

Research Topic White Paper #4  
Institute for Research on  
Unlimited Love  
Altruism, Compassion, Service

OTHER-REGARDING VIRTUES

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## **I. Introduction**

Recent advances in the social sciences point to a variety of character traits or dispositions that may fit people well for positive interpersonal relationships (McCullough & Snyder, 2000). Some philosophers have referred to these traits as “virtues:” individual dispositions that prepare people for success in the social realm (e.g., Roberts, 1995). Although traits such as trust, generosity, faith, empathy, kindness, gratitude, forgiveness, and honesty are traits that one would ascribe to individual persons to varying degrees, one reason that society and its institutions socialize people toward acquisition and expression of these virtues is that they are presumed to help people to live lives in which they are useful to other people, seek to protect the rights of other people, seek fair and equitable solutions to social dilemmas, and care for the welfare of others. They are other-regarding virtues. These personal virtues may also foster individual and interpersonal health and well-being in tangible ways.

The “Other-Regarding Virtues” area of the IRUL research program is devoted to stimulating high-quality scientific research on other-regarding virtues, and their connections to personality, behavior, and mental, physical, and social well-being.

### *Disciplinary Focus*

Relevant proposals from any discipline in the social and behavioral science may be appropriate, including anthropology, demography, epidemiology, medicine, psychology, and sociology. Disciplinary boundaries are less important in the judging process than are the criteria of (a) methodological rigor; (b) scientific creativity; and (c) feasibility. Multidisciplinary projects that bring to bear the tools from more than a single scientific discipline are most welcome.

### *Particularly Appropriate Content Areas*

Several public and private agencies support research efforts designed to illuminate the general effects of interpersonal relationships and social support on health. IRUL’s research program will not attempt to duplicate the laudable efforts of those agencies. Thus, projects that focus exclusively upon romantic love, marriage and family relationships, friendships, or other social engagements but which do not seek to illuminate specific other-regarding virtues in detail, and/or the specifically religious or spiritual contours of other-regarding virtues are unlikely to receive high priority for funding. Proposals are especially welcome that attempt to shed scientific light on other-regarding virtues such as:

• Generosity	• Empathy/Sympathy
• Volunteerism and Philanthropy	• Gratitude
• Civility and Civic-Mindedness	• Hospitality
• Tolerance and Forbearance	• Humility
• Forgiveness and Mercy	• Altruism or Sacrifice for Others
• Trust	• Faith

Proposals for both experimental and non-experimental work are welcome. Research involving animal models or computer simulations will be considered also. The remainder of this document is devoted to outlining ten research areas that are viewed as especially important areas for future work on the other-regarding virtues.

## **II. Key Research Questions**

### **Question 1**

#### **What Are the Relationships Between Religion/Spirituality and the Other-Regarding Virtues?**

Most religions and spiritualities acknowledge a normative set of other-regarding virtues that adherents should seek to instill, and many people believe that religions and spiritualities provide many people with social and psychological resources that encourage virtues such as love, faith, trust, forgiveness, generosity, kindness, and tolerance. Some of these resources are believed to be the result of socialization processes by which other-regarding virtues are made normative and instilled through moral education (e.g., explicit moral educational efforts; exposure to religious exemplars and role-models), and/or through repeated opportunities for practice of these virtues (e.g., formation of relationships with people from different sociodemographic backgrounds, service learning, etc.). Moreover, the history of world religions is marked by extraordinary periods in which religion seemed to promote civic virtue, care for the downtrodden, tolerance of outsiders, forgiveness, and unusual generosity.

Despite the widespread belief that religions are typically effective in promoting other-regarding virtues, the history of religion also points to periods in which religions have motivated violence, inhospitality to outsiders, suspiciousness, and greed—nearly all of the vices that most people would eschew in others and (when at their best) in themselves. Moreover, the scientific evidence on this issue is complicated. Modern social-psychological research has questioned religion's potential to motivate spontaneous altruistic behavior (e.g., Batson, Oleson, Weeks, Healy, Reeves, Jennings, & Brown, 1989), even while other research has indicated that religious involvement is positively related to charitable giving (Regnerus, Smith, & Sikkink, 1998; see also Argyle, 2000, for brief review).

IRUL welcomes proposals for studies that are designed to explore whether religious and spiritual engagements provide people with resources for exhibiting the entire spectrum of other-regarding virtues. Proposals for studies are welcomed that investigate how religions or spiritualities confer people with emotional or skill-based competencies for enacting other-regarding virtues. We would also be interested in the extent to which spiritual moments (e.g., mystical states, peak experiences, experiences of awe or reverence) produce loving motivations and behavior.

## **Question 2**

### **What are the Sociological and Social-Psychological Conditions that Foster-Other Regarding Virtues and Behavior?**

Researchers have shed a great deal of light on the sociological and social-psychological conditions that foster social condition such as violence and aggression (e.g., Bushman & Anderson, 2001). Indeed, many of the factors that foster negative behaviors such as aggression (e.g., watching violent television programming) are modifiable; that is, they could ostensibly be changed by parents, society, or individual people themselves in order to reduce the prevalence and/or damage caused by such negative behaviors.

By comparison, fairly little is known about how to foster other-regarding virtues and behaviors. Under what social-psychological conditions will people manifest charity, generosity, trust, forgiveness, and gratitude? We are interested in creative studies from basic research traditions that help to shed light on characteristics of social interactions, groups, and environments that foster other-regarding behavior. Although we are certainly interested in basic research that illuminates social-psychological processes without regard to their obvious applicability to real-world settings, we are also particularly interested in research that addresses sociological or social-psychological conditions that could be readily modified in the service of encouraging other-regarding behavior and virtues.

Relatedly, we are interested in studies that take a complex look at the sociological and social-psychological conditions that foster other-regarding virtues and behavior. How might the positive effects of well-established causal factors be thwarted in the presence of other sociological or social-psychological conditions? Also, how might the factors that foster one form of other-regarding behavior interfere with another form of other-regarding behavior? For example, Batson, Klein, Highberger, and Shaw (1997) demonstrated that people who experience empathy for another person's welfare will attempt to help that person even when doing so would violate the moral principle of justice. We are interested in studies in the spirit of Batson et al.'s (1997) work that not so much seeks to confirm conventional wisdom about other-regarding virtues and behaviors, as to cast doubt on what we believe we already know and, therefore, that has the potential to lead research on other-regarding virtues in entirely new directions.

## **Question 3**

### **What Are the Motivations Behind Other-Regarding Virtues and Their Implications?**

The motives behind acts of unselfish service, generosity, forgiveness, gratitude, and humility are often hidden. Such acts may be determined by multiple motives working together simultaneously (e.g., when someone helps because they desire to ease the suffering of someone and because helping would confirm their positive self-image). Although people's own motivations may be superficially accessible, people's awareness of their own motivations may be somewhat limited in many settings.

What is the differential potency of the various motives that might stimulate the expression of other-regarding virtues? For example, when do people act gratefully out of a desire to express their recognition of another person's benevolence, rather than out of a simple desire to

restore reciprocity? When is the altruistic motive to help present and when is it absent (e.g., see Batson, 1991). How do the motives underlying the manifestation of other-regarding virtues influence the efficacy of such individual expressions of other-regarding virtues? Are interpersonal behaviors that truly are motivated by love versus other motivations (e.g., the profit motive, the desire for approval from others, the desire to reduce one's own distress, the desire to feel "empathic joy," etc.) any more efficacious in obtaining their desired outcomes? Intrinsic in studies that examine this question should be the recognition that behavior is governed by multiple motives.

#### **Question 4**

##### **How Can Other-Regarding Virtues Be Measured Beyond Standard Self-Report Measures?**

Science typically advances quickly following the development of sound methods for measuring particular phenomena. To stimulate progress in our understanding of the other-regarding virtues, investigators must develop innovations for assessing both (a) people's potentials to express these other-regarding virtues; and (b) characteristics of how they deploy these virtues to address issues in real-life. Here we distinguish between a person's untapped potential for expressing other-regarding behavior and aspects of the frequency, quality, or efficiency with which they express these other-regarding virtues in relationships with others.

Although some people may be adept at providing information on their own capacities for other-regarding virtue, it would seem difficult, if not impossible, to measure certain other-regarding virtues (e.g., humility) by means of self-report. Innovative proposals for psychometric development that move the field beyond simply adding to the existing stockpile of self-report, pencil-and-paper measures will receive special interest. Alternatives to self-report might include peer-reports and informant-reports, but we are also interested in the development (and application) of standardized laboratory paradigms that might elicit people's potential for other-regarding virtue or enable assessment of the frequency, quality, or efficiency with which the enact other-regarding virtues in specific interpersonal situations.

#### **Question 5**

##### **What Action Tendencies Accompany Other-Regarding Emotional States?**

Discrete emotion states seem to be accompanied by particular action tendencies (e.g., fear is accompanied by an motivation to flee or defend oneself; anger is accompanied by a motivation to attack or correct an injustice). Positive emotions also seem to have their own unique patterns of action tendencies, though these actions tendencies are less specific than are those for negative emotions (Fredrickson, 2001). The experience of other-regarding affects (e.g., feelings of altruistic love for other people, love for God, reverence and respect for life, humility, gratitude), insofar as they are true "emotional states," should be accompanied by specific action tendencies as well.

What are the action tendencies for the other-regarding emotions? Conventional wisdom suggests that people who feel other-regarding emotional states (e.g., gratitude, humility) are

frequently motivated to behave in more loving ways that recognize the value and worth of other people. From a scientific point of view, the question is whether the link between other-regarding emotional states and other-regarding behaviors is a reliable one. Supposing that people who experience such other-regarding emotional states do demonstrate a heightened motivation to enact other-regarding behaviors, it is likely that the relationship between these feeling states and the action tendencies that they might trigger is less than perfect. Not all people who experience other-regarding emotions will “convert” these emotions into behaviors that actually are efficient at recognizing the value of other people or promoting their well-being. What factors interfere with the conversion of these positive emotional states to loving, other-regarding behavior? Proposals for studies that address these issues are most welcome.

### **Question 6**

#### **To What Extent Can Other-Regarding Virtues Be Viewed as Components of Personality?**

In the last two decades, substantial progress has been made in delimiting the major aspects of the human personality. Some theorists (e.g., McAdams, 1995) have proposed that personality can be best understood at three levels. The first of these levels refers to personality traits and dispositions. Traits and dispositions are more or less enduring dimensions of personality that differ across people, but which are thought to have a strong genetic component, and to be more or less continuous across the life span. A second level at which personality can be conceptualized is the level of goals and strivings. Goals and strivings are the regulatory mechanisms that guide behavior to achieve certain outcomes. They tend to be developmental in nature and rather malleable as a result of changing life circumstances. A third level at which personality can be conceptualized is at the level of identity. Identity, or the life narrative, is the relatively coherent story or set of stories that people in modern societies use to bring coherence and unity to their lives.

The “other-regarding virtues” (e.g., forgiveness, gratitude, love, trust, generosity, politeness, civility) are typically conceptualized as enduring attributes of persons (i.e., people are typically considered as more or less “grateful,” or “forgiving,” etc.), which suggests that their relationship to better studied aspects of the human personality need to be delineated specifically. To what extent can the other-regarding virtues be understood in light of other, better known understandings of personality? Moreover, do the other-regarding virtues predict behavioral outcomes in a way that is unique from other approaches to measuring aspects of human personality? Given the long-standing focus on psychometric issues within the field of personality research, studies addressing these issues might be meaningfully paired with research programs that address psychometric issues as well.

## **Question 7**

### **Are the Other-Regarding Virtues Related to Health and Well-Being?**

In the wisdom literatures of many world religions, virtues are assumed to lead to important outcomes in the personal or interpersonal domains both for the practitioner and the person who is the “recipient” of the other-regarding behavior. In the past several years, researchers have posited that certain other-regarding virtues (e.g., serving other people in the community) might have a positive influence on health or well-being not only for the recipient of service, but for the provider of service as well (Van Willigen, 2000). To what extent does the possession and/or expression of other-regarding virtues lead to improvements in health and well-being—either for people who possess the virtue or the beneficiaries of their virtuous behavior?

Other areas of research (e.g., research on the effects of providing care to an aging relative or a child with disabilities) demonstrate that under some conditions, extended and intense service to others can cause decrements in physical health and well-being for the caregiver (Schulz & Beach, 1999). What can we learn from instances in which the expression of other-regarding virtues contributes to improvement or stability in the health/well-being of the recipient, but to decrements to the health/well-being of the caregiver? Proposals that seek to clarify the links of other-regarding virtues and behaviors to health—especially innovative proposals that go beyond simply confirming commonly accepted wisdom—are sought.

## **Question 8**

### **By What Physiological or Psychological Pathways Do Other-Regarding Virtues Influence Health?**

Insofar as other-regarding virtues influence health and well-being, they must do so through other psychological or physiological mechanisms. For example, if such virtues influence likelihood of cardiovascular disease, it should be possible to observe how the effects of other-regarding virtues on such long-term endpoints are mediated by a chronic pattern of decrements in normal cardiovascular functioning. Thus, we are interested not only in studies involving clinical endpoints (e.g., well-defined disease states) that may be best studied through epidemiological methods, but also to studies involving shorter-term endpoints (e.g., cardiovascular, endocrine, or immune reactivity; self-esteem; feelings of security) that might be the physiological or psychological mechanisms that are the vehicle for the establishment of the links between other-regarding virtues and well-defined states of health or disease.

## **Question 9**

### **How are the Other-Regarding Virtues Related to Social and Interpersonal Outcomes?**

Other-regarding virtues are thought to be dispositions that fit people well to thriving in the social or interpersonal domain. In this context, the term “thriving” is assumed to incorporate not only one’s circumscribed, individual self-interest (i.e., that the practitioners of other-regarding virtues is better at obtaining positive outcomes for themselves), but also, efficacy in promoting social and interpersonal harmony (i.e., that the practitioners of other-regarding virtues are presumed to be skilled in fostering positive social and interpersonal relations, and the well-being of the other people with whom they interact). The interpersonal settings in which other-regarding virtues might be relevant to social and interpersonal relations are vast. Other-regarding virtues might promote kindness and fairness toward strangers, politeness and civility toward the people with whom one interacts in the course of daily commerce, self-sacrifice with friends, harmony and stability in marriage and family relationships, and peacemaking and reconciliation in the context of inter-ethnic or inter-tribal conflicts.

Research is needed to describe the dynamics by which particular other-regarding virtues promote positive outcomes in these diverse social and interpersonal settings. Consonant with the overall spirit of this request for proposals, IRUL is especially interested in proposals for studies that would move the field beyond simply evaluating conventional wisdom. Instead, IRUL seeks to support research that can revolutionize the study of other-regarding virtues and steer the field in new and productive directions.

## **Question 10**

### **How Can Other-Regarding Virtues Be Promoted and Taught?**

A final question of interest relates to the ways that society and its agents might foster other-regarding virtues and behavior. Without doubt, it is fundamentally important to society that large numbers of citizens develop a proneness toward other-regarding behavior, but how might parents, mentors, schools, churches, and communities do so more effectively and reliably?

We are interested in studies that explore structured methods for encouraging other regarding virtues and behaviors in all walks of life. Research projects in this area might seek to apply knowledge gained from basic research on the sociological and social-psychological causes of other-regarding behavior, but they may also focus on approaches developed more closely out of traditions in education, prevention, and treatment. Studies addressing the efficacy of interventions for promoting other regarding virtue will be expected to adhere to the highest methodological standards for evaluating the efficacy or effectiveness of behavior change interventions (e.g., experimental designs with active comparison conditions, trained treatment providers, evidence of treatment compliance, etc.), although studies that fail to meet these high standards may be considered if the proposals make up for such methodological deficiencies through outstanding characteristics in other areas.

## References

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### III. Annotated Bibliography of Key Reference Works

*Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 2000, Vol. 19, 1 [Entire Issue]. This issue of *JSCP* includes a set of papers that were initially presented as a conference on the classical sources of human strength. Includes a brief history of the relationship between notions of character and virtue with scientific psychology, and includes reviews of theory and research on other-regarding virtues such as humility, gratitude, and forgiveness, as well as two commentaries.

McCullough, M. E., Pargament, K. I., & Thoresen, C. E. (Eds.) (2000). *Forgiveness: Theory, Research, and Practice*. New York: Guilford. This recent edited book is a comprehensive review of theory and research on forgiveness. Key chapters include chapters on the measurement of forgiveness and its cross-cultural features, chapters on the cognitive, developmental, social, and personality factors influencing forgiveness, and perspectives on the applications of forgiveness to counseling, psychotherapy, and health interventions.

McCullough, M. E., Kilpatrick, S. D., Emmons, R. A., & Larson, D. B. (2001). Is gratitude a moral affect? *Psychological Bulletin*, *127*, 249-266. In this article, the authors review the existing theory and research on the emotion of gratitude. Based on the previous work, they conceptualize gratitude as an emotion with moral functions, much as do moral emotions like empathy and guilt. Specifically, the authors find evidence that gratitude possesses: (a) a moral barometer function (i.e., it is a response to the perception that one has been the beneficiary of another person's moral actions); (b) a moral motive function (i.e., it motivates the grateful person to behave prosocially toward the benefactor and other people); and (c) a moral reinforcer function (i.e., when expressed, it encourages benefactors to behave morally in the future). The authors also find that the personality and social factors that are liked with gratitude are also consistent with a conceptualization of gratitude as a moral emotion.

*Psychological Inquiry*, 1991, (Vol. 2, 2 [Entire Issue]). Although now somewhat dated, this issue of *Psychological Inquiry* begins with a target article by Daniel Batson and Laura Shaw on the empathy-altruism hypothesis. This target article is followed by commentaries by a wide variety of social scientists, and then concludes with a reply by Batson and Shaw. Useful summary of the research and theory related to empathy-induced altruism, including perspectives from the theory's most vocal detractors.

Snyder, C. R., & Lopez, S. L. (2001). *Handbook of positive psychology*. New York: Oxford. This recent volume sets forth an agenda for the burgeoning positive psychology movement. It includes chapters by leading scholars on a variety of virtues, including other-regarding virtues such as compassion, gratitude, forgiveness, love, humility, connecting with others, empathy and altruism. Includes important chapters on the study of positive psychology in special populations, and outlines future directions for the field.