

Social Motivation Lab

Cleveland State University
Department of Psychology



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Welcome to the Existential Motivation Lab. In this primer, we give a broad overview of an interesting and fruitful research area within social psychology, provide you with some insight into how our lab works, and cover some broad areas that would be relevant to your role as a Research Assistant (RA) with the lab.

Much of what excites us about psychological research is the collaborative process of studying "big" questions about fundamental aspects of the human condition. Following an existential philosophical tradition summarized nicely by the Pulitzer Prize winning writings of Ernest Becker, we are particularly fascinated by how the human awareness of death can affect social behaviors and the pursuit of meaning and value in one's life. Our lab is interested in better understanding that process, as well as applying the idea that people are motivated to protect themselves from potential death anxiety to better understand health and unhealthy behaviors.

As a research assistant, you will be directly contributing to some cutting edge research in social psychology. You can expect to work closely with a knowledgeable team of researchers who will provide you with training, guidance, and resources to conduct your own the empirical experimental research studies. The research skills you will learn in this lab can be generalized across a broad range of disciplines that employ the experimental method. Additionally, working in a productive research lab looks great on your resume and potential graduate school applications, can prepare you for a future research position, and... it can be fun!

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A major focus of the lab is directed at understanding the motivational consequences of the experience of freedom. Psychological science has learned much about how people perceiving restrictions on their freedom push back and assert themselves to regain their freedom (e.g., reactance). But on the other side of that coin, despite having been explored in great depth by existentialists, psychological science still knows relatively little about the possible motivational consequences of being faced with one's own unrestricted personal freedom.

We build on classic existential philosophy and psychological theory, and take the perspective that people may sometimes experience anxiety due to the uncertainties and risks that can accompany autonomy and free choice. As a result, whereas some individuals with passive/inactive coping strategies (e.g., those high in neuroticism) may not effectively manage that anxiety, others with more adaptive coping strategies (e.g., low neurotics) may employ various strategies to actively reduce their freedom, such as by:

1. conforming to social consensus or cultural norms,
2. undermining their own opportunity for choice (e.g., via self-handicapping),
3. undermining the ability to experience freedom-borne anxieties (e.g., reducing self-awareness via substance use), or
4. supporting autocratic leadership who would make decisions on one's behalf rather than democratically involving one in decision-making.

Our research provides some of the first experimental evidence suggesting that salient freedom entails potentially ironic consequences; indeed even that the psychological experience of freedom could itself pose a motivational obstacle to social participation in democratic systems of leadership. We are currently focused on further understanding the underlying motivational mechanisms and the overt social consequences associated with the freedom experience in consumer behavior, health decision-making, and political and workplace leadership preferences.

Our lab conducts research about human motivation and the self, broadly entailing motivation triggered by the human awareness of death, and encounters with absolute freedom, feelings of isolation, and strivings for a sense of meaning and significance. Although not exclusively, much of our research utilizes Terror Management Theory (TMT) as a vehicle. This theory initially addressed two relatively simple questions: Why do people have such a great need to feel good about themselves, and Why do people have so much trouble getting along with those different from themselves?

As a consequence of developing advanced cognitive capacities, humans also developed a sophisticated understanding of the inevitability of death. TMT posits that this awareness of inevitable death motivates people to create, maintain, and successfully participate in cultural belief systems (or worldviews) that imbue life with meaning. That is, people can quell the awareness of death by feeling like a valued part of something larger and longer lasting than oneself – something that offers either a symbolic legacy (lasting impact via family, business, science, etc.) or a literal afterlife (e.g., heaven). This idea helps explain much cultural behavior, as well as why people are often so hostile toward those who threaten their cultural worldviews.

Since its inception, the theory has generated much empirical research into the nature of self-esteem motivation and prejudice as well as a host of other human social behaviors. To date, over 450 studies conducted in over 20 countries, and on every continent, have explored topics ranging from creativity, to sports fandom, to health, and have examined self-esteem, aggression, stereotyping, needs for structure and meaning, depression and psychopathology (e.g., phobias), political preferences, sexuality and attraction, romantic and interpersonal attachment, self-awareness, unconscious cognition, martyrdom, religion, group identification, disgust, human-nature relations, risk taking, and legal judgments, among others.

Our lab is particularly focused on trying to understand the psychological mechanisms that determine when and how people protect themselves from both the conscious and unconscious awareness of death (e.g., via politics, religion), and how it can motivate them to do some rather amazing and helpful things: donate to charities, help their communities, engage in artistic and creative acts, feel happiness and meaning in life, and explore new ideas and seek personal growth experiences.

By joining as a research assistant (RA), you will be given unique opportunities that are not offered in the typical classroom experience. Broadly, you will get hands-on involvement in the research process, experience working as a member of a productive research team, and valuable insight into some emerging concepts in experimental psychology. We take seriously the fact that you are here because you are a motivated, intelligent, and responsible young scholar. As such, we will trust you with real responsibilities and offer training experiences designed to better equip you to carry out your own research efforts in the future. That is, we view you as a professional member of our team and a possible future academic colleague.

We have designed your experience in the lab to cover many of the basic skills and experiences involved in conducting social psychological research. These basic activities will be what constitute your basic expectations in the lab. In addition, we also offer a number of additional *optional* opportunities for your professional and academic development should you be interested in a future academic or research career; those are outlined in section 4e.

The following are the basic expectations for your participation in the lab:

1. *Time.* Be prepared to devote roughly 10 hours per week, during normal business hours, but perhaps also in evenings if useful, to lab activities. We of course understand that schedules can fluctuate, but you should maintain at least a 10-hour per week average contribution to the lab. We also expect at least a two-semester commitment.
2. *Lab responsibilities.* As mentioned above, we will treat you as an intelligent and responsible member of our team. You will be put in charge of your own research study, meaning that you will be responsible for learning the theory and methodology being used, recruiting participants and collecting data, and preparing that data for analysis. So, there are three primary categories of expected lab participation: training, recruitment and data collection, and data preparation. There may also be secondary duties associated with these tasks.
3. *Reliability.* You are expected to keep appointments with labmates and participants, and to be responsive to lab supervisors (Dr. Vail) via your contact info. However, we of course understand that things happen, so if you cannot make a scheduled session or attend a scheduled meeting just let us know as soon as possible and we will adjust accordingly.
4. *Professional conduct.* When interacting with research participants, we expect you to act with a casual, yet professional, demeanor (specific training on this will be provided). Inappropriate or abusive language or behavior will, of course, not be tolerated. Casual attire (your usual street clothes) appropriate attire for the lab; the lab should appear a relatively neutral and relaxed environment, so there is no need for business or formal attire.

As an RA, you will be put in charge of your own research study. In fact, you may work on several studies as you complete and begin new projects during the course of a semester. With each new study, you will receive intensive training about the relevant theory and methodology, as well as practical training for data collection sessions, from Dr. Vail. Below, we provide a general outline of that training.

1. *Theory and methodology*: With each study you get to conduct, you will first be taught the basic theoretical ideas being tested, as well as how those ideas are being tested. You are encouraged to play an active role here; your comprehension of the materials is a priority, and in academic research any questions or suggestions you might have can potentially lead to an informative breakthrough. So, feel free to question ideas and methods, suggest improvements, and, in general, participate in the free exchange of ideas.

2. *Practical training – Stage 1*. Most studies will require that you become proficient at three roles: actor, detective, and teacher.

Actor – Because good experimental method requires consistent environments, and because our research often involves some degree of deception, you will need to learn a script, detailing what you should do and say to participants when they first arrive and before they begin the study. The script lets the participants know what they are going to do and sometimes sets up a cover story. As consistency is important, especially before and during data collection, it is important that this script be memorized nearly verbatim, though delivered in a casual manner.

Detective – After you have delivered the script and participants have completed the study, it is important that you be able to discern whether their responses were natural. Suspicion about our methods (if we used a deceptive cover story) or unnatural response styles can threaten the validity of our data. Therefore, you will learn how to briefly interview participants to determine whether they provided natural, naive responses.

Teacher – After data has been collected and you've interviewed for suspicion, you'll need to inform participants about the actual nature of the research in which they just took part. This is called debriefing. Student participants often participate for course credit, and our studies often involve some form of deception. So, this task not only serves an educational function to inform them about psychological research but is also, in general, part of the ethical treatment of research subjects. As was the case with the introductory script, you will need to learn a scripted debriefing, explaining the cover story (if there was one), the theoretical ideas being tested, the design of the study, and our hypotheses.

In general, you will be given about a week to learn/memorize these component parts.

3. *Practical training – Stage 2*. Next, you will meet with Dr. Vail in the lab to run through the study as if they were a participant. At this stage, you will run a full rehearsal in the appropriate lab facility, getting familiar with the relevant equipment (e.g., paper/pencil materials, computer stations, physiological measurement equipment). Dr. Vail will provide feedback, guidance, and instruction during these sessions; these practice sessions will continue to be scheduled until you are able to conduct it casually in its entirety. Thus, the more and better preparation you do on your own, the sooner you can pass this stage and move on.

4. *Practical training – Stage 3.* Next, you will be scheduled to meet with Dr. Vail and run him through your study, from start to finish, as if he were a participant. This is essentially an exam, testing how well you've learned to conduct your study. This is also an opportunity for Dr. Vail to provide feedback on your performance and take a final look over materials before approving your study for official data collection.

5. *Scheduling and recruitment:* Dr. Vail can set you up with online accounts to schedule/reserve lab facilities and recruit participants.

Lab Google Calendar

Once you're cleared to begin collecting data on your study, you will be given access to the shared lab google calendar online. This calendar allows you to reserve your lab room at the time/date of your choosing. Because all lab members must reserve lab space via this calendar, it also allows you to see when each lab is available/unavailable on any given date. This is important because you may be using the same facilities as another RA; reserving your times on the google calendar helps avoid double-booking a room.

Dr. Vail can provide you with specific instructions about how to use the calendar to reserve your lab space.

Although we collect data from many sources, you will most likely be collecting data from the Psychology Department Participant Pool. These participants are students enrolled in Psychology 101, who are required to take part in studies for course credit, but will also include students in other courses. The Psychology Department operates a website, called Sona Systems, where researchers can post available research sessions and participants can sign up for those sessions. Once you're cleared to begin your study, you will be given a researcher's account on Sona Systems, and both you and the graduate student who trained you will be able to edit the study listing on the website.

To create timeslots for your study

1. BEFORE you get to this stage, make sure you've reserved your lab space on the google calendar. Then, navigate to your study profile page on the Sona website.
2. Click the 'View/Administer Time Slots' link.
3. Find the "Add a Timeslot" link.
4. This will take you to an options page to let you begin scheduling the needed timeslot.
 - a. You can also add multiple sequential timeslots with the "Add Multiple Timeslots" link, but be careful to note the time, duration, interval between timeslots, and number of timeslots.
5. Select the date you wish to run participants.
6. Select the time you wish to start, the maximum number of participants for each session, and confirm the listed location is correct. Note the expected duration of your study session, and include free time between timeslots if you require time to file away questionnaires, prepare or reset materials etc.
7. Repeat these steps for each day you wish to run participants.
8. You can also copy a weekly schedule from one week to the next. To do so, go to the "Add Multiple Timeslots" page, find the "Copy Timeslots" field.
9. We generally suggest you post timeslots out to at least 2-3 weeks in advance, to ensure participants have a chance to fill each timeslot. This makes the best use of your time, and ensures the study can be completed in a timely manner.

To award Credit or No-Shows

1. Once a timeslot finishes, your Sona homepage will present a link as "View uncredited timeslots." Here, you can award credit to students who participated in your session.
2. If a participant failed to appear, you may give them a "no-show." To do so, click 'Modify' on the relevant timeslot; find the relevant participant and give them either the "excused" or "unexcused" no-show option.
 - a. Unexcused no-show: If the participant did not contact you to cancel. If participants get two of these, their account is blocked and they must write research papers to get their course credit, instead of doing research.
 - b. Excused no-show: If the participant contacted you to cancel, or if the participant was unable to attend due to circumstances beyond their control.
3. Once finished, click on 'Update Sign-Ups'

Once you've recruited participants online, you'll need to conduct the sessions and collect and store the data. This process can generally be broken up into the following components.

1. *Set up.* Arrive early so you can have time to gather your materials, prepare the lab (e.g., laying out materials, booting up computers), and get mentally ready to conduct your session.
2. *Greet participants and begin.* Greet participants at the waiting area, escort them back to the lab room, and deliver the introduction script. If anything comes up at this stage that we didn't notice during training, please let us know immediately.
3. *Monitor the session.* While participants are completing the study, you will most often find that this is a relatively quiet time and a nice opportunity to read or study for one of your classes. But you should also keep a watchful eye to help anyone who needs assistance, as well as to note any participants who interfere with, interrupt, or interact, with each other. Such activity could invalidate the data, so we would need you to make special note of it if it occurs.
4. *Interview and Debriefing:* This is when you interview to determine whether participants gave natural responses, and then provide the debriefing. Again, if anything comes up that we didn't notice in training, please let us know and we'll help address the issue.
5. *Clean up and data storage:* The room should be left clean. Please clean up any trash, erase any pencil marks on cubicle walls (sometimes participants do this), and tidy anything else up. Turn the lights off, and put the completed materials in the allocated data storage area before you leave for the day.
6. *Awarding participation credit:* At the end of your sessions, log into the Sona System website and allocate credit, or no-show, to each participant.

There are also a number of secondary activities that are part of a fully functioning lab. Sometimes these tasks will be relevant to your own study (e.g., making calls to recruit non-student community members for your study), and other times they may be relevant to studies in which you were not directly involved (e.g., data preparation). You should be prepared to handle these tasks, or work with others on them, to enable our research programs to run smoothly.

Making recruitment calls – Sometimes we may ask you to make telephone calls. This might be for a variety of reasons e.g. to recruit participants, to screen participants, or to schedule their timeslots. Usually you will be given a script and flow diagram to guide you through the communication and the various answers the person may provide. These calls will typically be conducted from 257 Union Bldg.

Data preparation – An important step in the research process is to prepare data for statistical analysis. Accurate and reliable data entry is vital to successful and valid research. Raw data is usually prepared in room 607 of Union Building using a software package called SPSS, or sometimes Excel. Training in data entry will typically be specific to your particular study.

Transcription – Some of our research entails open-ended written responses, and need to be transcribed into a digital response for computerized quantitative textual analysis. This may be done using a specific computer program or data file, and training on these tasks are usually specific to the project.

Content coding – Occasionally, we will have textual or graphical data that require thematic content coding. This procedure involves training and a scoring manual to guide your judgment of content themes. These sources might entail a photograph, video footage, or an essay response, and content coding is often done in teams.

Field research – We occasionally conduct studies outside of the laboratory. When we do, we may ask you to assist by recording observations, serving as a confederate (trained acting), soliciting members of the public for participation, or conducting an interview. Special training will be given in these instances.

As mentioned above, we recognize you are a motivated, intelligent, and responsible young scholar and strive to offer you helpful training experiences. Although there is a basic set of expectations for the lab, we typically view our RAs as professional members of our team and potential future academic colleagues. As a result, we are very interested in building a program that produces successful student researchers who are capable of going on to become successful graduate students and professors. Toward that effort, we offer optional training experiences that can help you excel in the lab by attending lab meetings, taking on more responsibility (e.g., leading other RAs, managing more studies), and developing your own research questions and your own study designs.

1. *Lab meetings* – Dr. Vail holds weekly lab meetings, and you are most welcome to join. The topics discussed at these lab meetings can vary wildly, but, in general, these meetings are where you can learn what it takes to operate a research lab and what you might encounter in your future as a graduate student.

Topics discussed at lab meetings generally include all steps of the process of research, from start to finish. We sometimes discuss issues with Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval or other clerical departmental issues; we also often discuss the process of getting research reports published, including data analysis and analytic strategies, scientific writing skills, and how to interact with journal editors and peer-reviewers; but one of the most important activities of these meetings involves theoretical and methodological discussions. We often discuss conceptual ideas about existential motivation and grapple with different ways of turning them into concrete, testable, ideas. This can be a difficult skill, and the sooner you gain exposure to it, and begin developing it, the better. Finally, we also sometimes discuss the grad student life (e.g., courses, comprehensive exams, research tasks, teaching assistantships, etc.), which may be of interest if you are interested in learning what you might expect as a future graduate student yourself.

You are welcome to just come and observe, or to take any degree of active participation with which you are comfortable. On the more passive side, you're welcome to simply observe and learn about what is involved for a professor who supervises his own lab (Dr. Vail), and for graduate students researching and studying in a graduate program. On the more active side, you're also most welcome to join in the conversations, ask questions, and propose ideas.

2. *Additional responsibilities* – After you've gotten familiar with the lab and have a study or two under your belt, you are more than welcome to become more actively involved in the lab. This might mean taking on additional projects (to help give you a broader exposure to different ideas and methodologies, and extra things to mention in a graduate school application), or the responsibility of training other RAs (to get lab experience in a leadership role), or participate in the conceptual and methodological development of a new research study.

3. *Research practicum* – Once familiar with the lab and after handling a study or two, you are also welcome to take a more active role in the conceptual and methodological development of a new research study. This is excellent experience for future graduate school applications and research performance, and we will do our best to help support your efforts in developing and conducting your own research project.

Our lab is located on the 6th floor of Union Building.

Lab facilities

1. Experiment rooms (rooms UN607, UN608): These rooms are where we conduct our research. Depending on the study, these rooms can handle many participants at a time. Each lab space is equipped with individual work areas, some are additionally equipped with isolated cubicles, computer stations, physiological recording equipment, or other specialized experimental equipment temporarily set up (dependent on studies being conducted).
2. Data entry room (room UN607): This room contains computer stations where data can be stored, entered, and analyzed.

Lab office

1. Dr. Vail's office (UN257): Located on the second floor of Union Building. Dr. Vail is often available here to provide general academic guidance to students, especially our research assistants.

This section contains very basic information regarding the safety of yourself and participants.

1. Health. Obviously, your health is important and we're very supportive when it comes to taking care of yourself. If, for whatever reason, you are unwell and cannot attend the lab to run studies, please contact Dr. Vail (contact information included at the end of this section) and we will either arrange for someone to cover your session or for a reschedule/cancellation of the timeslot. Please note that the more notice you can give the better.

2. Emergency. During a study, if you become injured or fall ill, if you encounter dangerous or criminal activity, if you feel threatened by a participant, or if for any other reason you need assistance, you can find help from Dr. Vail at the office in UN257. If no one is there you can get help from the Psychology Dept. office in the seventh floor of the Union Building. Additional emergency contact information is included below.

3. Subject Matter. Additionally, much of our research can involve tough or uncomfortable subject matter. This means you will be actively dealing with a broad range of tough, emotionally charged, or controversial issues. If, at any time and for whatever reason, you find the research topic or methodology makes you uncomfortable, just let us know and we will happily do our best to reposition you with a different study.

Similarly, participants may also find the subject matter makes them uncomfortable, painful, or disturbing. Please be aware of any verbal and non-verbal signs of participant distress. If you observe such signs, please provide participants with the opportunity to excuse themselves from the study (without penalty) and give them our contact information as well as information to contact the CSU Counseling Center.

Emergency contact info:

Health emergency, criminal activity, or imminent threat: TEL: 911

Other lab contact info:

Dr. Kenneth Vail:

Room 257, Union Building

TEL: 216-687-3720

Below are a few resources that provide insight into our primary theoretical tradition, as well as important experimental methodological information. These resources should be readily available online or in the university libraries, but we would also be happy to provide copies of these resources for you.

Existential Psychology:

Fromm, E. (1941). *Escape from freedom*. New York: Owl books.

Vail, K. E., Juhl, J., Arndt, J., Vess, M. K., Routledge, C., & Rutjens, B. T. (2012). When death is good for life: Considering the positive trajectories of terror management. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 16, 303-329.

Becker, E. (1962). *The Birth and Death of Meaning: A Perspective in Psychiatry and Anthropology*. New York: Free Press of Glencoe.

Becker, E. (1973). *The Denial of Death*. New York: Free Press.

Experimental methodology:

Aronson, E., Ellsworth, P.C., Carlsmith, J. M., & Gonzales, M. H. (1990). Why Methodology? Why Experiments? In Aronson, E., Ellsworth, P.C., Carlsmith, J. M., & Gonzales, M. H (Eds.). *Methods of Research in Social Psychology* (pp. 8-32). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Sona System

Here you will recruit participants for your studies by posting timeslots, as well as award participation credit.

<https://csuohio.sona-systems.com/>

TMT Resource Hub

This website contains a variety of information about TMT. It includes a basic overview, a regularly updated list of publications in the area, commonly used research materials, and links to professors and researchers around the world who work on testing TMT.

<http://tmt.missouri.edu>

Ernest Becker Foundation

A great website containing a forum & media related to the works of Ernest Becker & TMT. Check out the audio lectures by Sheldon Solomon!

<http://www.ernestbecker.org>

Google Scholar

This search engine can provide abstracts and some full articles on relevant topics.

<http://scholar.google.com>