

AREA FOUR: OTHER-REGARDING VIRTUES

Recent advances in the social sciences point to character traits or dispositions that equip people for success in the interpersonal world. These traits, which some philosophers have called “virtues,” include trust, generosity, faith, empathy, kindness, gratitude, forgiveness, and honesty, among others. Such traits are presumed to help people live lives in which they are useful to other people, seek just solutions to social dilemmas, and care for the welfare of others. These other-regarding virtues may also foster physical health or psychological and relational well-being. Collectively, funded projects in the “Other-Regarding Virtues” area shed light on how such virtues can be facilitated in laboratory and applied settings, and how they influence physical health, psychological well-being, and interpersonal relations. The projects are distinct from much of the “mainstream” social-scientific work on these topics in that they explore distinctively religious or spiritual contours of other-regarding virtues under investigation.

Research Area Consultant

Michael E. McCullough, PhD is the IRUL research consultant in this area. He is an associate professor of Psychology, with a secondary appointment in the Department of Religious Studies, at the University of Miami, Coral Gables, FL. He has authored over sixty scientific articles and book chapters on religion, spirituality, and the virtues, including work on the relationships of such variables to physical health, psychological well-being, and interpersonal relations. He has also written and edited several books on these subjects.

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1. Other-Regarding Love for Individuals Outside One's Social Group

Stephen Wright and Arthur Aron will conduct a study at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and at the State University of New York at Stony Brook that examines love for people outside one's own social group, the absence of which is one of the world's most grievous and seemingly intractable moral and spiritual problems. Hope for addressing this problem in novel and effective ways comes from a psychological model of close relationships that was originally inspired by the Upanishads and has recently been applied to intergroup relations. The central idea of the model is that close others and those in one's social groups function in a sense as part of oneself; the regard and caring that one usually experiences for oneself is thereby extended to close others. Further, the social identities of close others become to some extent one's own. As a result, one becomes more inclined to extend caring and love to the friend's ethnic group.

This project will explore this phenomenon by examining (a) variables such as caring, empathy, and trust toward outgroup members; (b) the specific role of inclusion of other in the self as the mechanism underlying the effects of cross-group friendship on prejudice toward members of that outgroup; (c) the possible moderating role of religiousness/spirituality; (d) the practical potential for applying these concepts in the real world. Three studies will be conducted: a laboratory study that creates interpersonal closeness between people of different ethnic groups; a survey of students' friendships with people from different ethnic groups; an applied study designed to increase students' other-regarding love for members of other ethnic groups by using established laboratory procedures for fostering inclusion of the others in the self.

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2. The Gift of One's Self: Expressions of Unlimited Love and Gratitude in Organ Donors and Recipients

Robert A. Emmons will study organ donation, often referred to as the "gift of life." The overall goal of this project is to examine expressions of unlimited love in the form of organ donation and the role that the virtue of gratitude plays in motivating donation and recipient behavior. The specific aims of the project are to: (a) investigate the degree to which self-transcendent strivings (spirituality, intimacy, and generativity) predict intentions to donate organs and actual organ donation; (b) test the "moral motive" hypothesis of gratitude: Does the virtue of gratitude for life predict intention or willingness to donate part of one's self?; (c) examine whether an intervention designed to increase gratitude increases actual intention to become an organ donor; (d) examine whether the expression of gratitude by transplant recipients increases their likelihood of thriving post-transplant. The project is strengthened by the diversity of its methods. The investigators will incorporate correlational, prospective longitudinal, qualitative, and experimental methods.

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3. The Self as a Conduit of Love

Julie Juola Exline will examine the ways in which receiving love from others enhances one's ability to love. Love is a common thread that underlies many virtuous actions, including helping behavior, emphasis on positive qualities in others, and forgiveness and apology in the wake of offenses. This project will test a conduit model of altruistic love. The model predicts that we are most able to love if we have first received love, either from other people or from God. The proposed research also addresses the role of grace, or undeserved favor, in the transmission of love. Studies will be primarily experimental, beginning with laboratory-based designs and cumulating in an intervention study. Laboratory-based studies will address whether feeling loved—especially when the love is seen as undeserved—motivates people to return love to the source. A second set of studies will address whether people who receive love, and are reminded to pass it on, will become more loving to third parties. Finally, an intervention will be developed to give participants the tools to love in situations in which doing so would be difficult. Religious themes will be emphasized, including participants' relationships with God. One major aim of the proposed project is to provide a bridge between scientific and theological literatures on the topics of altruistic love, forgiveness, justice, and grace. By focusing on the dual roles of giving and receiving love, the long-term aim of the project is to give people practical tools that will enhance their well-being, their perceived relationships with God, and their ability to love others.

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