

Special Topics in Psychology: Existential Social Psychology (830:457:A3) Summer Semester

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Course Description and Goals

This class is designed to offer students an introduction to the growing field of existential social psychology. Existential social psychology uses rigorous scientific methods to investigate how people deal with BIG questions about existence, such as: “Who am I?”, “What’s my purpose in life?”, “What happens when life ends?”, “How do I relate to other people and nature itself?”, and “Why do I believe in things I can’t see, touch, or verify?”. We will start by learning about psychological theories that look to answer these existential questions and review research that provide support for these theories. We will also discuss the implications of these existential concerns for psychological health and well-being, as well as connect theory and research on existential social psychology to real-world social issues like prejudice/discrimination, ideological conflict, and terrorism/extremism. The goals of this class are as follows:

1. Students will be able to define key existential social psychological theories.
2. Students will demonstrate understanding of existential social psychological theories and concepts by being able to explain theories and important theoretical concepts in their own words.
3. Students will describe and critique research supporting theories in existential social psychology.
3. Students will interpret the significance of existential social psychology for psychological health and well-being.
4. Students will apply existential social psychology theory and research to understand real-world social issues.

Communication

I want to help you succeed in this course and do the best that you can! Please don’t hesitate to reach out to me throughout the semester with any questions or concerns you may have. It’s a good thing to ask for help—it means you’re paying attention and you know what you need—and you are not bothering me.

Please direct all general course questions to the “General Course Questions” discussion board in Canvas (available in the Course Essentials module). Check both the syllabus and the discussion board before asking a question. Personal questions regarding grades or individual assignments should not be addressed in Canvas; please email me these questions. Depending on when you send your email, you can expect a response:

- Monday-Friday: within 24 hours (if between the hours of 8am and 5pm, it will likely be sooner).
- Weekend emails: I’ll respond within 48 hours.
- Emails received between 5pm and 7am will likely not be addressed until the morning.

If you do not receive a response from me within the above listed time frame, please send the email again.

Office Hours

Office hours will be by appointment online and usually need at least a 24-hour notice. We can meet via web conference (using Webex). If you’d like to request an appointment, email me.

What You Can Expect from me in this Course

I strongly believe in empowering students to reach their academic potential and career aspirations. In other words, I am invested in your success. I view my role as an instructor is to support your learning efforts, rather than giving you the answers. ALL students face challenges in route to a college education. Whether medical, personal, or financial, unforeseen events can be distracting and/or get in the way of academic success. If life events get in the way of your ability to complete coursework, please reach out to me before you miss deadlines, rather than after. You do not need to have a documented excuse and/or disclose any information you do not feel comfortable sharing. Simply shoot me a quick email that you are facing challenges and we can begin working on a plan to help you succeed in the class. Moreover, I generally want to help make sure that everyone is on track and making progress in the course. To support your efforts in the course can expect me to:

- Communicate with the whole class using Announcements in Canvas 1-2 times a week to review progress and reminders. Please make sure your [Canvas Notifications](#) are set to alert you to new Announcements immediately.
- Provide personal feedback on your major assignments in a timely fashion (usually within a week of submitting) to help you improve or continue to do well in the course.
- Respond to all of your email communications with me based on the communication guidelines above.
- Reach out to you—multiple times if needed!—if I notice that you’re falling behind or seem to be struggling. I want to help you succeed.
- Encourage you to strive for better and congratulate you on your achievements. I’m excited for us all to learn together.

Required Readings

Required readings are review articles published in psychology journals and book chapters from edited volumes. All required readings are provided for students to download from the course Canvas Page. There will generally be two articles per module.

Online Format and Condensed Summer Schedule

This course offers readings, lecture material, frequent assessments, and online activities, including active discussions and exercises. There are no scheduled meeting times, but deadlines are strictly enforced, as students work together to achieve learning objectives. The class follows a rigorous schedule and you should expect to be working at least as many hours as with a traditionally-scheduled class. Plan to log into Canvas and work almost every day, as we complete a semester's worth of learning activities in just a few weeks. As much as possible, we will try to stick with a consistent schedule during the week. Below is the complete calendar for the course.

Week 1						
M	Tu	W	Th	F	Sa	Su
Module 1: Intro to existential social Psychology			Module 2: Terror management theory			
Complete Readings, and view lecture		Reading Annotations Due	Complete Readings, and view lecture, Watch Video		Reading Annotations Due	
	Discussion Post Due	Reply to a Classmate		Discussion Post Due		Reply to a Classmate
Week 2						
M	Tu	W	Th	F	Sa	Su
Module 3: The meanings of life			Module 4: The Self			
Complete Readings, and view lecture		Reading Annotations Due	Complete Readings, and view lecture		Reading Annotations Due	
Real World Application Assignment 1 Due	Discussion post Due	Reply to a Classmate		Discussion Post Due		Reply to a Classmate
Week 3						
M	Tu	W	Th	F	Sa	Su
Module 5: Mental time travel			Module 6: The need to belong			
Complete Readings, view video, and view lecture		Reading Annotations Due	Complete Readings, and view lecture		Reading Annotations Due	
Real World Application Assignment 2 Due	Discussion post Due	Reply to a Classmate		Discussion Post Due		Reply to a Classmate
Week 4						
M	Tu	W	Th			
Module 7: Faith and Religion			Final Exam due by 11:59 pm			
Complete Readings, view video, and view lecture		Reading Annotations Due				
Real World Application Assignment 3 Due	Discussion post due	Reply to a Classmate				

Assessment

There are a lot of assignments in this course, and you're expected to engage with the content frequently because engagement and application are how we learn best. As long as you are putting forth your best effort and communicate with me when struggling, you should be able to succeed in this course.

Activity type	Percent
Online Discussion	21%
Reading Annotations	14%
Weekly Assignments	30%
Final Exam	35%
	100%

Assignments

Readings and reading annotations: Each module will contain two readings. Students are to read each reading and use Hypothesis social annotation tool to write notes, comments, and/or ask questions about the readings. Students are required to add 1 annotation to each reading for each module, although they are welcome and encouraged to write more than 1 annotation.

Online Discussion Posts and Replies: The discussions will take place within the *Discussions* tool on Canvas. The purpose of the discussions are to get you to think critically about readings and videos. We want to use the discussion space to make direct connections between course content and your own experiences. Specifically, I will post a discussion question. Students are required to...

- 1) Answer my discussion question.
- 2) Post a discussion question of their own.
- 3) Reply to peer's post providing their question.

You will receive 1 point for each of the above requirements. Discussion posts are pass/fail, so as long as you complete each of the three components above with good effort, you will receive credit. However, you will be given feedback on the quality of your discussion posts. This feedback should be taken seriously because it is meant to prepare you for the final exam.

Weekly Real World Application Assignments: Each week you will turn in a "real world application" assignment. The form of this assignment may be different from week to week. The goal of these weekly assignments are to get you to apply the course content to real world problems/issues. Each assignment is worth 10 points. Assignments will be graded for quality.

Final Exam: The final exam will consist of short-answer and essay questions. The exam is worth 35 points or 35% of the course grade, and will cover all the topics presented in the course. The questions will be similar to the discussion questions I post, and so it will be important for you to take the feedback I give you on your responses seriously.

Late Assignment Guidelines

All students face challenges in route to a college education. Whether medical, personal, or financial, unforeseen events can be distracting and/or get in the way of turning in assignment on time. I believe strongly in empowering student to overcome obstacles. Because of this I have 2 policies for late work:

1. The Life Happens Window: All assignments will have a due date. Due dates are listed on the course schedule and on the Canvas page. If life happens and you are unable to turn in the assignment before the due date, you may submit the assignment WITHOUT PENALTY during the Life Happens Window. The Life Happens Window closes 48 hours after assignment due date. Assignments will not be accepted once the life happens window closes, unless you have requested and received an extension from me.

2. Extensions beyond the Life Happens Window: For an extension beyond the Life Happens Window, you must reach out to me to request an extension in advance of the Life Happens Window closing. I do not want students to feel like they have to share details with me or provide documentation to receive an extension. I trust my students, so you DO NOT need to provide a reason for the extension and/or share personal details you do not feel comfortable sharing. Simply send me a quick email saying you need an extension, and we will work together to set a new deadline. I will not accept extension requests after the life happens window has closed.

Rutgers Policies and Resources

Academic Integrity: Students are expected to submit their own work throughout this course. Cheating, plagiarizing, and other misconduct will result in a failing grade on the assignment and the student may face other disciplinary actions as specified by the university. Appropriate documentation of sources using APA Style is necessary to avoid plagiarism in all written assignments. Violations of Rutgers' Academic Integrity Policy will be subject to penalties. For further information regarding Rutgers' policies: <https://deanofstudents.camden.rutgers.edu/academic-integrity>

Code of Conduct: Rutgers University-Camden seeks a community that is free from violence, threats, and intimidation. You are expected adhere to Student Code of Conduct:

<https://deanofstudents.camden.rutgers.edu/student-conduct>

RaptorCares: The Raptor Cares Report (<https://deanofstudents.camden.rutgers.edu/reporting>) connects you to our Dean of Students Office, who can assist with a variety of concerns: medical, financial, mental health, or any life issue that impacts your academic performance. You can share a concern for yourself, a classmate or a friend.

Office of Military and Veterans Affairs: The Office of Military and Veterans Affairs can assist our military and veteran students with benefits, deployment issues and much more. Contact: Fred Davis 856-225-2791

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Disability Services: Rutgers University welcomes students with disabilities into all of the University's educational programs. In order to receive consideration for reasonable accommodations, a student with a disability must contact the appropriate disability services office, participate in an intake interview, and provide documentation:

<https://ods.rutgers.edu/students/documentation-guidelines>

If the documentation supports your request for reasonable accommodations, your campus's disability services office will provide you with a Letter of Accommodations. Please share this letter with your instructors and discuss the accommodations with them as early in your courses as possible. To begin this process, please complete the Registration form at <https://webapps.rutgers.edu/student-ods/forms/registration>. For more information go to the following link: <https://success.camden.rutgers.edu/disability-services>

Support for Undocumented and Immigrant Students: The Rutgers Immigrant Community Assistance Project (RICAP) provides free and confidential immigration legal consultations and direct representation to enrolled students. For more information or an appointment, contact Jason Hernandez, Esq., at 856-225-2302 or jason.c.hernandez@rutgers.edu. For more information please visit: <http://deanofstudents.rutgers.edu/student-advocacy/information-support-undocumented-students/>

Readings

Module 1

Pyszczynski, T., Greenberg, J., Koole, S., & Solomon, S. (2010). Experimental existential social psychology: Coping with the facts of everyday life. In D. T. Gilbert, & S. T. Fiske (Eds.), *Handbook of Social Psychology* (5th ed.). McGraw-Hill.

Sartre, J.-P. (1956). *Existentialism is a humanism* (C. Macomber, Trans.). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. (Reprinted from *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme*, 1956, Paris: Éditions Gallimard.)

Module 2

Pyszczynski, T., Greenberg, J., & Solomon, S. (1997). Why do we need what we need? A terror management perspective on the roots of human social motivation. *Psychological Inquiry*, 8, 1-20.

https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327965pli0801_1

Arndt, J., & Goldenberg, J. L. (2017). Where health and death intersect: Insights from a terror management health model. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 26, 126-131.

Module 3

King, L., Heintzelman, S. J., & Ward, S. (2016). Beyond the search for meaning: A contemporary science of the experience of meaning in life. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 25, 211-216.

Juhl, J., Routledge, C., Hicks, J. A., & Sedikides, C. (2017). Can affectively negative experiences contribute to well-being? The affectively negative need-fulfillment model. In M. D. Robinson & M. Eid (Eds.), *The happy mind: Cognitive contributions to well-being*. New York, NY: Springer.

Module 4

Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2004). Autonomy is no illusion: Self-determination theory and the empirical study of authenticity, awareness, and will. In J. Greenberg, S. L. Koole, & T. Pyszczynski (Eds.), *Handbook of Experimental Existential Psychology*. The Guilford Press.

Schlegel, R. J., Smith, C. M., & Hirsch, K. A. (2013). Examining the true self as a wellspring of meaning. In J. A. Hicks & C. Routledge (Eds.) *The experience of meaning in life: Classical perspectives, emerging themes, and controversies*. Springer.

Module 5

Abeyta, A. A., Nelson, T. A., & Routledge, C. (2019). Precious time: The role of time and temporal thought in managing death-awareness. In C. Routledge & M. Vess (Eds.), *The handbook of terror management theory*. Cambridge Academic Press.

Sedikides, C., Wildschut, T., & Stephan, E. (2018). Nostalgia shapes and potentiates the future. In J. P. Forgas, & R. F. Baumeister (Eds.), *The social psychology of living well*. Routledge.

Module 6

Brietbart, W. (2017). Existential isolation. *Palliative & Supportive Care*, *15*, 403-404.

Wesselmann, E. D., & Williams, K. (2017). Social life and social death: Inclusion, ostracism, and rejection in groups. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, *20*, 693-706.

Module 7

Szumowska, E., Czernatowicz-Kukuczka, A., Kossowska, M., Krol, A., & Kruglanski, A. W. (2020). Truth and significance: A 3N model (needs, narratives, networks) perspective of religion. In K. Vail III & C. Routledge (Eds.), *The science of religion, spirituality, and existentialism*. Academic Press.

Routledge, C. (2018). *Supernatural: Death, meaning, and the power of the invisible world*. Oxford University Press.