

Areas of Research Excellence Nomination

Research and Theory Development in Small Group Processes

Proposal Leads:

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Category: Areas of Unique Distinction

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Executive Summary: Throughout the social sciences, researchers have spent decades examining the mechanisms through which societies create and perpetuate systems of inequality, as well as the processes through which social characteristics like race, gender, and sexuality become tied to cultural evaluations about the relative “worth” of those who possess them. Group Processes scholars seek the answers to these (and other) questions by looking at what occurs in small, face-to-face settings. As Group Processes scholars, we examine the non-conscious social psychological processes through which cultural beliefs about status, power, dominance, and prestige shape interpersonal behavior in small group settings. Considering the ubiquity of small group interactions in day-to-day life, it is easy to see that such settings are a primary locus for the perpetuation of inequality. Given recent scientific and political attention to non-conscious processes related to bias and discrimination, Group Processes scholars are uniquely positioned to provide the kinds of answers that researchers and policy makers alike are looking for.

UNC Charlotte has a longstanding reputation as a leading producer of Group Processes scholarship on status, power, and decision-making, with an extensive focus on how gender-based status beliefs shape interaction processes. Since just the year 2000, the three faculty members named in this proposal have collectively received nearly \$2 million dollars in federal research funding and have published more than 90 peer-reviewed articles and chapters. The presence of such a distinct cluster of researchers has also allowed us to train the next generation of Group Processes scholars, and we have sent many graduates of our MA program to pursue their PhD at top-tier universities, including Cornell, Stanford, and Notre Dame. It is not a stretch to say that through the work of the faculty named here, UNC Charlotte has become widely recognized a leader in teaching and research on Group Processes.

The Group Processes Research Laboratory in the Department of Sociology is one of a very small number of experimental sociology labs in America. The lab is a key reason why our Group Processes faculty have been able to continually produce cutting-edge research and secure external funding. Furthermore, the research that we produce has established a reputation for our program as an international leader in research on Group Processes and as a highly desirable destination for group processes scholars. It is also worth noting that most other small group labs are housed in sociology departments at R1 universities and in PhD granting programs. In this way, the Group Processes scholars at UNC Charlotte are producing research that draws unique attention to our university and raises our profile as a top research university. With the recent expansion of our lab space and establishment of a virtual reality lab, the contributions of the Group Processes faculty are likely to continue into the foreseeable future.

The team’s focus on the mechanisms by which pervasive inequalities are reproduced, and on ways to disrupt that process, has the potential to improve lives. Added investment in this area of research on our campus would benefit the University, the region, and the nation. Such investments could involve acquiring additional faculty (junior and senior), as well as updating the lab space and expanding data collection and analysis capabilities by integrating brain imaging technology (such as EEG or fNIRS) into our existing space.

Evidence of Strength and Excellence

Shortly after arriving at UNC Charlotte in 1993, Murray Webster (now Professor Emeritus) established the Group Processes Research Laboratory (GPRL) in the Department of Sociology. Dr. Webster pulled together funding from a variety of university and external sources to create a space where he (and others who would come later) could conduct experimental research to test and develop theories on status and power processes. Since its inception, research in the GPRL has been funded nearly continuously by federal research grants from the National Science Foundation and the Army Research Office. As a result, UNC Charlotte has earned a reputation as a leading producer of research in the area of Group Processes. Likewise, external evaluations of the Department of Sociology note that UNC Charlotte may have the *top* non-PhD-granting sociology department in the country, and this is due in no small part to the work of the Group Processes team.

Both collaboratively and individually, the Group Processes scholars at UNC Charlotte have worked to raise the university's research profile. Collectively, between just the three members of the team, we have received 14 different federal grants from either the National Science Foundation or the Army Research Office (four in the past five years). Of these awards, totaling almost \$2 million, six have been collaborative efforts (five NSF awards for Walker and Webster, and one ARO award for Dippong and Webster). In addition, the research conducted through these grants has led to a substantial number of well-cited publications in top disciplinary and specialty journals. In this regard, Walker and Webster have been especially prolific as a collaborative team, co-authoring fifteen peer-reviewed articles and chapters together since 1998 (four in the past five years), and preparing to publish a co-edited volume through Oxford University Press in 2022. While in this proposal we highlight the contributions of Webster, Walker, and Dippong, it is worth noting that UNC Charlotte has been the academic home of other exceptional Group Processes scholars, including Joseph Whitmeyer and Noah Mark, whose work has been integral to establishing Group Processes as an Area of Unique Distinction.

Although the three faculty members of the Group Processes lab team share a research focus on understanding structures of status, power, and inequality in small groups, each of us brings distinctive interests and strengths to the university. Murray Webster is a prolific and influential scholar, pursuing a research agenda centered on exploring the structural and situational bases of status-based inequalities, as well as mitigating the negative effects of such inequalities. Over more than four decades in academia, his work has given rise to new areas of sociological inquiry, greatly extended scientific knowledge about micro-social processes of inequality and stratification, substantially shaping the field of Group Processes. Dr. Webster's work has amassed thousands of citations. In recognition of Dr. Webster's unique and exceptional work, he received the UNC Charlotte First Citizens Bank Scholars Medal for Outstanding Scholarship in 2003, was inducted into the Sociological Research Association—an international honor society for top sociological scholars—in 2008, and in 2015 received the American Sociological Association's Cooley-Mead Award for his lifetime contributions to distinguished scholarship.

Lisa Slattery Walker (formerly Rashotte) arrived at UNC Charlotte in 1998. Her research focuses on small group interaction, nonverbal behaviors, identity, emotions, gender, and expectations.

Dr. Walker's work has appeared in *Social Psychology Quarterly*, *Social Science Research*, *Social Forces*, *Sex Roles* and numerous other journals. Many of her published works are co-authored with current or former graduate students. Her recent work highlights techniques for ameliorating the negative status effects of gender biases in group settings. Current NSF-funded work with Webster focuses on the effect of nonverbal and paraverbal behaviors on inequality structures in small groups. Current work with Dr. Anita Blanchard in the Department of Psychological Sciences examines how groups develop in online environments. Dr. Walker is a recognized leader in the profession, having served on several major editorial boards, on the Executive Committee of the Southern Sociological Society, and as Chair of a section of the American Sociological Association. Further, Dr. Walker contributes to media outlets ranging from local news to the BBC. An interview about her work became one of the BBC's "best of 2015" and a new video featuring her research will soon be available from the BBC Reels series.

Joseph Dippong is the most recent addition to the Group Processes team, having joined UNC Charlotte in 2013. In that time, he has brought in over \$530 thousand in external funding (all in the past five years), including two substantial grants in which he was the sole PI (one from NSF and one from ARO), and his innovative work in measuring and modeling status structures is gaining national attention. Dr. Dippong has outfitted the GPRL with equipment and software to collect and analyze vocal spectral data—one of only a few sociology labs in the country with this capability. Furthermore, Dr. Dippong played a central role in obtaining funding for and establishing the Group Processes Virtual Reality Laboratory. Through his research and efforts to expand the capabilities of the GPRL, Dr. Dippong is working to ensure that the UNC Charlotte's Group Processes team remains on the leading edge of scholarship in the field.

As a team of researchers working independently and in collaboration, the Group Processes scholars clearly meet the criteria as an Area of Unique Distinction. Almost thirty years of consistently strong and innovative research in the GPRL has contributed to the international reputation of the Group Processes team and has raised the research profile of the university. Within sociology and the social sciences more broadly, UNC Charlotte is widely recognized as a flagship institution for producing research within the sub-discipline of Group Processes. As a unit, the Group Processes team draws unique attention to the university, produces grants and publications at a level indicative of very high research intensity, addresses timely questions with of clear scientific and social import, and shares its knowledge with the broader community.

Whereas we have presented arguments for the strength and reputation of the Group Processes team, we also contend that this is an area in which the university can continue to raise its research profile through strategic investments. Chief among these, we propose that the university can prioritize recruiting additional faculty whose research focuses on group processes. This has been an area of strength for the university for a long time, and recent retirements within the team (most notably Murray Webster and Joseph Whitmeyer) provide an opportunity to recruit new faculty. Given the magnitude of Murray Webster's contribution, we suggest that the university prioritize hiring a scholar with an established reputation for excellent research. The existing reputation and resources within the Group Processes team makes it likely that, given the resources, we could recruit a top scholar in the area.

Alignment with Regional and National Priorities

The work of the GPRL aligns very closely with many aspects of the University's mission and with current priorities of federal agencies and national organizations, as well as with the priorities of society as a whole. By focusing on the mechanisms by which pervasive inequalities are reproduced, and on ways to disrupt that process, research in group processes has the potential to improve lives. Added investment in this area of research on our campus would benefit the University, the region, and the nation.

Group Processes research is fundamental science, and as such aligns with the University's mission to provide students with intellectual and professional skills. We have trained dozens of undergraduate and graduate students in the GPRL and taught them how to do things that transcend the research lab – including but not limited to interviewing techniques, computer programming, and critical thinking. We have provided this experiential education as a path to personal and professional growth. We operate as a team, the work on inequality highlights an ethical and respectful environment. We have developed a strong infrastructure in our laboratory spaces and have recently made steps (e.g., the addition of virtual reality capabilities) that will only enhance the accessibility and utility of that infrastructure.

A 2014 report by Harvard University ranked Charlotte as 50th of the 50 cities studied with regard to social mobility. Recently, those same researchers have placed Charlotte 96th out of a new list of 100 cities. The research undertaken in the GPRL has the potential to be part of changing this, by identifying the mechanisms that reproduce inequality and developing techniques and tools to be used by both organizations and individuals seeking to reduce the disparities we see in the US as a whole and particularly in the Charlotte region.

As is evidenced by the success of the team at obtaining funding from both the National Science Foundation and the Army Research Office, this work aligns with the priorities of those agencies. In particular, the research conducted in the GPRL aligns with the NSF's 10 Big Ideas of "Future of Work at the Human-Technology Frontier," (especially with the new VR capabilities and the work Dr. Walker does on virtual teams), "Growing Convergence Research," (as our work is inherently interdisciplinary), and "Mid-scale Research Infrastructure" (where we have applied for funding in the past and gotten positive feedback). In addition, we have hired a very diverse group of students over the years, aligning with the NSF INCLUDES initiative.

The Army Research Office's current Broad Agency Announcement for Fundamental Research lists Network research as a priority area. In addition, they have demonstrated interest in the understanding of group and team dynamics as well as the processes of reading and understanding social cues, all of which falls squarely in the work of the GPRL. The current relevant program manager at the ARO is a group processes scholar who understands and supports this line of work.