ross, Mark H. (2002). The Political Psychology of Competing Narratives: September 11 and Beyond. In Craig Calhoun, Paul Price and Ashley Timmer, (eds), *Understanding September 11*. New York: The New Press, 2002, 303-320. (A shorter version appears on: <http://www.ssrc.org/sept11/>)

**Bruner, J. S. (1991). *The narrative construction of reality*. *Critical Inquiry*, 18, 1-21.**

Howard, G. S. (1991). Culture tales: A narrative approach to thinking, cross-cultural psychology, and psychotherapy. *American Psychologist*, 46, 187-197.

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Russell, R. L., & Lucariello, J. (1992). Narrative, yes: Narrative ad infinitum, no! *American Psychologist*, 47, 671-672.

Murray, K. D. (1995). Narratology. In J. A. Smith, R. Harré, and L. Van Langenhove (Eds.), *Rethinking psychology* (pp. 179-195). London: Sage Publications.

*Selected excerpts from:*

Chacour, Elias (2003). *Blood Brothers*. Baker Books.

Bruner, Jerome (1990). *Acts of Meaning*. Harvard University Press. (170 pages)

Buber, Martin (1923/1958). *I and Thou*. Translated by Ronald Gregor Smith. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons,

Vygotsky, L. S. (1962). *Thought and language*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Lakoff, G. (1987). *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal About the Mind*. University of Chicago Press.

Fadiman, A. (1998). *The Spirit Catches you and You Fall Down*. Farrar, Straus, & Giroux.

### Assignments

**Journal.** Students will be expected to keep a journal of their experiences, accurately summarizing the narratives they encounter and reflecting on them in light of the concepts and principles of cultural/narrative psychology. The journal is a common assignment to both PSY 150 and RS 104. Students will be encouraged to reflect on similarities between the 1<sup>st</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century worlds, integrating material from both courses with their experience on the ground in Israel and Palestine.

**Narratives** (from press, lectures, personal communication). Prior to the May 11-15 class meetings and during the class meetings and travels in the Middle East, students will collect a variety of news media stories from Palestinian/Arab, Israeli, and Western (American and overseas) news sources. During the trip, students will be exposed to lectures and discussions in a wide variety of formal settings (see WIME 2009 Proposal for a tentative list), and will be expected to interact with shopkeepers, home-stay hosts, and others in less formal modes.

**Presentations.** Students will make regular presentations to the rest of the group during the trip, sharing the narratives they collect and reflecting on the narrative structure of their own perspectives on self, culture, and the Middle East conflict. Discussions will be co-lead with one of the course instructors. Presentations will occur at regular group meetings (approx. 2-3 times per week).

**Paper.** Upon returning, students will be required to write a substantial (approx. 5000 word) paper reflecting on their experience and incorporating the themes and concepts of cultural/narrative psychology to compare and contrast the various narratives that they collected, and in turn to compare and contrast these with their own. The goal of the paper is deconstruct – and reconstruct – their own understanding of the Middle-East conflict, and explore the ways in which understanding the storied nature of self-construction might aid in understanding and moderating the conflict.