The Science and Practice of Compassion [Online]

Psychology and Social Behavior 192B
[Blum Center, School of Social Ecology]
Spring 2018

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Hours: TBD

Course Description

The purpose of this course is to teach the ground-breaking science of compassion, which explores the roots of a meaningful, purposeful, and happy life. Students will discover how cutting-edge research is yielding fundamental insights into the nature of human kindness, the origins of empathy, promotion of altruistic behavior, and the benefits of living a more compassionate life. The fundamental premise of the course is that connecting to others, behaving in kind ways, and contributing to something larger than yourself is a primary driver of human happiness and flourishing. Students will gain expertise in cross-disciplinary research from psychology, evolutionary biology, neuroscience, and beyond.

Through the course, students will gain insight to questions like: Do empathy and compassion make the world a better place? In what way? How does empathy affect individuals and their behavior, and how might it be scaled to reduce inequity and promote compassionate deeds, altruistic behaviors, and social justice in the US and around the world? Does empathy lead us towards moral action that benefits others, potentially at a cost to self? “Empathy orients you toward moral action,” contends New York Times editorialist David Brooks, “but it doesn’t seem to help much when that action comes at a personal cost.” Cognitive scientist Paul Bloom agrees, writing that, “if you want to be good and do good, empathy is a poor guide.” By contrast, Leslie
Jamison, author of *The Empathy Exams*, writes that Bloom’s “position represents the beginning of a longer conversation in which we ask ourselves not just whether empathy makes us good but what good empathy is made of.” How do you define “good empathy”?

We will amplify this discussion by studying the psychological, evolutionary, biological, and neurological bases of empathy, its significance in philosophy, contemplative/religious practices and ethics, and how we can build on empathy and compassion to encourage altruistic behavior and service, promote well being, and advance social justice. We will have both required books, and required articles that will be posted.

**Student Learning Objectives**

By the end of this course students should:

- be able to critically discuss and analyze the meaning, usefulness, and limitations of the following terms: empathy, empathic communication, cognitive empathy, affective empathy, affective perspective taking, cognitive perspective taking, altruism, and compassion.
- be able to articulate and discuss the biological, neurological, and evolutionary roots of empathy, compassion, and altruistic behavior and understand the linkages between them.
- be able to evaluate and empathically reflect the points of view of others, particularly those with different ethical and political orientations.
- be able to reflect critically on how their own learning and experiences provide you with necessary tools to be ambassadors for empathy, compassion, and service.

**Course Organization and Assignments**

The course will consist of 10 discrete modules examining compassion from different angles. Each module consists of:

- video lecturettes
- guest expert webinar
- interactive scenario or exercises
Webinars are a required component of the class. Students are expected to complete all readings prior to the webinar session. The assignments vary, but each module requires you to engage with other students, the teaching assistants and the instructor through message board posts and response videos. Students will be required to complete a pre-course and post-course survey as well as two projects: one midterm project and one final project.

**Grading**

Grades are calculated as:

- Pre-and post course surveys: 5%
- Webinar attendance and engagement: 15%
- Homework assignments: 15%
- Discussion posts and peer reviews: 10%
- Midterm project: 25%
- Final project: 30%

**Readings:**

The textbooks for the class are:

- Matthieu Ricard (2013). *Altruism: The power of compassion to change yourself and the world.*
- Peter Singer (2015). *The Most Good You Can Do: How effective altruism is changing ideas about living ethically.*

Additional articles and readings will be available as an electronic course reader.
Overview of Course Schedule:

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<td>• The Role of the Brain</td>
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<td>Final Project</td>
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Course Policies

Internet connectivity
Please ensure that you have a stable Internet connection when you are taking the quizzes. Whenever possible, use a wired connection instead of a wireless connection. Connectivity issues that arise during a quiz may prevent you from completing the quiz or may cause scoring errors.

Communication
In an online course, the majority of our communication takes place in the course forums. However, when we have a need for communication that is private, whether personal, interpersonal, or professional, we will use individual email or telephone.

Questions concerning class materials should be posted on the class forum called "General Discussion Forum," so that all students can benefit from reading the answer. Discussion postings are archived and will be available throughout the course. Please do not email the instructor with questions about the readings or video lessons. They should be posted to the discussion forum. I will do my best to respond quickly to questions.

Expectations of Students
I expect you to:

- keep up with the material covered every week
- complete your homework on time every week
- participate actively and courteously in the forums
- abide by the standards of academic honesty and student code of conduct
- seek help (instructor, TA, or homework forums) when you don’t understand a topic

Expectations of the Instructor
You can expect me to:

- provide comprehensive learning material on time every week
• provide one scheduled live office hour every week
• provide a continuing “office hour” / instructor help forum, check it at least three times a week and respond to student postings
• create assignments that reflect the stated learning expectations for the course
• do my best to get you to appreciate and enjoy the course material

Plagiarism
The University of California seeks to foster a spirit of honesty and integrity. Any work submitted by a student must represent original work produced by that student. Any source used by a student must be documented through normal scholarly references and citations, and the extent to which any sources have been used must be apparent to the reader. The University further considers resubmission of a work produced for one course in a subsequent course or the submission of work done partially or entirely by another to be academic dishonesty. It is the student's responsibility to seek clarification from the course instructor about how much help may be received in completing an assignment or exam or project and what sources may be used. Students found guilty of academic dishonesty or plagiarism shall be subject to disciplinary action up to and including dismissal from the University. If you are unsure what constitutes plagiarism, visit the following web site: http://www.plagiarism.org/plagiarism-101/what-is-plagiarism.

Disability Services
If you need support or assistance because of a disability, you may be eligible for accommodations or services through the Disability Service Center at UC Irvine. Please contact the DSC directly at (949) 824-7494 or TDD (949) 824-6272. You can also visit the DSC’s website: http://www.disability.uci.edu/. The DSC will work with your instructor to make any necessary accommodations. Please note that it is your responsibility to initiate this process with the DSC.

Code of Conduct
All participants in the course are bound by the University of California Code of Conduct, found at http://www.ucop.edu/ethics-compliance-audit-services/_files/stmt-stds-ethics.pdf
The learning environment at the University of California, Irvine is one based on honesty and integrity. This environment can be maintained only if all participants recognize the importance of maintaining the highest ethical standards. It is critical for all concerned that all student work be the sole work of each individual student. The tests in this course are to be taken by you and you alone, without help. You may not print the tests. You are to take the tests without assistance from printed materials, the Internet, your cell phone, or any other way in which you could gather information. Doing so constitutes academic dishonesty. Please familiarize yourself with the UCI Academic Honesty Policy. Anyone caught cheating or in any other way in violation of the university policy on academic honesty will receive an F in the class. There are no exceptions to this rule.

**Netiquette**

In an online classroom, our primary means of communication is written. The written language has many advantages: more opportunity for reasoned thought, more ability to go in-depth, and more time to think through an issue before posting a comment. However, written communication also has certain disadvantages, such a lack of the face-to-face signaling that occurs through body language, intonation, pausing, facial expressions, and gestures. As a result, please be aware of the possibility of miscommunication and compose your comments in a positive, supportive, and constructive manner.