Why Good People Do Terrible Things

PSY 400, 3 credit hours
Spring Semester, 2015
Monday, 3:45 – 6:30, 103 Huntington Hall

Professor: Leonard S. Newman
Office: 515 Huntington
Phone: 443-4633
Email: lsnewman@syr.edu
Office hours: Wednesday 2:30-3:30, and by appointment

Readings

There is no textbook for this course. Readings will be distributed in class or posted on Blackboard

Prerequisites and other guidelines

Students should already have credit for either PSY 205 (Foundations of Human Behavior) or PSY 209 (Foundations of Human Behavior, Honors section).

Please turn off all phones and beepers before class begins—or set them to “vibrate” if you need to be available for urgent calls. And other than emergencies, please no texting in class!

If you believe that you need accommodations for a disability, please contact the Office of Disability Services (ODS), http://disabilityservices.syr.edu/, located at 804 University Avenue, Room 309, or call 315-443-4498 for an appointment to discuss your needs and the process for requesting accommodations. ODS is responsible for coordinating disability-related accommodations and will issue students with documented disabilities “Accommodation Authorization Letters,” as appropriate. Since accommodations may require early planning and generally are not provided retroactively, please contact ODS as soon as possible. You are also welcome to contact me privately to discuss your academic needs although I cannot arrange for disability-related accommodations.

The Syracuse University Academic Integrity Policy holds students accountable for the integrity of the work they submit. Students should be familiar with the Policy and know that it is their responsibility to learn about instructor and general academic expectations with regard to proper citation of sources in written work. The policy also governs the integrity of work submitted in exams and assignments as well as the veracity of signatures on attendance sheets and other verifications of participation in class activities. Serious sanctions can result from academic dishonesty of any sort. For more information and the complete policy, see http://academicintegrity.syr.edu
Students who are interested in getting extra help with the course material are encouraged to make use of the services provided by the Tutoring Center at www.tutoring.syr.edu.

Course Overview and Objectives

It is tempting for people to distance themselves from evil behavior, and it is easy to conclude that terrible things are done by terrible people who share nothing in common with “us.” In this class, however, we will review research and scholarship on the ways in which otherwise ordinary people come to tolerate, justify, and participate in behavior that would ordinarily violate their moral standards. Research in social psychology will be emphasized, but readings will be drawn from a variety of sources. Concrete real-world examples to be discussed in class will also represent a wide range of contexts in which reprehensible behavior can occur—wartime, civil disorder, educational settings, the business world, families, athletic competition, etc. Genocide will play a particularly large role in our readings and discussions.

Students who complete the course will become familiar with some of the core conceptual approaches to understanding how people—including themselves—who might otherwise appear to be ordinary, decent human beings could engage in moral transgressions and play a role in the victimization of others.

Course Requirements

Attendance will be taken and is necessary to keep up with course material. Keeping up with the readings is also essential.

On at least 4 days (TBA), a two-page long reflection paper, derived from the assigned readings and on a topic or topics to be announced in advance, will be due at the beginning of class. Papers should be double-spaced, in 12-point font, with “normal” margins. Scoring of these papers will be based on content and the quality of the writing.

Twice during the semester, you will take a quiz (multiple choice and short-answer) on the material covered during the preceding weeks of class. The final will be a short-answer test.

Final grading

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Course Outline and Assignments

The following sequence of topics and specific readings is subject to change. Readings are to be done before the class for which they are assigned.

Week 1, January 12: Class Introduction

NO CLASS WEEK 2, JANUARY 19 (MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. DAY)

Week 3, January 26: “Bad” people?

Readings:


Week 4, February 2: Doing nothing can also be terrible: Bystanders, Pluralistic Ignorance, and Psychic numbing

Readings:


**Week 5, February 9: They made me do it: Basic social influence**

**Readings:**


**Week 6, February 16: Movie, “The Fog of War”**

**Week 7, February 23: Rationalization, justification, and the slippery slope**

**Readings:**

Tavris, C. & Aronson, E. (2007). *Mistakes were made (But not be me).* (Chapter 1). Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt


**Week 8, March 2: Dehumanization (AND QUIZ 1)**

**Readings:**


NO CLASS MONDAY, MARCH 9, (SPRING BREAK)

Week 9, March 16: Labeling and action identification: are you advancing your career, scheduling trains or sending people to their deaths?

Readings:


Week 10, March 23: Movie, “The smartest guys in the Room”

Week 11, March 30: “I” didn’t do it: Deindividuation and the assembly line of evil

Readings:


Week 12, April 6: Are we letting terrible people off the hook?

Readings:


Week 13, April 13: QUIZ 2—and movie, “Hotel Rwanda”

Week 14, April 20: Can terrible people do good things?

Readings:


Week 15, April 27: Short answer final