THE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF GENOCIDE AND MASS KILLING

PSY 775 (M002), Seminar in Social Psychology, Fall, 2007
Tuesday, 9:30 –12:15, Huntington Hall, 530C (The Allport Room)

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Course Overview and Objectives

The last century was called “Age of Genocide” by some observers. Not surprisingly, organized mass murder has already been the subject of quite a bit of scholarly inquiry. Over the past decade or so, however, public discussion of mass murder and genocide might actually have increased. The prominence of the topic is due in part to a number of tragic events in the world (e.g., the killings in Bosnia and Rwanda and the ongoing tragedy in Darfur). In addition, a few books on the topic (e.g., Daniel Goldhagen’s *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, Jan Gross’s *Neighbors*, Iris Chang’s *The Rape of the Nanking*, and Phillip Gourevitch’s *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will be Killed With Our Families: Stories from Rwanda*) received a great deal of media attention and inspired quite a bit of public debate. Curiously, though, social psychologists have not played a particularly prominent role in this debate.

The silence of social psychologists is ironic, because as
discussed by Ned Jones in his classic 1985 *Handbook of Social Psychology* chapter on the history of the field, for many years the research agenda of social psychologists was profoundly influenced by the mass killings of Jews and other groups during World War II. Many classic programs of research (e.g., Stanley Milgram’s obedience studies, Adorno et al.’s work on the authoritarian personality) were launched in order to shed light on the behavior of the perpetrators of the Holocaust. In recent decades, though, why people might become perpetrators of genocide has not been so obviously an important issue for social psychologists. That is unfortunate, because among social scientists, social psychologists would seem to be especially well-positioned to shed light on the processes that lead individuals and groups to become mass murderers. Typical definitions of social psychology are usually very similar to the one offered by Brehm and Kassin (1996, p. 6), who stated that social psychology is “the scientific study of the way individuals think, feel, desire, and act in social situations”. One would hope, then, that social psychological principles could be applied to the thoughts, feelings, desires and actions of people in social situations involving the systematic murder of other human beings.

The premise of this class is that social psychologists do in fact have a great deal to offer to people seeking a way to make sense of the behavior of people who plan, participate in, or passively observe genocide. Many of the assigned readings will be from the social psychological literature, and very often, they will not directly concern genocide. By the end of the semester, though, it is hoped that class members will have an appreciation for how the psychological processes covered in those readings might play a role in the horror and evil of genocide.

**Course Requirements and Grading**

As in all of your graduate classes and seminars, the most basic
course requirement is attendance and participation (20% of the final grade). To contribute to the discussion in a meaningful way, you will need to do the assigned readings before the class for which they are assigned. Readings will be made available (at least a week in advance) on-line via the class’s Blackboard site. At least once during the semester, each student in the class will do an extra reading (in addition to the ones assigned to everyone) and summarize it for the class.

Students will be required to write two papers. One of these will be an 8-10 page paper on a course-relevant topic of the student’s own choosing (40% of the final grade). The topic must be selected and approved by the instructor by the end of Week 11 of the semester and it is due on the last day of the Fall 2007 semester. In addition, during the class meeting, each student will prepare a 10 to 15-minute long class presentation on his or her topic.

As noted above, by the end of the semester students should have developed an appreciation for how social-psychological processes can be used to explain the planning, initiation, and maintenance of genocide. Another goal of this course is to enhance your ability to share that appreciation with non-psychologists. Therefore, as a second writing assignment, students will write 750-word (newspaper editorial length) essays focusing on one of the social-psychological processes or variables covered in the course. These essays should make the case that these concepts or phenomena shed light on the causes of genocide, and they should be written with intelligent laypeople as the intended audience.

Summary of grading:

1. Quantity and quality of class participation 20%
2. Coverage of extra
 Students with disabilities who require accommodations for access and participation in this course should inform the instructor and consult with the Office of Disability Services (ODS). Please contact ODS at 315/443-4498 (voice) or 315/443-1372 (TTY).

**Course Outline and Reading Assignments**

**Week 1 (August 28): Introduction**


**Week 2 (September 4): Justification and the continuum of destructiveness**

(Or—The first few steps are the most important ones)
you’ll ever take)


Week 3 (September 11): Conformity, pluralistic ignorance, and the role of bystanders

(Or—Don’t underestimate human decency—but don’t overestimate how difficult it is to express it)


**Week 4 (September 18): Crises and scapegoats**

*(Or—Scapegoats always seem plausible)*


Week 5 (September 25): Individual differences: Is there a “genocidal personality”?

(Or—Normal people become perpetrators)


**Week 6 (October 2): Are there genocidal cultures?**


**Week 7 (October 9): Film, “The Architecture of Doom”**

**Week 8 (October 16): Obedience**

(Or—Okay, so the Milgram Experiment does not resemble
Auschwitz, but…)


Week 9 (October 23): Film, “Hotel Rwanda”

Week 10 (October 30): Genocide, human nature, and evolutionary psychology

(Or—Is genocide inevitable?)


**Week 11 (November 6): “Losing oneself” – Roles, deindividuation, and strong situationism**


Week 12 (November 13): The aftermath: Lying, distortion, collective guilt—and reconciliation


**Week 13 (November 20): Do social psychological explanations condone perpetrators?**


**Week 14 (November 27): Heroic helpers and resisters—the continuum of benevolence?**

To be shown in class (brief film): “Defying genocide: Choices that saved lives”


SUPPLEMENTARY EVENT:

**Robert Koolakian**
Tuesday, November 27
4 p.m.
Peter S. Graham Scholarly Commons, E.S. Bird Library, First Floor

**Week 15 (December 4): Presentations, discussions of final papers**