The Character Project: New Frontiers in Psychology, Philosophy, and Theology
http://www.thecharacterproject.com/

Request for Proposals: "New Frontiers in the Psychology of Character"

Fellowship Announcement

Wake Forest University, with the help of a very generous grant from The John Templeton Foundation, welcomes proposals for the "New Frontiers in the Psychology of Character" funding initiative. We aim to support young scholars working on the psychology of character, who often have new and interesting ideas but who have not yet benefitted from traditional funding sources. Thus, we would give preference to proposals from PIs who are within ten years of receiving their Ph.D. We envision applicants from personality, social, and developmental psychology in particular, but possibly other subfields as well, who are interested in the ability of people to achieve moral behavior. Interdisciplinary teams of psychologists working with faculty in other disciplines, especially philosophy or theology, are encouraged (but team-based proposals are not required).

Fellowship Description

Fellowship Directors: William Fleeson and R. Michael Furr, Wake Forest University

Character Project Director: Christian Miller, Wake Forest University

This $1.5 million dollar RFP is aimed at empirical work in psychology on the existence and nature of character and the relationship between character traits and beliefs, desires, identities, emotions, behavior, and situations. Proposals can request between $50,000 and $200,000 for projects not to exceed two years in duration. We hope to make between 6-10 awards.

Background

In the early parts of the 20th Century, *character* made up a major part of psychology, specifically of personality psychology. However, an influential observational study of children's moral behavior, conducted by Hartshorne, May, and colleagues in the 1920's, suggested that consistency in morality-related behavior was lower than many people expected. Consistency of single moral behaviors from occasion to occasion revealed correlations only in the .2 to .3 range. Some psychologists interpreted such results to mean that there was no consistency in moral behavior, and thus that there were no stable, meaningful individual differences in moral behavior – character did not exist. Psychologists interested in individual differences subsequently labeled their efforts the study of "personality", rather than of "character". In addition, perhaps partly to avoid any reminder of "character" in their studies, they also largely abandoned the study of

ethics, morality, and virtue. Our purpose in this RFP is to contribute to the recent revival of character, ethics, and morality as objects of psychological study.

In the 1960's, the issue of consistency was raised again, this time questioning the existence of not only character but also of personality in general. Research continued to suggest that individual differences in behavior on single occasions were no more consistent than were the children's behaviors in the Hartshorne and May study. In addition, experimental studies of the effects of situations produced surprising results, suggesting that behavior is not primarily the product of robust character traits such as honesty or compassion, but rather of the situations in which people find themselves. In other words, evidence suggested that researchers should look, not to internal features of individuals, but rather to external facts about situations, in order to explain why people behave the way that they do.

For example, Darley and Batson (1973) examined helping behavior among Princeton Theological Seminary students. Students were instructed to walk across campus to deliver a lecture. Along the way, they encountered an experimental confederate slumped over against a wall, ostensibly in need of care and aid. Results revealed that the likelihood that students stopped to check on the man was a direct function of the degree to which they were in a hurry. Students who were told initially that they were running late and "must" hurry to give their lecture rarely stopped to help (10%), whereas the majority of students who were told that they had plenty of time stopped to check (63%). These results appeared to indicate that the primary factor dictating students' behavior was the situational pressure that they were facing, rather than their characters.

Such results suggested that behavior was driven largely by situational pressures, and that the way people think about character and behavior in real life may be flawed. That is, on this view, most people commit the "Fundamental Attribution Error" by appealing to features of an individual's character to explain behavior rather than to facts about his or her situation. A belief in character traits appeared to be unfounded, simplistic, and inaccurate. This may not only be a dismissal of individual differences in moral actions, but a dismissal of moral actions at all. For it is hard to justify a belief in moral agency or character if supposed moral actions are driven only by shifting forces of the situations in which people find themselves.

This "situationist" view of behavior stands in stark contrast to contemporary personality psychology. Indeed, the past 20-30 years have seen significant demonstrations of the meaningfulness and empirical viability of stable personality dispositions (Fleeson and Noftle, 2008). Researchers have found considerable empirical support for the stability of traits over time, as well as for robust predictions between traits and important values such as marital quality, mental health, and longevity. However, such research did not directly demonstrate consistency in behavior nor address the inconsistency in behavior, leaving many still questioning the existence of broad, global traits -- morality-related or otherwise.

Given that both the trait-oriented and the situationist positions have strong supportive evidence, an emerging view today in personality is a synthesis of the two positions. This synthesis can be achieved via three steps: (i) recognizing that it is possible to have more than one important type of consistency (Fleeson & Noftle, 2008; Mischel & Shoda, 1995; Ozer, 1986), (ii) demonstrating

that traits are consistent in at least one of these ways (Epstein, 1979), and (iii) conceptualizing a nature of traits that accounts for the empirical consistency and inconsistency together (Fleeson, 2001, Fleeson & Noftle, 2008, Furr & Funder, 2004, Furr, 2009; Miller, 2009). Identifying the nature of traits that incorporates consistency and inconsistency will require incorporating insights from both prior sides of the debate.

Although the first two steps have been accomplished for personality traits, the second step has not been empirically tested explicitly in specifically moral traits, and the third step is only beginning. This third step requires research both on personality characteristics and on situational influences. Furthermore, the situationist position has surfaced in the field of philosophy, with writers such as Doris (2002) and Harman (2009) making influential claims that there are no reliable meaningful individual differences in morality-related behavior. Thus, work on the psychology of personality gives rise to some of the following big questions about character.

Twelve Key Questions

1. Are there reliable and meaningful individual differences in dispositions to think, feel, and act in morally relevant ways?
   2. Is there evidence, including consistency evidence, for the existence of character traits?
   3. If character traits do stand up to empirical scrutiny, are they best conceptualized as general traits, such as those in the Big Five approach (openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism), or are they better understood as hundreds of highly localized traits? If they are general traits, does the Big Five approach capture all of them?

4. What are the empirically most promising psychological models of character traits, including integrating both character traits and situations in the explanation and prediction of behavior?
   5. What roles do beliefs, desires, and emotions play in character traits?
   6. Do goals and identities have important relationships to character?
   7. How much self-regulation do people have over their character traits at a given moment and over a given period of time?
   8. What is the best way to define situations in the first place in order to empirically assess the role of situations in influencing character-relevant behavior?

9. How does character develop and/or how it is perceived?
   10. How accurate is the understanding people typically have of their own character traits? And how accurate is the understanding people have of other people's character traits?
   11. How do people acquire character traits over time? Are certain strategies more effective in cultivating a given character trait than others?

12. What new (or old) methods and analytic techniques can best be utilized to reach breakthroughs in the study of character?

Character and Virtue

Psychologists have defined "character" in many ways, with no universal agreement as to its meaning. The broadest definitions have "character" as nearly synonymous with "personality". Some of these broad definitions exclude intelligence and abilities from the notion of personality, in order to focus on the characteristics of the person. Mid-breadth definitions limit "character" to "virtue", meaning the virtuous or strength aspects of personality (along with their attendant vices). These definitions refer to personality characteristics such as courage, compassion, honesty, and self-control, among others. The most specific and central definitions emphasize ethical and moral behavior, defining character as the collection of dispositions to think, feel, and act in morally relevant ways, and especially individual differences in those dispositions. This last definition brings the complete package of character, morality, ethics, and virtue back to psychology.

We will give preference to projects the closer they are to the specific and central definition of character. However, because we believe that the best science is basic, we realize that some projects may be more appropriately studied at the broadest level. Thus, we welcome applications at all levels of breadth of definition. If a project defines character at a broader level, then the project must address questions that have relatively salient implications for character, and these implications must be spelled out in the application.

Application Instructions

Letters of Intent are due by November 29th, 2010. Notification will be made by January 15th, 2011, with submission of full proposals no later than March 28th, 2011. Final award decisions will be issued by June 1st, 2011 for research to begin on August 1st, 2011 (and no later than September 1, 2011).

Letter of Intent (LOI) Stage

Applicants are required to submit:

1. A complete curriculum vitae for the PI and for all major team members (if applicable).
2. A letter of intent that includes the central questions of the project, the background and significance of the questions, the way in which the project addresses the goals and at least one of the Twelve Key Questions of this RFP, and a summary of the methodology. The letter cannot exceed 1,500 words.

Application materials should be submitted by e-mail attachment, if possible, to CharacterPsychology@wfu.edu. The word "Psychology of Character" should appear in the e-mail subject line. The only acceptable file formats are .doc and PDF. Questions about the application process can be sent to the same address. All LOI materials must be received no later than November 29th, 2010.

Full Proposal Stage

Those applicants who are invited to submit full proposals must include:

- A cover letter with the title, amount requested, duration of the project (not to exceed two years), and team members (if applicable).
- A description of the work to be carried out, not to exceed 5,000 words. The description should explain the central questions of the project, the background and significance of the questions, the way in which the project addresses the goals and at least one of the Twelve Key Questions of this RFP, the methodology, and the researchers' qualifications to conduct the research.
- A project abstract of up to 500 words which explains the project and its significance to non-academics, and which would be published on The Character Project website and possibly in Templeton materials, and included in publicity materials if the proposal is funded.
- A time line.
- A detailed budget with accompanying narrative explaining line items, totaling between $50,000 and $200,000 in direct costs. Overhead is limited to 15%, and funds cannot be used for major equipment purchases.
- Approval of the Dept. Chair and University Signing Officials.

Full proposals should be submitted by e-mail attachment, if possible, to CharacterPsychology@wfu.edu (questions about full proposals can be sent to the same address). The words "Psychology of Character Proposal" should appear in the e-mail subject line. The only acceptable file formats are .doc and PDF. Full proposals will be accepted only from applicants who have been invited to submit by the fellowship directors, on the basis of the LOI phase. Full proposals must be received no later than March 28th, 2011.

Grant Eligibility

The PI must have a Ph.D. and be in or contracted to a faculty position at an accredited college or university before May 15th, 2011. Applicants can have their name on only one proposal for this competition, and if funded, cannot subsequently be funded in the philosophy and theology funding competitions (to be announced at a later time), although they can be named on them. Selection criteria will include: (1) significance, approach, innovation, investigators, and environment; and (2) relevance of the project to the RFP goals. Please see NIH criteria for more information (http://cms.csr.nih.gov/PeerReviewMeetings/ReviewerGuidelines/). All applications must be submitted in English and all payments will be made in US dollars.

Funded projects must have their PI commit to the following:

1) Submit interim and final reports, as well as interim and final expenditure reports. The interim and final reports should not exceed 5 pages, and should detail the outcomes of the funded project. Reports must be submitted at the end of Year 1 and at the conclusion of the project if the project is for more than one year.

2) Attend and present initial findings at the two-day Initial Research Workshop in June of 2012 where PIs from the philosophy and theology of character funding initiatives will be in attendance (expenses covered).
3) Attend and present central results at the three-day Final Research Colloquia in June of 2013 where the PIs from funding initiatives for the psychology, philosophy, and theology of character will each present their conclusions (expenses covered).
4) Consent to have their presentation at the Initial Research Workshop and Final Research Colloquia be videotaped for The Character Project website.
5) Submit a chapter length version of their paper from the Final Research Colloquia by December 31, 2013 for publication in a two volume edited work tentatively entitled *The Character Project: New Perspectives in Psychology, Philosophy, and Theology*.
6) Notify the Project at CharacterPsychology@wfu.edu of all conference presentations, papers, and books that arise from the funded research.
7) Follow stipulations of grant award as communicated by Templeton either to WFU or to the recipient directly, and as determined by WFU.

All questions should be directed to:
CharacterPsychology@wfu.edu
or
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References

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