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Office of University Communications

September 11, 2012

Gardner-Webb Students Test Psychological Theories by Analyzing Real Cases

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C. – Shorter days. School schedules. Morning rush. Crisper air. Smells of fall. All are elements that can be associated with the day that changed America: September 11, 2001.

“I know there are people all over, especially in the New York area, that are feeling pretty anxious these days and they may not know why,” said Dr. David Carscaddon, dean of the School of Psychology at Gardner-Webb University. “But they are responding to a variety of cues that bring back memories of that day in 2001 when their world came apart.”

Carscaddon believes these environmental cues help explain feelings of uneasiness that can be related, even subconsciously, to traumatic past experiences. “Forewarned is forearmed,” said Carscaddon. “Once you understand how specific surroundings are affecting you, you can take the steps to get some counseling, or get support, or just take it easy on yourself.”

Psychology refers to it as the “classic conditioning” model, and GWU students often participate in classroom discussions that help them understand how various psychological theories apply to different cases, including 9/11 and other terrorist attacks. In recent weeks, dozens of people have lost their lives in shootings and mass murders all over the United States. Americans were gunned down in a crowded movie theater in Colorado. More citizens died in Texas when a shooter killed people at a university. A Wisconsin temple was the site of another shooting, resulting in more deaths. Carscaddon thinks these tragic events can help students better understand criminal profiling theories as they ask questions like ‘why?’ or ‘what could have caused this?’

“Looking at cases, and then determining how theory applies to those cases, can be really helpful to students,” said Carscaddon. “It helps them see what works and what doesn’t work. It teaches them to apply good reasoning and logic to bizarre situations and try to make sense of them as best we can.”

Carscaddon walks his students through elements of well-known cases, showing them how to properly examine the information from a variety of angles, often emphasizing commonalities between cases. “We find in a lot of these spousal or family shooting cases that a common thread would be that these people have experienced some sort of loss or great disappointment. In addition, they feel incompetent to do anything about it,” Carscaddon shared. “They’ve gone to the end of their rope and that level of desperation leads them to do something drastic.”

Much more information is still needed in the area of mass-murderer psychology, Carscaddon said. While some perpetrators of these horrendous crimes are motivated by an emotional loss, others are politically driven and seem to want to convey a moral outrage behind the action, such as the terrorist attack on 9/11.

“Those kind of events, you don’t get over. You get used to them,” reflected Carscaddon. “So as time goes on, you pick up new skills, you pick up new ways of adapting and coping with life. Time itself helps you learn how to get used to that tragedy and go on.”

Ultimately, tragedies can be at once universal and deeply personal. Carscaddon believes that with the right tools, no matter what the circumstance, people can recover. “We’re not alone,” he said. “We do nothing by ourselves.”