

## **CONF 320: Interpersonal Conflict Analysis and Resolution**

Mondays 4:30 – 7:10

King Hall, Room 210

Instructor, Dr. Steve Garon; email: sgaron@gmu.edu; (703) 284-6190 – I will respond to your email or voicemail within 48 hours

Office hours by appointment

### **COURSE DESCRIPTION**

This course explores a variety of theories, models, and frameworks for analyzing and resolving interpersonal conflict. We will begin by exploring the role of cognition in conflict and then focus on theories framing individual development, family relations, and social experiences early in life. Students will examine the various dimensions of one's self and social interaction that lead to interpersonal conflict situations. Students will have an opportunity to consider a range of possible interpersonal conflicts, their possible associated causes, and methods of inquiry that lead to resolution. Of equal importance, students will learn and practice skills for responding constructively to conflict and engaging in difficult conversations. Through analysis, exercises, and role plays, students will reflect on "who am I and what do I bring to this particular conflict?" and further, "what are my range of options to begin the resolution process?" Reflection is encouraged at both the individual level and the group (class) level to further develop skills.

### **COURSE MATERIALS**

#### **Required texts (available in the GMU bookstore):**

Stone, Douglas, Bruce Patton and Sheila Heen. Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most. New York: Viking, 1999.

Tavris, Carol and Elliot Aronson. Mistakes Were Made (but not by me): Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs, Bad Decisions, and Hurtful Acts. New York: Harcourt, Inc., 2007.

#### **Additional Readings (posted on the class web page on E-Reserve or distributed in class):**

Apatow, Robert. "The Classical Model of Dialogue" The Spiritual Art of Dialogue. Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 1998, 5-11. (distributed in class)

Anderson, Walter Truett. "Science and the Creative Brain" Reality Isn't What It Used to Be: Theatrical Politics, Ready-to-Wear Religion, Global Myths, Primitive Chic, and Other Wonders of the Postmodern World. San Francisco: Harpers, 1990, 55-71. (e-reserve)

Bohm, David. "On Dialogue" (Nichol, Lee ed) On Dialogue. London: Routledge, 1996, 6-15. (e-reserve)

Chesler, Phyllis. "Indirect Aggression among Girls and Teenagers" Woman's Inhumanity to Woman. New York: The Penguin Group, 2001. 78-123. (e-reserve)

Fisher, Roger and Alan Sharp. "Introduction" and "Getting it Done" Getting It Done: How to Lead When You're not in Charge. New York: Harpers Business, xi-13. (distributed in class)

Folger, Joseph P., Marshall Scott Poole and Randall K. Stutman, "Face-Saving" Working Through Conflict. New York: Longman, Inc., 2001. 155-184. (e-reserve)

Heifetz, Ronald A. "Values in Leadership" Leadership Without Easy Answers. Cambridge, MA: Bleknap Press, 1994, 13-27. (e-reserve)

Lakoff, George and Mark Johnson. "Concepts We Live By," "The Systematicity of Metaphorical Concepts," "Metaphor, Truth, and Action," and ""Truth" Metaphors We Live By. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980. 3-9, 156-166. (distributed in class)

Mullen, John D. and Byron M. Roth. "Psychological Impediments to Sound Decision-Making" Decision Making: Its Logic and Practice. Savage, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1991, 19-49. (e-reserve)

Sites, Paul. "Needs as Analogues to Emotions" (Burton, John ed) Conflict: Human Needs Theory. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990. 7-33. (e-reserve)

Tannen, Deborah. "Asymmetries: Women and Men Talking at Crosspurposes" You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation. New York: Ballantine Books, 1990. 49-73. (e-reserve)

Wilmot, William W. and Joyce L. Hocker. "Moderating Your Conflicts." Interpersonal Conflict, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2007, 210-242. (e-reserve)

## **Assignments and Evaluation**

George Mason University provides each professor discretion to determine +/- grades for the semester. My policy is that averages ending in 9 or higher will receive a "plus" score (e.g. 79 = C+) and averages ending in 0 or 1 will receive "minus" scores (e.g. 80 or 81 = B-).

### **Participation 20 %**

Because much of this course involves in-class, experiential learning, participation constitutes a significant portion of the course grade. Course attendance is expected and is a large part of your participation grade. *However, just showing up for class does not represent 'A' participation work.* Students are expected to show up on time for each class and stay for the duration, complete their reading assignments on time, and to participate in class discussions and exercises. Sometimes absence from class is unavoidable. If you know you are going to be absent, contact me in advance. Otherwise I expect you to be here.

### **Skills Contract Journal 10 %**

At the beginning of the course, students will be asked to develop a skills contract journal that highlights strengths they bring to the course, skills they would like to improve, and areas of interpersonal conflict communication/behavior/response they would like to have an opportunity to practice in class. Students will self-evaluate their progress at the end of the course. Specific instructions for this assignment will be provided in class.

### **Early Semester Essay 10%**

Students will be provided with an essay topic early in the semester that requires them to apply certain readings to a given situation. The purpose of this exercise is twofold: 1) to see how well students integrate readings and 2) provide students with a sense of my grading standards and expectations. Specific instructions for this assignment will be provided in class.

### **Mid-term Exam 20 %**

The mid-term exam will be an in-class essay exam containing interpersonal conflict scenarios and/or readings-or-class-activity-based questions to which students will respond.

### **Team Presentation 20%**

Students will partner with two of their peers to prepare a team presentation. The goal of the assignment is to review an interpersonal conflict scenario from a film or book and present an analysis and recommendations for possible resolution or prevention of the conflict. Presentations should last approximately 15-20 minutes and will be presented over the course of two weeks midsemester. Specific instructions for this assignment will be provided in class.

### **Final Exam 20 %**

The final exam for this course will be an in-class essay exam that emphasizes (but may not be limited to) application of information learned in this class to specific situations or scenarios.

\*\*\*\*\*Cell phones and Computers: As a courtesy to all, please keep cell phones OFF during class. Use of computers is not permitted as this course is experiential, requires full participation and class slides are provided for notes. Thanks for your cooperation.

### **Class Topics and Readings**

1/26 Introduction to the course/syllabus review  
Getting to know you  
Perspectivism and conflict theories  
Introduction to listening

Readings for 2/2:      Lakoff and Johnson  
                                 Anderson  
                                 Tavis: Introduction and Chapter 1

2/2 Cognition and conflict: selection and interpretation of information  
Cognitive dissonance  
Cognitive perspectives on interpersonal conflict  
Skills practice: listening

Readings for 2/9: Sites  
Wilmot and Hocker  
Stone: Introduction and Chapter 1

**Skills contract journal due in class (hard copy) on 2/9**

2/9 Basic human needs in the interpersonal realm  
Needs and emotions  
Skills practice: dealing with/receiving strong emotions  
Form groups for team assignments

Readings for 2/16: Stone: Chapters 2–4  
Tavris: Chapter 2

**Essay assignment: due in class (hard copy) on 2/16**

2/16 Personality and self-development: individual characteristics theories  
The development of social interaction – links between early social experiences and later social interactions  
Skills practice: confrontation and expressing emotions constructively

Readings for 2/23 Folger, Poole and Stutman  
Stone: Chapter 5  
Tavris: Chapter 3

2/23 Face and face-saving; mistakes and self-justification  
Interactional perspectives on interpersonal conflict  
Skills practice: analyzing interpersonal conflict situations

Readings for 3/2 Tannen  
Stone: Chapters 6–7  
Tavris: Chapter 6

3/2 Family structure  
Gender/roles  
Skills practice: analyzing interpersonal conflict situations; reframing

Readings for 3/16: Stone: Chapters 8–10  
Chesler

3/9 No class – enjoy your spring break.

3/16 Gender/roles continued

Theory mapping exercise (in groups)  
Skills practice: reframing  
**No readings for 3/24 – review for midterm exam**

3/23 Midterm

Readings for 3/31: Stone: Chapters 11-12  
Bohm  
Apatow

3/30 Language and communication  
Dialogue, discussion, and debate

Readings for 4/06: Tavis: Chapters 4-5

4/06 Class presentations and discussion  
Skills practice: negotiation

Reading for 4/13: Tavis: Chapter 7

4/13 Class presentations and discussion  
Skills practice: negotiation

Readings for 4/20: Fisher and Sharp  
Heifetz  
Tavis: Chapter 8

4/20 Leadership and problem-solving  
Group leadership exercise

Readings for 4/27: Mullen and Roth

4/27 Decision-making  
Group decision-making exercise

**Assignments for 5/04: Build individual concept map with concepts provided  
by Instructor – be prepared to share on 5/04**

5/04 Review and compare individual concept maps  
Wrap up: Assessing Interpersonal Conflicts, Theory and Approaches to Resolution

5/11 Final Exam

## ACADEMIC POLICIES AND INFORMATION

### Academic Honesty and Collaboration

George Mason University has an Honor Code with guidelines regarding academic integrity and which is designed, “to promote a stronger sense of mutual responsibility, respect, trust, and fairness among all members of the George Mason University community” ([www.gmu.edu/catalog/policies](http://www.gmu.edu/catalog/policies)). The Honor Code lays out strict penalties for cheating and plagiarism.

Plagiarism is a serious offense, and all written work for this course should include proper citations in a standard citation format (MLA, APA, etc.). *If you are unsure about how to cite a direct quotation or concept from course or outside readings, then ask for help.* “I wasn’t sure how to cite a source, so I left out the reference,” is not an acceptable defense for plagiarism. Copies of common style manuals are available at the GMU library reference desk.

For individual class assignments, you may discuss your ideas with others or ask for feedback; however, you are responsible for making certain that there is no question that the work you hand in is your own. You may not submit papers or presentations from other courses to fulfill assignments for this class.

For group class assignments, the names of all participants should appear on the work. While it’s fine for groups to divide project work among team members, the final product that’s submitted should represent a single, conceptually-linked piece of work. With rare exception, each student working in a group is given the same grade for an assignment. *If a group is having trouble with a member not fulfilling their work obligation, then the group needs to bring the problem to the instructor’s attention immediately.*

### Late Work

Class assignments that are submitted late will be penalized by one letter grade for each day they are late. If a student has a documented emergency, special arrangements can be made with the instructor.

### Paper Format

Papers for the course should be typed, double-spaced, have 1” margins, and use a common 12-point font. The pages should be numbered and stapled together. Papers should have a title, include your name and the instructor’s name, and consistently follow a single standard academic citation format (MLA, APA, etc.).

## STUDENT RESOURCES

### GMU Writing Center

“The Writing Center seeks to foster a writing climate on campus and beyond by offering free writing support to George Mason students, faculty, staff and alumni. No matter what your writing abilities are, writing specialists can help you develop the skills you need to become a successful writer. ...Free services include: One-on-one 45 minute sessions with a writing specialist; online writing lab; one-on-one sessions with an ESL specialist; workshops on such topics as documenting sources, grammar and punctuation; writing handouts on a variety of subjects; a library of handbooks and writing manuals; [and an] online chat with a

tutor about papers submitted to the Online Writing Lab” (<http://writingcenter.gmu.edu>).

### **Disability Support Services**

Any student with documented learning disabilities or other conditions that may affect academic performance should: 1) make sure this documentation is on file with the Office of Disability Support Services (993-2474) to determine the possible accommodations you might need; and 2) contact her or his instructor to discuss reasonable accommodations.

“George Mason University is committed to providing appropriate services and accommodations that allow self-identified students with disabilities to access programs and activities at the university as stated in Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990.

To achieve this goal, the university maintains and supports the Disability Resource Center Office which is responsible for assuring that students receive the services and accommodations to which they are entitled. The professional staff of the Disability Resource Center Office coordinate services for students with disabilities, determine reasonable services and accommodations on the basis of disability, and act as a liaison between students and faculty/administration on concerns relating to services and accommodations” (<http://www.gmu.edu/departments/advising/dss.html>)