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# Understanding and Defining Addiction in an Honors Context

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# Understanding and Defining Addiction in an Honors Context

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## INTRODUCTION

Exploration and development of identity, autonomy, sexuality, academic functioning, and peer relationships are important age-appropriate tasks of adolescence and emerging adulthood (Baer & Peterson; Cicchetti & Rogosch; Erikson). During college, this developmental stage may manifest as questioning prior beliefs and assumptions and exploring fresh philosophies and behaviors (Schulenberg & Maggs). Many emerging adults try out what they believe are different facets of adult life. Some of the requisite experimentation may include risk-taking behavior, including experimentation with alcohol, cigarettes, and marijuana (Baer & Peterson; Shedler & Block; Winters). College provides opportunities to experiment with potentially addictive substances at peer-run social events that often include alcohol and other substances (Schulenberg & Maggs). The combination of a mindset poised for exploration and a developmental period with enhanced opportunity for experimental behavior makes college a unique time to explore the high-risk behaviors that are prevalent within emerging adult communities. While large courses may usher university students through the research about what constitutes addictions, honors programs offer an invaluable resource for exploring more fully these value-laden, high-risk, and timely questions. In small, discussion-based honors classes, emerging adults are able to actively explore their questions, thoughts, and previous conceptions about addiction in a manner that would not be possible in larger classes. The students emerge from my 300-level honors class—titled “Yeah, I Like It, but I’m Not Addicted”: Exploring the Meanings and Consequences of Addiction—with a more thorough understanding of addiction as well as analytical skills that will help them navigate both academic and personal contexts in college.

## PROGRAM RATIONALE

### SELECTION OF THE COURSE TOPIC

As a clinical psychologist trained in addiction and pediatric health, I continue to be drawn to the parallels between substance use and other types of health-risk behaviors. In conducting clinical interventions for people struggling

with such behaviors as severe overeating or pathological undereating, I continue to notice that the relevant empirically supported treatments (ESTs) for these discrepant behaviors are almost identical. For example, across substance use, obesity, and eating disorder interventions, the ESTs include an identification of the function of the disordered behavior (e.g., “What are the things that you *like* about drinking?,” “How does drinking benefit you?”), a plan for replacing the disordered behavior with a more benign behavior that serves the same function (e.g., going to a non-drinking social event instead of a bar), and a plan for handling cravings and avoiding urges to engage in the disordered behavior (e.g., “What can you do instead of drinking when you feel you really *need* a drink?”) Over time I have found that these clinical parallels highlight a common pattern of behavior that is quite similar across substance use, binge eating/overeating, and eating disorders, all of which I see as *addictions*. The neuroscience literature has recently come to the same conclusion, suggesting that there are common neural pathways across these three types of addictive behaviors (e.g., Volkow & Wise).

The question of what other behaviors might belong in this paradigm continues to intrigue me. In particular, I have been drawn to the work of Jon Krakauer, who explores the stories of people engaged in a variety of excessive and somewhat fanatical behavior, including a death-defying journey to climb Mount Everest (1999), an excessively focused and extremely intense nomadic journey to an untimely death in Alaska (1997), and the violent behavior of a small segment of a zealous religious group (2004). A key question is how these different behaviors might fit a collaboratively generated definition of addiction.

### COURSE CONTENT

With the support of the University of New Mexico Honors Program, I therefore designed a course to collectively create, assess, and refine a definition of addiction and then to determine how a variety of extreme behaviors might fit that working definition. Specifically, the goal is to examine conventional addictive behaviors such as substance use, overeating, and undereating, and then to widen the definition of addiction in an open, supportive, curious, and non-judgmental manner. In the course, we explore a handful of potentially contentious behaviors such as obsessive involvement with the military and fundamentalist religions, including their confluence and consequences for events like 9/11. We evaluate whether discrepant behaviors are simply extreme or might be better defined as obsessions and compulsions; we question whether such behaviors are in line with the day-to-day typical behaviors of mainstream American culture or qualify as addictions. Some specific questions we address include: Can people involved in the military come to rely on its structure to the point where they cannot live without it? If so, does such military involvement qualify as addictive? Is involvement in a fundamentalist religious group that has limited and reluctant interactions with outside cultures dangerously in its singular focus? Is it potentially addictive?

The potentially addictive nature of military involvement and fundamentalist religions is unknown to me and to my knowledge is virtually unexplored within the social science literature. The goal for the class is to collaboratively generate and modify a definition of addiction based on readings and discussions throughout the semester and to determine how each behavior might fit the students' collaboratively determined definition of addiction.

While addiction is the explicit focus of the course, implicit goals are to develop and hone students' skills in critical analysis, communication of ideas (orally and in writing), and collaborative work. An ancillary, but important goal is to improve their ability to interpret and process social science research. To meet these ends, the class is conducted in a weekly or biweekly format within the sixteen-week semester. The units of the class (and syllabus) explore a series of human behaviors, e.g., "The way we feel," "The way we eat," "The way we look," "The way we believe," "The way we behave," "The way we live," and "Interactions and outcomes" (see Appendix). The first unit investigates the most basic, or at least the most well-known, addictive behaviors, substance use. Subsequent units explore behaviors that are progressively more distant from the commonly held definition of addiction.

In the first unit, the students generate their impressions of what addiction is and how it can be prevented and treated. We work together to generate an initial working definition of addiction, which is actively maintained by an appointed scribe from the class. Students then examine data from the sciences, social sciences, and epidemiology, and they read literature on each topic, giving them background materials to guide their understanding of each behavioral phenomenon that we explore. We discuss texts and supportive films, using the characters' experiences—fictional as well as nonfictional—to explore and evaluate what these behaviors might look like. I invite the class to wrestle with each behavior in order to modify their definition of addiction at the end of each unit and to determine if each behavior fits their definition. At the end of each unit, I ask the class to generate and explore potentially effective, as well as ideal but implausible, prevention and intervention strategies for each behavior. Whether or not they consider the behavior an addiction, this type of problem solving is a useful skill in cognitive development. Additionally, this component of the class demands creativity and becomes progressively more relevant to contemporary events as the semester continues.

The units of the course flow together in two ways. First, the class maintains a parallel structure for all units: (1) we begin with a working definition of addiction, (2) I present external foundational scientific, epidemiological, and/or current-events material, (3) we discuss the target behavior and the assigned reading, (4) we create an updated and amended definition of addiction, (5) we decide if the behavior fits the created definition, and (6) we explore potential prevention and intervention strategies for the behavior. Second, the progressive nature of the class contributes to the flow. As students gain more experience talking about basic addictions such as substance use, they develop a foundation

from which to creatively explore less conventional behaviors such as fundamentalist religions. By the last unit of the semester, the students proficiently toss around reasons to support and refute the fit of different behaviors within their definition and are able to support their arguments with biology, behavior, economics, and current events.

### WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS

#### SHORT PAPERS

Given my goals to include assignments and activities that support and promote diversity (Hu & Kuh) that have relevant, real world applications (Kuh, 1993) and that promote students' sense of self-efficacy (LaChance et al.), one assignment requires that students seek out Albuquerque area resources for a person struggling with alcohol or substance abuse or dependence (e.g., come up with a list of AA meetings with their times, and locations or create a list of area substance use providers, their cost, and the length of their wait lists). Following this assignment, I use class time to discuss the list of area resources. Very quickly, we discover as a class that there is a paucity of available and affordable resources for people struggling with substance abuse and dependence. The class then generates feasible as well as creative (potentially less tenable) solutions to this public health issue. Throughout this type of activity, I encourage students to use their areas of knowledge. I ask economics majors, for instance, why these resources are so expensive and what would happen if they were affordable. I ask anthropology and sociology majors how resources might vary in different cultures. I ask pre-med students what the greater health ramifications are of not receiving substance use treatment when needed. Similarly, in the overeating unit I invite students to obtain the ingredient list from their favorite fast-food or restaurant menu. I challenge students to identify community differences in, for instance, the prevalence of billboards advertising fast food and to notice differences in the number of fast food restaurants or Whole Foods stores by neighborhood. These assignments lead to compelling class discussions about the individual, public-health, and economic implications of healthy and non-healthy eating habits, and they provide a foundation for exploring how these various factors influence the class definition of addiction. For example, if fast food is the only food available to you, does eating it—potentially to the point of overeating—mean that you are addicted?

I also try to include several guest speakers, including a clinical psychologist to discuss the nature of eating disorders, another clinical psychologist to talk about the appearance and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and a lawyer to talk about the societal implications of extreme human behavior in the final unit of the class. For example, last year we were fortunate to have one of the lawyers for Terry Nichols (from the Oklahoma bombing case) talk about her perspectives on people who go to extremes.

My approach to in-class and small homework assignments is fluid and contingent on the skill level that I see during class activities. For example, if a class appears to have a difficult time finding resources in the community, I have them conduct this activity for *each* unit. If they appear to have difficulty hearing each other's perspectives, I require more group work and assignments. If they struggle with writing, I require more short papers.

### **SPECIALIST INTERVIEW**

Students select a target addictive behavior of their choice, a specialist who has expertise in that area, and a set of questions to ask the specialist; then they write a five-page paper. The paper must contain the questions they posed, the interviewee's responses, and the students' interpretation of that information.

### **RESEARCH PAPER**

The research paper, which is the most conventional assignment, offers students an opportunity to learn about scientific research through gathering the necessary scientific papers, to reading the research, and then processing, interpreting, and integrating this information into a research paper. Students are allowed to stay with the same topic they selected for their specialist interview or select a new target behavior. The paper should be a ten-page, double-spaced exploration of their target behavior and driving research question, in 2009 APA style. All students present their findings to the class in a five-minute overview and provide a one-page, double-spaced, bullet-point handout to their peers.

Because many students struggle with writing, I encourage them to have me review rough drafts and questions. I offer feedback on each step and/or draft if students want it. I also provide thorough and detailed feedback on each of their writing assignments, which student report that they get too seldom at this large university. In addition to in-class discussion of grammar, I provide students with writing resources such as *Writing Down the Bones* by Natalie Goldberg and *On Writing* by Stephen King.

### **COLLABORATIVE GROUP PROJECT**

Since collaboration as an essential component of most professions, I have students practice working together on an assignment that gives them an opportunity to be expressive in whatever medium is most comfortable for them. In the collaborative project, students apply their expertise from their major to evaluating an addictive behavior. As a group, they pick a target behavior, come up with a driving question to guide the project (e.g., why crack is more prevalent in one socio-economic group and cocaine in another), and then create a ten-minute presentation of their findings using the expressive format of their choice (e.g., video, mock debate, or diorama). As with research project, all students provide a one-page overview of their findings to their peers.

This project offers a nice opportunity to end the semester by supporting the students' sense of self-efficacy. Each student is a unique contributor in his or her area of study. Specifically, I compose groups of three from disparate majors, and each student hands in a signed sheet of paper that details how every student contributed to the group (e.g., John: 20% background lit review, 30% discussion of how to approach and create project, 50% assembling the project; 33% class presentation). I have been pleased with the results. Students have felt invested in the component of the project that they completed and tend to proudly report and display the area where they had the most participation.

### **PERSPECTIVE OF A TEACHING PROFESSOR (SARAH W. FELDSTEIN EWING)**

Teaching this class is the highlight of my professional year. The students in the UNM Honors Program are smart, hardworking, and thoughtful. They are also gifted in expressing themselves verbally and consequently excel in class discussions.

Through the experience of teaching this class, I have learned several practical as well as professional lessons. I have found that teaching the class twice (rather than once) a week makes a tremendous difference in the tenor and tempo of the class; it increases student participation (after an hour and a half, the ability of students to engage and participate is severely compromised) and level of collaboration (students who see each other more frequently do a better job of working together and being invested in the welfare of the group instead of being solely interested in their own grade and success).

I have also learned that, because each unit includes a text to guide the discussion and because some of the texts are content-intensive, having the class watch a film with parallel subject matter is beneficial. For example, during the overeating unit, we read Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation*, which includes a detailed history of the development of the fast food industry, and watch *Supersize Me* (2004).

A third important practical lesson for me involves the reading list. In the beginning, I used texts from a variety of fields, including the Alcoholics Anonymous *Big Book*, which details strategies for and stories of people who have struggled with and recovered from alcohol dependence, as well as Lawrence Wright's award-winning *The Looming Tower*, which provides a thorough history of key American and Al Qaeda figures as well as socio-economic and cultural events that led to 9/11. I found that students were more able to read deeply and process books that had more human perspectives and stories. Thus, I have replaced the AA *Big Book* with David Sheff's *Beautiful Boy*, a painstaking memoir of a father who struggled with his son's methamphetamine addiction, and Lawrence Wright's *The Looming Tower* with Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, a graphic memoir of her experience in the Islamic Revolution.

The professional lessons I have learned have shifted my teaching approach in this honors course and beyond. I have found that class discussions are critical, but, if left to their own devices, a few vocal students will monopolize class discussions for the full semester. To curb this pattern, I break the students into groups (with revolving members) and request that the quiet ones be appointed as ambassadors to convey the group perspectives to the class, thus yielding a diverse array of opinions, getting students to work with a variety of different people, and hearing the voices of the shy students.

Second, I have found that healthy debate is essential to exploring a topic thoroughly. Even when all students fall to one side or the other on the question of whether a behavior fits their definition of addiction, I divide the class into smaller groups and assign half of the smaller groups to argue the “pro” side and the other half to argue the “con” side. As the psychologists Miller and Rollnick have suggested, the act of arguing for one side or the other causes students to switch their beliefs and perspectives.

Third, even at a diverse university like UNM, diversity of race, ethnicity, culture, social and economic experiences cannot be guaranteed. In line with studies that have indicated the benefit and import of interactional diversity experiences in college classrooms (Hu & Kuh; Kuh, 1993), I try to develop proxies of such interactions. For example, in the unit on obsessive involvement with the military, I divide the students into groups and provide them each with a famous quotation; the students are required to determine what the other groups’ quotations are without using any type of word-based (written or verbal) communication. (They soon discover that they can draw pictures or pantomime). The goal is to see how different political and cultural influences might cause a culture to focus within itself and to misunderstand or fear other cultures when they do not speak the same language. The tenor of the class during this exercise is interesting; the more collaborative classes figure out ways to work with other groups while less collaborative classes try to compete with other groups. I continue to contemplate ways to improve group collaboration and cohesion.

## **PERSPECTIVE OF A PARTICIPATING STUDENT (BEVIN EHN)**

While extremely prevalent in university society, addiction remains relatively unexplored in college curricula. One of the few venues where students can explore this subject at UNM is the honors program—an arena where non-science students can explore scientific topics and where many non-traditional subjects are recognized for their societal relevance. In Dr. Feldstein Ewing’s course on addictions, students like me were given the opportunity to immerse ourselves in a journey toward greater understanding of the psychological, physiological, and environmental factors that characterize addiction.

When a complex topic such as addiction is the primary focus of an honors course, the course structure needs to make the subject accessible to students of

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varying educational backgrounds and personal experiences; to accomplish this, the professor structured the course so that students took an active role in learning through participation, enabling the learning process to revolve around the shared knowledge and experiences of the students as well as the expertise of the instructor. Active participation was additionally beneficial because the class was composed of students with different majors. As a student majoring in journalism and mass communication, I entered the first class having minimal knowledge of addiction and psychology. Instead of viewing such lack of background as an obstacle, Dr. Feldstein Ewing encouraged each of us to make the course material applicable to our specific interests by examining addiction within the context of our field of study. For example, when investigating food addiction for my research paper, I used my knowledge of advertising and mass communication to describe the role of the advertising industry in the rapid growth of the fast food industry since the 1980s. Channeling my interests into the study of addiction made the discussions, texts, and assignments have greater personal relevance.

Throughout the semester, assigned texts reinforced the focus of each unit by showing the effects of addiction through the viewpoints of fictional and non-fictional characters. When I was deciding which honors course to take, the reading list inspired me to pursue Dr. Feldstein Ewing's course among the dozens of honors course offerings. While a text such as the AA *The Big Book* was not surprising to see on the list, I was intrigued when I noted the unexpected titles of *The Looming Tower: Al Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* by Lawrence Wright and Jon Krakauer's *Under the Banner of Heaven*, the latter of which details the history of the Fundamental Latter Day Saints and the story of two brothers affiliated with this religion. I was curious about required readings on military involvement and fundamentalist religions that turned out to be the focus of the course, in which we evaluated the conventional definitions of addiction as a basis for determining the relevance of *unconventional* addictive behaviors.

The required films enabled us to experience a visual representation of each addiction topic. For example, after our unconventional unit on religion as an addiction, we watched the documentary *Jesus Camp (2007)*, which follows a summer camp for Evangelical youth. Similarly, after our unit on the military, we watched *Jarhead (2006)*, based upon Anthony Swofford's experience as a sniper in the Gulf War. The combination of documentaries and fictional films enabled us to see both factual and dramatic interpretations of each addiction, inspiring debate and discussion about the origin and potential prevention strategies for each addiction and preparing us for our course assignments.

The most important and challenging assignment of the semester was determining the definition of addiction. Although we learned various definitions of addiction through our initial readings and class sessions, we were assigned—as a class—to create an original definition that would guide our assessment of addictive behaviors for the remainder of the semester. In this democratic

process, my classmates and I selected various criteria for what we believed should define an addiction (i.e., addiction requires a loss of control over one's actions and involves behavior that is harmful to oneself and others). Creating and modifying definitions of addiction throughout the course was beneficial in recognizing the differences between addictions, compulsions, and extreme behaviors.

The class definition of addiction additionally guided our selection of research topics. Dr. Feldstein Ewing adopted an accommodating, yet structured, format for assignments wherein we were given the freedom to choose the area of addiction that interested each of us while maintaining high standards of formatting and accuracy in the execution of the assignments. The first substantial assignment was to interview a specialist in the addictive behavior of our choice and use this interview to write a report on the prevalence of the addiction. Dr. Feldstein Ewing challenged us in each of our following assignments, including a research paper and a collaborative group research project. Of all of the assignments I completed during my time at the UNM, the research paper was one of the most technical, in-depth projects I conducted. Research techniques and technical writing skills were a major focus throughout the semester, and writing the research paper enabled me to improve my writing and research abilities while researching a topic that truly interested me. The result was that I gained lasting knowledge and applicable research techniques.

This course offered several more benefits, the most significant of which was that it produced a meaningful change in my own attitudes and beliefs. The course material and subject matter were presented in such a way that I was learning about the reality of addiction and discovering ways to pursue and maintain healthy lifestyle choices. Specifically, reading Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation* changed my attitudes about behaviors toward food and addiction.

As with any course, some areas could have benefitted from improvement. I would have liked to delve more deeply into topics that were only briefly mentioned during class discussions such as the Internet, sexual activity, extreme physical workouts, and gaming. Several of the course readings were too time-consuming, although Dr. Feldstein Ewing's decision to replace Wright's *The Looming Tower* (the most technical, detail-oriented book on our reading list) with a more accessible book will make the reading list more feasible.

Intriguing, informative, and relevant courses such as Dr. Feldstein Ewing's encourage students who are not familiar with the social and behavioral sciences to learn about topics as relevant and meaningful as addiction—a subject all-too-frequently overlooked for its significance in the university setting and modern-day society.

## CONCLUSIONS

Several pedagogical lessons have emerged for me from teaching this honors course—lessons that influence how I teach all of my classes. In terms of best practices for teaching, a course design that requires active student participation

yields significantly more interested and engaged students. Not only is the class more interesting to the students but also to the instructor. Paralleling the work of Kuh regarding the importance of having students engaged in terms of academic and broader college success (Kuh, Hu, & Vesper), I have found that having students move around throughout a class period (e.g., get up to move into group discussions, write their perspectives on the board, and engage in interactive class activities) keeps students involved. Bevin Ehn's observations confirm the research by Kuh (1993) that shows classroom experiences to be the primary source of how students change during college; thus, I use the opportunity in this honors course (as well as other courses) to ensure that students have a sense of the real-world application of the topics studied in class. Finally, I have learned the importance of keeping students active and engaged by attending to their feedback, both provided (through course evaluations) and behavioral (are they slumped in their seats? watching the clock? texting under the table? smiling? participating? interacting with their peers?). Using this information, I will continue to draw on lessons from this honors course to adapt and modify my approach to classroom teaching both in and outside of the University of New Mexico University Honors Program.

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## APPENDIX

### SYLLABUS

What is addiction? Together, we will critically evaluate definitions of addiction (and relevant behaviors, and life choices), and determine what addiction means to us. My hope is that through this class, we will rid ourselves of conventional definitions, and come up with thoughtful, unanticipated, and original ideas about addiction.

In addition, in this class we will figure out how addiction affects people on an individual level (in terms of biology, physiology, day to day interactions), all the way to how it affects our society on a greater level (in terms of the environment, national spending, international relations).

Together, we'll also evaluate the prevention and intervention approaches that exist for different addictions, and how effective they are in preventing or intervening with addictive behaviors.

This is a collaborative, interactive class that requires critical analysis and thoughtful contributions. I anticipate fantastic thoughts and debate.

Here is what is required for the class:

#### Required Reading:

1. David Sheff, *Beautiful Boy*, ISBN-10: 0547203888
2. Marya Hornbacher, *Wasted: A Memoir of Anorexia and Bulimia*, ISBN: 0-06-018739-5
3. John R. Crawford, *The Last True Story I'll Ever Tell, An Accidental Soldier's Account of the War in Iraq*, ISBN-10: 1594482012
4. Jon Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven*, ISBN-10: 1400032806
5. Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation*, ISBN-10: 0060838582
6. Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis, The Story of a Childhood*, ISBN-0-375-71457-X

#### Required Films (not necessary to purchase):

1. *Crazy Heart* (2009)
2. *Super Size Me* (2004)
3. *Thin* (2006)
4. *Jesus Camp* (2006)
5. *Jarhead* (2005)
6. *Into the Wild* (2007)
7. *American History X* (1998)

Class Requirements and Related Grading:

1. Contributions to class seminars (25%)
2. One interview of a specialist on the addictive behavior of the student's choice (25%)
3. One research-based presentation (25%)
4. One interdisciplinary group project (25%)

Expectations:

*What I will expect from you*

- Appropriate and professional conduct
- Thoughtful, active, class participation
  - If you're shy, come see me and we'll figure out strategies to help you feel more comfortable participating in class.

*What you should expect from this class*

- You will gain practice and experience in:
  - Communicating your ideas verbally and in writing
  - Sharpening your critical thinking skills
  - Analyzing and communicating research findings
  - Collaborative working skills

*What you can expect from me*

- Fairness
- Academic rigor
- Accessibility—you can always see me with questions or concerns.

*Cell phone policy*

Absolutely no cell phones (texting or answering) permitted except in predetermined emergencies (to be discussed with me beforehand). Penalty for cell phone use is loss of participation credit.

*Absence policy*

No more than 2 unexcused absences without penalty in participation credit.

Our Semester:

**Act 1:** What is addiction?

**Act 2:** What are the consequences of addiction?

**Act 3:** How does addiction influence personal through global events?

**Act 4:** What are the individual through public policy prevention and intervention strategies that exist? How effective are they?

**Act 5:** Where can we go from here? Steps for the future.

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### Week by week (example):

1/20: Orientation

- What is addiction?
- Thinking about addiction from micro through macro levels

1/27–2/3: *The way we feel*

Reading: Beautiful Boy

1/27: xi–43

\* *Film: Crazy Heart*

2/3: 44–103, 561–566

2/10–2/17: *The way we eat*

Reading: Fast Food Nation

2/10: 1–10, 18–57, 59–88, 111–131

\* *Film: Super Size Me*

2/17: 132–190, 192–252

2/24: Talk with specialists due; presentation of findings in class

2/24–3/3: *The way we look*

Reading: Wasted

2/24: 1–144

\* *Film: Thin*

3/3: 145–289 \*Guest speaker

3/10–3/24: *The way we believe*

Reading: Banner of Heaven

3/10: prologue–226

\* *Film: Jesus Camp*

3/17: No Class—Spring Break

3/24: 227–341

3/31: Research presentations due; presentations of findings in class

4/7–4/14 *The way we behave*

Reading: The Last True Story

4/7: 1–146 \*Guest speaker

\**Film: Jarhead*

4/14: 147–220

\* *Be sure to watch Into the Wild in preparation for 4/21 discussion*

4/21: *The way that we live:*

*Discussion of Into the Wild*

4/28–5/5: *Interaction and outcomes*

Reading: Persepolis

4/28: 38–164; \*Guest speaker

\**Film: American History X*

5/5: 165—407

5/5: Presentation of interdisciplinary projects

