

# Behavioral Science and Public Policy

PPHA 31941

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This document provides a **high level overview** of the course. It is **not** the syllabus.  
Assignments and topics are subject to change before the start of the quarter.  
**Feel free to email me for a copy of last year's syllabus.**

## **COURSE OVERVIEW**

Many policies are aimed at influencing people's behavior. The most well-intentioned policies can fail, however, if they are not designed to be compatible with people's underlying motivations or cognitive capabilities. The objectives of this course are twofold: (1) to learn some of the psychological underpinnings of everyday decisions and behavior (and their implications for policy) and (2) become familiar with a range of behavioral interventions (including "nudges") that may be especially compatible with the way people think. The ultimate goal of this course is to prepare you – as future policy makers, program managers, consultants, and advisors – to be effective agents of change.

### **The course will address questions such as:**

- How might the way people process information affect their receptivity to new ideas?
- How might policies and programs be better structured to enhance their likelihood of uptake?
- What types of motivations other than economic incentives can be used to motivate change?
- What types of interventions can be used to "nudge" desired behaviors, in ways that are compatible with the way people process information?
- How can you be a more effective policymaker or advisor by being aware of your own expertise and the biases that accompany it?

We will explore these questions through in-class discussion, reading reflections, and written assignments.

The course is organized into two halves, each with two sections:

1. Understanding humans as information processors
  - a. Basic mechanisms
  - b. Types of information processing and common mental shortcuts
2. Exploring strategies to create supportive informational environments:
  - a. How to structure the environment to encourage desired behaviors (often through "nudges")
  - b. How to communicate information more effectively and persuasively.

The first half of the course focuses on how people process information – and in a sense, answers why we can't just "educate" people if we hope to change their behavior. The second half of the course explores ways that as policy advisors, we can structure the environment to be more supportive of desired behaviors and help people act on their intentions. Many of the

interventions we will examine may be familiar to you as “nudges,” although most existed in the psychological literature long before that term came to be!

**LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

At the end of this course, students should be able to:

1. Explain the processes and biases that underlie much of human decision-making.
2. Evaluate (and improve) existing policy interventions using psychological principles.
3. Understand and apply behavior change strategies to practical problems.

**COURSE FORMAT:**

Classes will be a mix of lecture and discussion focused on topics presented in the readings. You are *highly* encouraged to participate in class or via Canvas Discussion boards. The course is designed to be broadly relevant to policy, without delving into the specifics of any one policy area. You will get more out of the material the more you try to apply it to the topics of greatest interest to you.

**COURSE MATERIALS**

You can expect 2-3 readings per class. Starting in week 3, a select number of readings will be drawn from the one required book: Kahneman, D. (2011). Thinking, Fast and Slow. All other readings will be provided on Canvas.

Course topics at a glance

Wk	Topic	Topic
1	Course Overview; Our Ancient Brains	Mental Models: Basic units of cognition
2	Limits of Attention	Sharing Information I: Avoiding Overload
3	Sharing Information II: Challenges of Expertise	Thinking Automatically: Systems 1 & 2
4	Heuristics – the Big 3: Availability, anchors, and representativeness	Status Quo bias, Loss Aversion, & Endowment effect
5	Self-serving Biases: Confirmation bias, Motivated reasoning & Overconfidence	Habits, Temptation, and Self-Control
6	Behavior Change frameworks	Incentives & Extrinsic Motivation
7	Social Norms and Comparisons	Commitment and Planning Devices
8	GROUP PROJECT DAY	Reminders & Prompts
9	Persuasion	Emotional appeals; Course wrap-up

# Overview of Course Assignments

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## **PARTICIPATION & ATTENDANCE** (3%)

You are encouraged to participate in the course by offering insights, asking questions, and sharing relevant examples from your own experiences. Participation can happen in many forms, including by asking questions or making comments in class or by responding to others' comments and questions on Canvas discussion boards. The more you make an effort to engage, the more enjoyable the course will be.

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## **READING REFLECTIONS** (5%)

To help ensure quality class discussions, you are expected—five times during the quarter—to post a reflection on the readings (300 words max.) to Canvas **by 11:59pm the day before class.**

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## **RESPONSE PAPERS** (40%)

Over the course of the quarter, you will write two short papers (~900 words each) in response to a particular scenario or set of scenarios. The purpose of these assignments is to give you practice recognizing and applying insights from behavioral science.

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## **KEY CONTRIBUTOR/ARTICLE PRESENTATION – Done with partner** (15%)

Once during the quarter, you along with a partner, will present an empirical article that relates to the day's assigned readings. Since your classmates are not expected to read this article, your task will be to concisely and effectively communicate the main ideas in a way that your peers can easily understand. You and your partner will have eight minutes (total) to present the paper, explain how it relates to the day's topic, and share key insights. This assignment serves three purposes: (1) it provides the class with a concrete example of course concepts, (2) it gives you an opportunity to apply what you have learned about sharing information, and (3) it builds your familiarity with behavioral science research. For students with time zone conflicts, this presentation can be pre-recorded.

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## **BEHAVIOR CHANGE INTERVENTION – Group Project** (37%)

Everyone will take part in a group project (3-4 people) that will involve designing a behavior change intervention to address a policy problem of significance. Note – the focus is on individual-level change – not the behavior of organizations or institutions. Through a series of three assignments, you will: (1) identify a behavior to influence, (2) investigate potential motivations and barriers that are relevant to that behavior, (3) pitch an intervention strategy to your classmates, and, with their feedback in mind, (4) write a proposal for your intervention. These steps closely follow the process that behavioral science consulting firms use in their practice.