



Faculty Directory

The College

AS News

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Psychology



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Research and Teaching Interests

Chronic psychological stress is known to damage biological health, yet we know surprisingly little about the psychological mechanisms that generate continuing stress. My research explores the idea that much chronic stress is triggered and

perpetuated by non-conscious motives, or “implicit goals,” that lead people to often behave in ways that are unknowingly and counterproductively controlling (of other people), or excessively self-demanding, or personally debilitating. This work has identified specific self-defeating goals that predict poor health, and indicates that these goals are especially harmful in persons who have difficulty self-regulating distressing emotions or physical pain.

My studies of stress-inducing motives and self-regulation abilities form the basis for the Social Action Theory (SAT) model of chronic stress. The research has disclosed three types of implicit stress-inducing goals or “strivings” that people often pursue automatically and unthinkingly in threatening situations: Striving to control or change other people (“agonistic striving”), striving to control or change the self (“transcendence striving”), and failing to assert control (“dissipated striving”). People are not always aware of their implicit stressful strivings, but research with a behavioral-experiential assessment technique, the Social Competence Interview, allows us to assess people’s agonistic, transcendent, and dissipated motives and to show repeatedly that they have important and widely differing implications for biological health and illness. Agonistic striving, for example, is associated with increased risk for cardiovascular disease and for recurring medically unexplained pain and other distressing somatic symptoms.

Transcendence striving, on the other hand, is associated with lower disease risk and may even turn out to be a form of “positive stress” that could be health protective. The emerging evidence suggests that studying implicit strivings, and how they interact with different self-regulatory processes, may give us a more precise (and practically useful) causal understanding of chronic stress than we have obtained thus far by focusing only on older, less specific constructs such as “hostility,” “anger,” or “stress-prone” personality traits like Type A.

Chronic stress-related illnesses begin early in life, and risk rises as income declines. Thus, much of my research focuses on young people and adults in disadvantaged communities. This work includes a 25-year program of community-based studies

known as “Project Heart” (supported by the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute); a series of projects have tested the SAT model in Baltimore, Syracuse, and Nashville. In addition to supporting key tenets of SAT, these investigations shed new light on social-motivational and self-regulatory mechanisms that may explain why living in a dangerous and disadvantaged neighborhood can foster the development of hypertension, heart disease, and stroke, along with unexplained pain and various somatic disorders. Studies now underway seek to pin down the specific psychophysiological processes by which stressful living environments endanger health. For example, current studies are investigating how a person’s implicit strivings and self-regulation abilities can affect his or her stress physiology, including cardiovascular, glucocorticoid, and immune systems.

Education

Ph.D., Stanford University

Honors

Fellow:

American Psychological Association
Society of Behavioral Medicine

Member:

Academy of Behavioral Medicine
Research
Delta Omega Society
Society of Experimental Social
Psychology

Student Research and Training Opportunities

Students who work with me typically learn

how to conduct stress assessments to identify implicit motives (e.g., Social Competence Interview) and self-regulatory capabilities (e.g., Anger Transcendence Challenge), and to code and interpret the behavioral data that we obtain with these measures. Students also learn psychophysiological assessment methods, including techniques for recording physiologic responses under controlled laboratory conditions and in the natural environment. Examples include the assessment of blood pressure and heart rate variability, blood chemistry, cortisol, and immune markers in the context of experimental, naturalistic, and longitudinal research designs. In addition to their course work in the Clinical-Health Psychology Program, my students are encouraged to pursue broad training in physiology, neuroanatomy, multivariate statistics, genetics, culture, and human development.

Representative Publications

Ewart, C.K., Elder, G.J., Laird, K.T., Shelby, G.D., Walker, L.S. (2013). Can agonistic striving lead to unexplained illness? Implicit goals, pain tolerance, and somatic symptoms in adolescents and adults. *Health Psychology*. Advance online publication July 29, 2013. DOI: 10.1037/a0033496.

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3: Models and perspectives in health
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