

Why We Act Study Guide

Myth of Monsters: Why do we create monsters in our mind after something terrible has happened?

Good and Bad People

“The question of why some people act badly and others don’t is not really about good and bad people” (pg. 16). Do you agree or disagree with this assertion?

Why/why not?

Gradual Escalation: When does a little become too much?

Bystander Effect

Describe a time when you couldn’t decide whether or not to call for help or act. Were you alone or with others? Did people you know see it? What was the outcome or consequence?

Social Loafing

“The combined team performance was significantly worse than the performance of participants who were working alone” (pg. 33). How does this statement affirm or contradict your experience? How might this impact how you teach or lead?

Anonymity

Have you ever not done something or done something more fervently or “out of character” when anonymity was guaranteed? Why did the anonymity matter?

Responsibility

Should it matter whether your actions matter? Why/why not?

Responsibility

Have you experienced an incident similar to the one the author references when the professor from New York took the backseat to the student from California? How did you or others around you respond?

Connection

How can shared identities or lack of commonality impact decisions to act? What are some ways shared identity has influenced your decisions to act?

Ambiguity

The author describes an incident walking home one evening while in college and finding a man in need of help. When the police showed up, she felt ridiculous for calling for help. Have you ever been in a similar situation? How, if at all, has that impacted how you respond now?

Audience Inhibition

Are you personally more likely or less likely or equally likely to act or participate when you are part of an audience? Why?

Pluralistic Ignorance

When has gauging other people's response caused you to make the wrong decision or form an incorrect opinion?

Common Misperceptions

"We tend to believe that other people's behavior reflects their true thoughts and feelings, even when we are aware that our own behavior does not. Thus, if other people aren't activating as if there is an emergency, we imagine they must really think there isn't an emergency" (pg. 52).

Strength in Numbers

What lessons can we learn from the United Airlines pilot (pg. 57-58)? How can you apply this in your life or work?

Cost Benefit Analysis

Are you surprised by the CPR data (pg. 63-65)? Why/why not?

Social Costs

"Think about a time when you've heard an offensive remark, a gratuitously derogatory put-down, or a racist or sexist slur. How did you respond? Did you say something and risk appearing

overly sensitive or creating social awkwardness? Or did you keep your thoughts to yourself? (pg. 66).

Social Costs

Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me. What is the neurology of this? Is it true? (pg. 69-70)

Conforming

Reflect on a time you felt pressure to conform. What caused that pressure? Did you conform? Why/why not?

Peer Pressure

Sanderson provides some neurological evidence around differences in how girls and boys respond to social signals (pg. 83). Does this confirm or contradict your observations? How so?

Misperceptions

“People change their behavior to adhere to their perception of a norm, but their perception is often wrong” (pg. 88). How might this impact your job? Is this more beneficial or more detrimental? Why?

Social Pressure and Skills

Fear of being ostracized or socially rejected is cited as a common reason for failure to act. Not having the skills to react has also been cited as a reason for inaction. Which do you believe has a greater causal impact? How do these factors interact to stymie action?

Social Positioning

The social positions of the bully and the interruptor have a significant impact on who bullies and who interrupts. “The ones who are cool bully more, and the ones who bully more are seen as cool,” and yet “comfort with their social position gives [interrupters] the courage to stand up to bullies” (pg. 97, 99). How do you reconcile these seemingly opposing forces encouraging and discouraging bullying behavior?

Chocolate

Do you agree with Father Pere Henri's take on how to measure goodness (pg. 102)? Why or why not? Think about your school or work environment. How is goodness measured?

Chicken or the Egg

At the beginning of chapter 7, the author states "it's hard to say which comes first - the demeaning attitudes or the membership in the fraternity or athletic team" in reference to the higher incidence of sexually aggressive behavior by men in fraternities or high contact sports (pg. 114). Based on the evidence given throughout the rest of the chapter and your experience, what is the root cause of this statistic?

Pluralistic Ignorance

How does pluralistic ignorance perpetuate sexually aggressive behavior (pg. 118-123)? What can be done to counteract this?

Correcting Misperceptions

The author asserts that "it is easier to change people's perceptions of others' beliefs -by providing accurate information- than to change their own beliefs" (pg. 124). Instead of trying to change norms, the author suggests that a more effective strategy is to just share what the actual norms are and to work toward reducing misperceptions (pg. 125). This seems to work well for decreasing school bullying and sexual aggression (pg. 105). How could you apply this strategy suggestion in your setting?

Skills Training

Several bystander intervention programs are referenced as it pertains to disrupting sexual assault (pg. 125-130). What makes these programs successful? Are there lessons from these that could be applied to other settings where bystanders may fail to intervene?

Silence and Power

Have you ever confronted your boss about unethical behavior or seen someone else confront your boss? What was the consequence? Do you regret it? Did it improve the situation?

Confronting Sexism and Racism

Sanderson cites a study where participants when faced with discriminatory and inappropriate comments “tended to see the comment as less serious and were less likely to report it if it was sexist than racist. When the person making the comment was a supervisor... participants felt less responsible for intervening” (pg. 139). Was this finding surprising? Why/why not?

Benefits of Silence

The author shares several examples where people benefit from staying silent, especially if the unethical behavior is exhibited by a high job performer versus a low job performer (pg. 142 - 144). When or under what conditions do you believe silence is an acceptable response? Why?

Loyalty

We often think of loyalty as a positive; however “the costs of standing up to bad behavior in any work environment can be substantial, but perhaps especially so when the culture of the place puts a strong emphasis on loyalty,” (pg. 145). How do you reconcile the value loyalty adds to a culture and the potential for fostering toxicity?

Toxicity

“If you are steeped in an environment with toxic norms, it is likely you can’t even see it for yourself” (pg. 147)? Do you agree or disagree with this opinion? Have you ever been in a toxic environment? What was your experience in recognizing its toxicity?

Slippery Slope

Sanderson gives several examples where bad behavior led the doer down a slippery slope. To what extent have you experienced this in your work or personal life?

Whistleblowers

What you choose to label something has power. From your perspective, which is a better term, “whistleblower” or “person of conscience,” to describe the person who calls out bad behavior? Why? (pgs 151-152)

Leaders

What makes a highly ethical leader? Do you agree with the author’s suggested traits? Would you subtract or add others to the list? (pg. 152)

Leaders

Psychologist Jonathan Haidt suggests “choosing leaders who focus not on the immediate short-term gains - when unethical actions can pay off - but on the long-term outlook” (pg. 155). Is this advice realistic, advisable or accurate? Why/why not? How might this advice impact your work?

Honor Pledges

Do honor pledges work? Why/why not? The author cites examples in testing environments. What about other types of common pledges such as Rachel’s Challenge, purity promises, New Year’s Resolutions, Lenten promises, or similar pledges? (ppg. 158)

EPIC

What is your impression of the EPIC program in New Orleans? How, if at all, would this program support/improve current concerns about policing in America? (pgs. 163-166.

Moral Courage

Describe the difference between moral courage and physical courage. Is either “easier”? Why/why not?

Moral Rebels

What traits set moral rebels apart from those that don’t act? Are any of these traits more critical to action than others? Why/why not? (pgs. 174 - 178)

Brain Impact

“People clearly vary in how attuned they are to social conflict, and this tendency is reflected in anatomical differences in the brain” (pg. 181). How, if at all, can this be changed? If it can not be shifted, how then do people with more gray matter volume in the OFC become moral rebels? Empathy Factor: There are two primary pathways for prosocial behavior. Does it matter which pathway is the primary motivator? Why/why not? (pgs. 183 - 189)

Parents

What are the lessons from the University of Virginia study of mothers and teenagers study (pgs. 190- 191)? Are these lessons that can be replicated?

College Students

Empathy among college students has been declining while narcissism has been rising over the last forty years. Why do you believe this has happened? Is this reflective of your experience? Is this cause for alarm or not a significant factor in ultimate moral behavior? (pgs. 192 - 193)

10 Strategies

In the last chapter, ten strategies are listed as ways to move from being a bystander to a moral rebel. Which of these strategies do you think would be the easiest for you to implement? Why? Do you think this strategy would have the biggest impact or is there another strategy that you think might make a greater impact?

- Strategy #1: Think of a time when you didn't speak up because you didn't think it would matter. If you had spoken up, looking back now, do you think it would have mattered? Why/why not? (pgs. 194 -196)
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- Strategy # 2: Three possible strategies to confront bad behavior are shared: express disapproval; make discomfort about you; and/or assume it is a joke. Have you ever used any of these strategies when confronting bad behavior? What was the outcome? Do you have a preference for one of the strategies over the others? (pgs. 196-198)
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- Strategy #7: Think of a time when you saw a leader take an ethical stance or action. Was that stance/action surprising? What was the outcome? (pgs. 203-205)
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- Strategy #9: Two examples of shifting social norms are shared — washing towels in hotels and voting. How might you employ this strategy in your work or personal (i.e. church, college, etc.) setting? (pgs. 206-209)