

The Social Psychology of Behavior in Organizations

Course Details

PPHA 33520

The University of Chicago

Harris School of Public Policy

Classroom: 289A

Times: Monday, Wednesday, 1:30pm – 3:50pm

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Office Hours: By Appointment

Course Description

Understanding others' thoughts and behaviors is essential for professional and personal success. We all do our best to understand our co-workers and significant others on a daily. Most of us do so by putting on the cap of an “intuitive scientist.” In other words, most of us rely on our intuitions to identify others' thoughts and motivations and to predict others' behavior.

Unfortunately, decades of psychological research suggest that our intuitions are often misguided in systematic ways. This course will enable you to have a more accurate understanding of others' motivations, feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. In short, this course will teach you to think like a “psychological scientist” rather than an intuitive scientist, and give you an understanding of when your intuitions about others are likely to be reliable and when they are not.

This understanding is important to have because managing other people—be they competitors, customers, or co-workers—is critical for professional as well as personal success. At the start of your professional career, success may have required simply having the necessary technical expertise to produce excellent work product for your organization. As you progress in your career, however, success will increasingly require you to manage groups of people, to align their skills, solve interpersonal problems, and create well-functioning teams. This course is intended to provide the scientific knowledge of human thought and behavior that is critical for successfully managing others, and also for successfully managing yourself.

Course Format

This course will oscillate between lectures, discussions of scientific articles, complex simulations of managerial cases, and in-class demonstrations of classic experiments in

psychology. The goal is to teach you the theory and enable you to see the complexities involved in putting theory to practice. The course has five components.

1. Class participation

Some segments of the course will thrive if you actively participate in discussions. These include discussions of scientific articles, discussions of in-class demonstrations of classic psychology experiments, and managerial cases. Come prepared to provide your educated opinion on the issues we discuss, having done the readings and thought about the insights you can bring to the table to benefit your classmates.

2. Readings

Some of the readings will be scientific articles published in the last 25 years. These will provide empirical findings about basic psychological processes and enable you to gain expertise in how to think about managing others. Another type of readings will be “how to” articles that provide prescriptive advice on how to and how not to manage others.

3. Managerial Cases

This course will feature several cases that involve role-playing on your part in trying to solve managerial problems. A “case” is a simulation of a problem that managers have had to face in real-life. A case will provide you with the necessary information to tackle this problem, and will ask you to provide a thought-out recommendation of what to do. You may attempt to rescue an organization from decline or help an organization reach the best decision. These cases will involve preparation before class and in-class work and discussion in attempt to solve the organizational problem at hand. Before each case, you will submit a memo that outlines your recommendation to the organization and your reasons for it. I will use these recommendations to structure an effective discussion in class that will focus on fleshing out everyone’s thought about the problem at hand. At the end of the case, I will lead a discussion that focuses on the important “take-aways” from the simulation. These cases will help you understand how to put theory into practice in solving organizational problems.

4. Midterm Assignment

The midterm assignment is meant to instill a scientist’s approach to learning about social psychology. This course lasts approximately 3 months whereas you will have to successfully manage others throughout your professional life. Therefore, you are tasked with acquiring knowledge and insight about social psychology for a much longer period than this course. Therefore, the midterm assignment will ask you to collect several scientific articles in a psychological topic that interests you, and create a 3-page memo that summarizes and synthesizes insights from these articles. The goal is to familiarize you with searching and evaluating empirical evidence from psychological research, so that you can do this whenever you encounter gaps in your knowledge about management and social interactions in your professional life.

5. Final Paper

The final paper will ask you to analyze a real organization that you have had experience

with. This analysis should focus on strengths and weaknesses in the organization, and must offer an experiment or experiments to run in the organization to glean important information about it or to improve an important aspect in it (you will learn what an experiment is and what it is not during this course). The final paper can be prepared individually or in groups of up to 3 people.

In writing the final paper, be sure to demonstrate your knowledge of relevant concepts, theories, and frameworks presented in this course. Your individual or group paper should also provide enough information about the organization you are researching to enable the reader to understand the issues involved. Be sure that you explain the impact that selected course concepts have had on your thinking about the situation you have chosen to write about. Papers will be graded on several factors including creativity, the use of psychological theory and class material, insight, presentation, and providing a coherent and well-structured experiment.

Grade Breakdown

Class Participation 25%

Case Memos 25%

Midterm Assignment 25%

Final Paper 25%

Pedagogical topics to be covered in the course:

Designing experiments in organizations

The power of social situations in creating human behavior

How we form impressions of others

How we form impressions of ourselves

(In)Accuracy in our impressions of others

(In)Accuracy in our impressions of ourselves

Biases in information processing

Biases in decision-making

Causes of ethical and unethical behavior

How beliefs can create reality

Motivation

Group decision-making

Passive influence—culture, commitment, and norms

Active influence—persuasion

Prosocial behavior and cooperation