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Course overview

This course is designed for students who are interested in behavior change and wish to develop insights and skills toward influencing positive social policy. Given the increasing technological, environmental and personal complexity of modern life, people and societies are relying on social psychological principals for sophisticated methods to understand and improve social and professional functioning. This course will provide an overview of practical ways in which social psychological theory and research have been applied to understand and deal effectively with problems in everyday life.

In this course we will examine the major theories, methods and research findings in social psychology that have been part of interventions designed to improve people’s lives. We will focus on how well-intentioned ideas about changing behavior for the better require a scientific method of testing and experimentation in order to build psychological theory and enhance the effectiveness of interventions. We will also explore the many practical and ethical issues involved with altering social behavior on a large scale. We will touch on several topics that are deeply rooted in human behavior such as self-identity, social norms, stigma, belief systems and situational cues. You will read and discuss high quality research papers involving these topics in order to address current issues and problems such as conflict, race, authority, the environment, health and inequality. The primary idea of this course will be to better understand the social nature of daily life and the power of social contexts to shape our thoughts, feelings and behavior.

Course Goals

By the end of the course, students will be able to:

- Analyze historical and current trends in the application of social psychology to social change.
- Identify the major social psychological ideas that have been developed in the interest of social change.
- Differentiate among different methodologies for investigating psychological insights into social change.
- Generate ideas for new interventions or evaluations based on social psychological insights into social change.

(Use these skills in your final paper to ensure a successful finish to the course!)
Course Structure

Presentations
Discussion leaders
This course is reading and writing intensive. Students will sign up to be responsible for one week in the course when they will present to the class one of that week’s empirical papers (e.g. – a peer-reviewed research paper where data was collected, not a theoretical or review article). Presentations should include a 5 minute summary of the piece, a discussion of the paper’s strengths and weaknesses, and ways in which the reading relates or does not relate to other readings for that session or thus far in the course. A written summary (e.g. outline) will be posted on Moodle on the Sunday before the reading is to be discussed in class. This assignment counts for 1 of your reading responses – see below.

Students will also give a short 15-20 minute presentation of their final project during the last two weeks of the semester.

Reading Responses
Students are expected to read all of the required readings and to send in their reading response by 6pm the Sunday before the topic week. Weekly responses ensure students keep current, help the professor to anticipate confusion or questions for seminar discussion, and foster class community and discussion. (See below for a note on writing your reading response.) Students will submit 10 responses over the semester and are allowed to skip three weeks of their choice – although you will still be expected to be familiar with the reading and prepared for class discussion during the weeks you do not submit a reading response.

Each reading response should be no more than two pages in length (double spaced, 1 inch margins, 12 point font in Times New Roman) and posted to our class website (Moodle) by 6pm the day before class.

Writing Guidance:
Your response should only spend one or two sentences summarizing a take-away from the reading or set of readings. (I will allow you to write only about one paper, but I prefer that you bring more than one paper into play in your response.) Then you should immediately turn to discussing and analyzing the paper or papers’ points. “Discussion” can mean comparing or critiquing or exploring implications. You should avoid simply repeating material from the readings, and avoid obvious criticisms if possible. Your critiques may be original or you may include and reference outside critiques (including past readings we covered; it would be good, though it is not a requirement, to bring them into conversation with each other). Comments should be written in concise prose—that is, sentences rather than phrases or bullets.

To receive a strong grade, responses should display knowledge from the majority of the week’s readings, or should say something interesting or thoughtful about one in particular. How you organize your response is up to you, but the best strategy is
probably to have two to three clear, persuasive points or critiques, backed up with convincing argument or evidence. You will be evaluated on your ability to think and write clearly, creatively, and originally.

**Applied project**
Over the course of the semester you will work on a project in small groups (or alone if you insist) that explores ways social psychology can be applied to solve or at least better understand and deal with a specific problem in everyday life more effectively. You will work with two or three other students with whom you share a similar personal or professional interest.

I will send around a short survey for you to rank your interest the following areas:

Consumer Behavior, Clinical & Counseling, Economics, Education, Environment, Health, Law, Media, Politics, Sports Teams and Workplace

I will do my best to assign you to groups based on your preferred interests.

**This project is broken up into 5 stages and will involve the following:**

1. **Topic proposal** - 1 paragraph 10 points due Sep 20
   Identify a particular issue or problem in your area of interest that you would like to investigate and fix in some significant way. For example – social psychologists have used research findings to help people change behavior to encourage healthier habits, reduce crime, save money, preserve the environment, improve education opportunities, increase diversity and cooperation in the workplace and help sports teams win more games.

   You will start by briefly reviewing the chapter reading associated with your area that I will provide in a supplementary file on Moodle. You will write a short paragraph describing your personal interests and concerns in this area and mention at least one issue from the chapter that potentially could be addressed with concepts from social psychology. You will do this on your own and submit it to Moodle for me to review and grade.

2. **Background information gathering** - 1 page – 20 points due Sep. 27th
   Next you will meet with your group to share your ideas and concerns and come to some consensus about what particular problem you would like to focus on. Imagine that you work for a company or government agency that has asked your group to come up with a proposal to deal with this particular problem and will provide funds to test and implement the project - provided you make a strong case based on sound theory and prior research.

   Your task at this stage will be to find examples in the popular press about what has been tried before by others to address the problem. Specifically, you want to begin to identify strategies that have had some success but also look for descriptions of initiatives that
have been tried and did not work out as planned. Look online for professional organizations associated with your topic, journalists that have written about the topic – e.g. NY Times, blog posts, etc. Each group member must find and submit their own article and write a brief 1 page description sketching out how your proposal is taking shape at the group level. I will post more specific instructions on Moodle to help you think about and complete this phase.


The main task at this stage of the project will be to research how social psychologists have tested different ideas that are relevant to your problem. Here you will describe specific peer reviewed research that will inform and justify your final proposal.

Specifically, each group member will find and summarize 2 peer reviewed research articles that address the issue/problem you are working on in your group. You then will sketch out a strategy for fixing the problem. You should base it on some of the information in these articles as well as what you may have learned from your background paper.

Detailed instructions and examples will be posted on Moodle. There will also be time devoted in class to discuss your ideas and plans with your group.

4. Final Applied Paper, 8-10 pages, 40 points due Dec 1st
5. Project Presentation 15-20 minutes in class, 25 points Dec 4th -13th

Grades

Final grades are made of weekly responses (40%), the applied project (40%), and class presentation and participation (20%).

Class Schedule and Readings

Reading schedule is tentative, subject to change, and open to discussion

Selected chapters from the following books


Week 1: Sept 6th: Overview and historical perspective

Inside the nudge unit: Chapter 1


**Week 2: Sept. 11th : Modern perspectives**

*Redirect*. Chapters 1 and 2.

*Nudge*. Chapter 1.


**Week 3: Sept. 18th : Stereotype threat, self-affirmation, and belonging**


**Week 4: Sept. 25th : Mindsets**


**Week 5: Oct. 2nd : Consistency and expectations – Cognitive dissonance**


**Week 6: Oct. 9th: Stereotypes and stigma**


**Week 7: Oct. 16th Social Norms**

*Nudge*, Chapter 3.


**Week 8: Oct. 23rd Social Norms – toward sustainability**
We recommend reading Chapter 7 of the text.


**Week 9: Oct. 30th Nudge, choice architecture, and defaults**

*Nudge*, Chapters 4, 5, and 17.


**Week 10: Nov. 6th Health**


**Week 11: Nov. 13th Mindfulness**


**Week 12: Nov. 20th Emotion**

Redirect, Chapter 3.


**Week 13: Nov. 27th Violence and law enforcement**


**Week 14: Dec. 4th**

Presentations

**Week 15: Dec. 11th**

Presentations