

Statement of Purpose

My career aspirations began with Dr. Norman Doidge's *The Brain That Changes Itself: Stories of Personal Triumph from the Frontiers of Brain Science*. Reading this book in high school introduced me to neuroplasticity, a concept which continues to inform my interests, and sparked my love for popular science books. This genre integrates scientific findings and conveys their implications to a general audience—something I hope to do in the course of a career in academic research, teaching, and public service. In graduate studies, I aim to acquire the quantitative skills, research experience, and theoretical background necessary for innovative scholarship in an academic position at a college or university. Duke University's Doctoral Program in Social Psychology has the collaborative, research-intensive culture I am seeking, as well as the faculty, facilities, and resources to support my academic and professional goals.

Three experiences in research have shaped my career path. First, as a Summer Research Fellow in [REDACTED] neuroscience lab at [REDACTED] in 2014, I designed and collected data for two experiments linking brain injections of a peptide to food consumption in male rats. Along the way, I learned techniques of animal research including stereotactic brain surgery, drug injections (IM, IP, and brain), and feeding measures. I ended the summer with a greater appreciation for the complex task of linking neurochemistry and behavior. Later that year, I assisted Professor [REDACTED] and fellow-student [REDACTED] in developing a coding scheme for causes and consequences of sadness. We then coded written memories from an undergraduate sample, and the data were used in [REDACTED]'s senior honors thesis. In addition to teaching me about narrative data collection, this experience interested me in individual differences in coping techniques under difficult circumstances.

Currently, as a Clinical Research Assistant to Dr. [REDACTED] at [REDACTED] Health System, I administer a proactive psychiatric screening survey to patients at one of the system's major hospitals for a pragmatic trial to integrate mental health assessment and treatment into the existing model of inpatient care. Talking to patients, I have observed first-hand differences in psychological well-being and the intrapsychic (e.g. outlook), interpersonal (e.g. supportive relationships), and sociocultural/lifestyle (e.g. job demands) factors that may underlie them. This position has also cemented my commitment to pursuing a research career. Working with Dr. [REDACTED] has shown me that being a principle investigator demands a combination of big-picture thinking and detailed problem-solving which I find energizing.

Although my research plans remain flexible, I am primarily interested in two lines of research which cut across several areas within social psychology, including self-regulation, social motivation, and emotion. The first line of interest is studying proximal (biological), medial (psychological), and distal (sociological) influences on mental health and human potential: flourishing in context. In what circumstances are our psychological needs (e.g. autonomy, accomplishment, connecting, security) met? I would like to build upon the growing body of research in Positive Psychology using the biopsychosocial approach.

The second area of research I plan to pursue in graduate studies centers on the following question: How can we make good decisions when the consequences of our actions are psychologically and/or physically distant? This question has roots in moral psychology, cognitive psychology, and philosophy, and is especially relevant in the modern world, as individuals, communities, and resources are increasingly connected in ways that are not always apparent or visceral. It could be interesting, for example, to examine how empathy might depend on psychological distance and mediate social decisions.

Although I lack extensive formal training in Social Psychology, my academic background has prepared me to be an active investigator at the graduate level. My breadth of study at [REDACTED] taught me to consider an issue from multiple perspectives, and my coursework in Psychology allowed me to practice interpreting scientific papers, writing research proposals and journal-style research papers, and exploring broad ideas using relevant findings from the literature. For example, I wrote about “Lifestyle Changes and the Increase in Depression over the Twentieth Century” for my final course paper in a History of Psychiatry class.

I believe Duke’s Doctoral Program in Social Psychology is the ideal place for me to continue my education, pursue my interests, and develop skills in psychological research and teaching. I am drawn to the program’s commitment to training graduate students in a variety of disciplines and methods, as well as the represented areas of faculty research and expertise. Because my primary research interests are broad and could benefit from multilevel analysis, it is critical that my graduate training facilitate interdisciplinary training in fields such as sociology and neuroscience. Duke meets this important criterion by encouraging students in the social program to develop secondary expertise outside of social psychology and by supporting interdisciplinary research bodies such as the Social Science Research Institute and the Center for the Study of Aging and Human Development. Additionally, I am excited by the program’s close ties with the Fuqua School of Business because there is rich opportunity for exploring both of my overarching research interests in organizational contexts.

Of course, a central factor in my decision to apply to Duke is a desire to work with the Social Psychology faculty. Of particular interest is Dr. Timothy J. Strauman. I am eager to be involved in his research relating self-regulation and depression, especially his focus on preventative interventions. Whether as primary advisors, instructors, or professional contacts, I would also relish the opportunity to learn from Dr. James Shah and his work on motivation and cognition in social contexts; Dr. Laura Smart Richman and her research into health outcomes, health behaviors, and the psychosocial factors that influence them; and Drs. Gráinne Fitzsimons and Aaron Kay in the Motivation and Social Cognition lab.

In sum, I intend to collaborate with exceptional researchers to build my investigative skill set and pursue my interests in flourishing and distal decision-making. Duke University’s Department of Psychology & Neuroscience is the optimal place for me to accomplish this goal in a community that values interdisciplinary training and research as a means to improve society.