Statement of Interests and Career Goals in Social Psychology

He threw the video game console to the ground in a fit of rage. His family had refused to give him any more money, which would surely be used to fuel his drug addiction. C was in his late twenties, and the console belonged to his 3-year-old brother. Even more striking was the contrast between this outburst and what had come just moments before: a sort of gentle pleading, suffused with apologies for regretful behavior and promises to turn things around – but really, this time. What would possess a man to put on such a display of immorality in front of his own family, who had been consistently patient, understanding, and loving toward him? Insight, or the ability to see oneself and his or her problem clearly, is chief among the factors that predict recovery from substance abuse (Goldstein, Craig, Bechara, Garavan, Childress, Paulus, & Volkow, 2009). It is clear that C lacked such insight.

I knew C as the older brother of B, who was my best friend at the time. Ever striving for his most moral self, B constantly deliberated over the principles of his morality and of those around him in an attempt to uncover the most righteous way to live. The contrast between B's insight and that of C's was unsettling, though this discrepancy could have been attributable to C's substance abuse. What was less easily explained, however, was the difference in the level of insight between B and his brother *before* the drugs. While C was certainly not immoral, he saw his morality as a set of unquestionable assumptions about right and wrong and indulged in significantly less reflection than B. This wasn't an artificial difference induced by foreign substances known to cloud judgement. Rather, this was a *dispositional* difference, and one that I have since noticed among many others. This led me to the central question: why do some people demonstrate and apply insight to their moral plights, and can this propensity for insight be changed?

Shortly after arriving at Stetson University, I sought out opportunities that might help answer this question with the assistance of Dr. Laura Crysel (a resident social psychologist). During this time, I also witnessed the implementation of controversial laws criminalizing homelessness in nearby cities, such as time-limits for sidewalk benches, or making it illegal to give money to panhandlers. These laws, which seemed to me to be the result of prejudice against the homeless, inclined me to investigate whether the homeless are prejudiced against each other (i.e., *in-group prejudice*). If they are, would it be due to a lack of insight? If C was aware of the influence that drugs can have on one's emotions and decision-making, would he self-correct and work harder to restrain himself? In 1973, psychologist Kenneth Gergen proposed that knowledge of a psychological process may reduce its influence, now known as the *enlightenment effect* (EE; Gergen, 1973). In other words: if homeless individuals were aware of the processes that lead to prejudice, would they correct for them? To acquire the data necessary to test these hypotheses, I personally approached approximately 2,000 homeless individuals, 209 of which agreed to voluntarily participate. I was awarded $2,500 to complete this project through a grant competition called the Stetson Undergraduate Research Experience, which provides funding to select students for independent research.

While we did find compelling evidence of in-group prejudice among the homeless, an effect which had not been observed before, the EE manipulation did not seem to influence the level of prejudice in our sample. One possible explanation for this null effect was that participants in our sample were asked to merely consider a hypothetical situation, thus lacking the motivation to effortfully apply the knowledge they had learned to themselves. Would participants be better motivated if there were *real* consequences at stake – for themselves or others? For my senior thesis, I am extending this line of inquiry by introducing participants to

research on moral psychology that demonstrates some of the ways in which our own minds work against us in preventing us from being our best and most moral selves. To raise the stakes, I am giving participants the power to assign a real positive outcome (in this case, a $25 gift card) to either themselves, or to another anonymous participant. In this experimental design, crafted in its original form by psychologist C. Daniel Batson, participants state their preferences for the fate of the positive outcome ahead of time, but most often neglect these preferences in favor of awarding it to themselves (Batson & Thompson, 2001). Will knowledge of psychological processes leading to hypocrisy cause people to be less hypocritical? Also, could any individual differences in hypocrisy be attributable to differences in one's tendency to reflect on moral issues? Unfortunately, there is no scale available to measure such differences. As a separate project, I am developing a valid and reliable measure of the proposed personality construct called *the need for moral cognition* (NFMC). To best exemplify this trait, recall that B naturally differed from his brother C in his propensity to deliberate over what is moral. People appear to differ in their tendency to engage with moral and ethical subject matter, and the NFMC measure seeks to quantify these differences. I would enjoy discussing the findings of either of these projects during an interview.

My interests are not solely related to insight, however. Other questions that I'd like to answer include: How might the NFMC intersect with emotions associated with moral judgement, such as disgust? Does the NFMC intersect with political identity? How might knowledge of the influence of psychological processes concerning moral judgement affect one's own moral judgements? These, among many others, are the questions I hope to answer, and I look forward to discussing these and related questions in the classroom and elsewhere. Given Dr. Hanah Chapmans's research on the moral emotions (Chapman & Anderson, 2011), and Dr. David

Rindskopf's expertise in latent variable modeling techniques, I have identified the City University of New York as a program particularly well-suited to provide me with the training, experience, and mentorship necessary to explore these questions and launch a career that I anticipate will be both fruitful and personally rewarding.

References

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