

Federal Funding Agencies at the APS Annual Convention

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Alphabet Soup

The ABCs of federal funding for psychological scientists

Submitting grant applications is often a nail-biting, anxiety-causing process. In this uncertain economic climate, it can be more stressful than ever to apply for funding for research projects. The “Federal Funding Opportunities for Psychological Scientists” symposium at the APS 23rd Annual Convention could not have come at a better time. In the symposium, speakers from many federal agencies described their respective agencies and offered suggestions as to where psychological scientists can look for research support.

Amber Story of the National Science Foundation (NSF) suggests that the Directorate for Social, Behavioral and Economic Sciences may be a good place to start looking for funding. Although the majority of psychology-related research goes through the Division of Behavioral and Cognitive Sciences, Story encouraged researchers not to overlook the Division of Social and Economic Sciences. Elizabeth Albro from the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), the research arm of the U.S. Department of Education, discussed research areas that might be appropriate for psychological scientists, including education technology, cognition and student learning, and mathematics and science education.

Valerie Maholmes from the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) gave an overview of NIH, saying “many behavioral and social scientists are funded by NIH, not just biomedical researchers.” Maholmes pointed psychological scientists to the Center for Population Research and Center for Research for Mothers and Children (CRMC; <http://www.nichd.nih.gov/about/org/crmc/>).

“You may be a mental health researcher and not even know it” said LeShawndra Price of the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH). While the major focus of NIMH is mental illness, it does support multidisciplinary research. Price presented her list of the common mistakes grant submitters make, including proposing too many aims and hiding weaknesses.

Although the speakers represented different agencies, all of them emphasized that potential grant submitters should call the grant’s program officer to determine if their project is a good fit for the particular funding award. For the grant application process, Maholmes said, “your best friend is your program officer.”

Converging Data, Converging Minds

The APS 23rd Annual Convention wasn’t just an opportunity for federal agencies to present their newest research and data, it was also a platform for agencies to encourage researchers to make their data

(and especially their metadata) more open and available. APS, the National Cancer Institute, and the Society of Multivariate Experimental Psychology co-sponsored the “Integrative Data Analysis: Conceptual Issues and Applied Examples” workshop, an effort to encourage psychologists to move beyond meta-analysis and toward integrative data analysis (IDA) techniques as well as shared data.

IDA is the analysis of a single, pooled data set comprised of multiple sets of data from similar studies. In meta-analysis, researchers use summaries of other data to test their hypotheses or models, but in IDA they use the actual raw data, while controlling for minor differences in study designs and samples. This is a concise (and cost-effective) way to determine whether results from one study are replicable and in line with existing models or whether there is enough variance to consider other explanations.

A number of sites such as the Health Indicators Warehouse (<http://healthindicators.gov/>) and the Integrative Analysis of Longitudinal Studies on Aging (<http://www.ialsa.org/>) have become key repositories for researchers interested in searching through results and test parameters of studies similar to their own or for those who would like to submit their latest results. In addition, the National Cancer Institute and the NIH are offering grants to those who are committed to sharing their data through one of these databases thus allowing federal agencies (and other similarly minded investigators) to build upon a foundation of solidly proven results.

Integrative Psychological Science

Psychological science has been moving in an increasingly interdisciplinary direction. Consequently, the field faces both many challenges and many opportunities. Paige McDonald from the Basic Biobehavioral and Psychological Sciences Branch of the National Cancer Institute (NCI), James Giordano from the Center for Neurotechnology Studies, Lisa Feldman Barrett of Northeastern University, and Axel Cleeremans of the Université Libre de Bruxelles spoke at the symposium “Outstanding Conceptual Challenges in an Era of Integrative Psychological Science.”

Read more at: www.psychologicalscience.org/federalevents2011convention

Research Not Lost in Translation

NIH Initiatives Helping to Improve the Flow of Translational Research

An important motivator for many researchers is to help people — to cure a disease or to improve lives. Translational research describes work that begins in the lab, but also has real-world applications. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) has established a “From Bench to Bedside” initiative in 1999 to help support and encourage projects that take basic science from the lab to the clinician’s office. However, it can be years or even decades before treatments and interventions that seemed promising in initial experiments are routinely used in clinical settings. To speed up this timeline, NIH has established a number of initiatives, which were highlighted in a symposium at the APS 23rd Annual Convention.

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NIA-APS Psychology Economics Roundtable

Many Americans, faced with the combination of an aging population, a looming health care crisis, and the lingering effects of an economic recession, may feel as though the future is not quite as bright as it once seemed. This feeling is understandable. No one relishes the prospect of having to work into what should have been the “golden years” in order to make up for rising healthcare costs and falling property values. To academics, this confluence of events serves as a clear reminder of the role that research can play in identifying solutions that will improve our lives and help us to age well as a society.

Understanding how research on health behaviors, decision making, retirement planning, social engagement, and work productivity can help to help improve people’s long-term life outcomes was the focus of a roundtable discussion sponsored by the National Institute on Aging (NIA) at the APS 23rd Annual Convention. The roundtable convened experts from the fields of psychology, economics, and public policy and featured presentations of ongoing interdisciplinary work.

One effective way to promote positive life outcomes, is to focus on changing the economic or institutional environment. Mitigating negative environmental influences for people living in impoverished communities, for example, may be as simple as giving them money. Arie Kapteyn, RAND Institute, discussed research conducted in Yucatan, Mexico, showing that people in impoverished communities who were given monthly social security payments were able to use more medical services, leading to improved memory, decreased hunger, decreased alcohol consumption, and overall greater satisfaction with health.

Helping people to move away from high-poverty environments may be another way to improve long-term life outcomes. Jens Ludwig, University of Chicago, presented evidence from the Moving to Opportunity for Fair Housing program, sponsored by the Department of Housing and Urban Development, suggesting that providing individuals with vouchers enabling them to move out of high-poverty neighborhoods led to improvements in their subjective well-being and mental health, although the effects on economic, academic, and behavioral outcomes were less clear.

Changing aspects of the economic or institutional environment will only help to set the stage — individual behavior remains a significant influence on life outcomes. Many of us have a hard time engaging in certain everyday behaviors, such as getting our servings of leafy greens or saving for a rainy day, even though we know these behaviors will be good for us over the long haul. Research has shown that this phenomenon, called delay discounting, is a powerful cognitive phenomenon: We tend to be present-focused, opting for smaller immediate rewards over larger but later rewards.

Psychological scientists and behavioral economists have been investigating different ways to circumvent this often unhelpful cognitive bias. David Laibson of Harvard University discussed one approach that has gained attention among policy makers: the use of nudges. In general, nudges are techniques that can be implemented at the institutional or individual level to help us to get around our cognitive biases and make decisions that benefit us over time. One well-publicized nudge, default enrollment, capitalizes on people’s tendency to stick with the default option and seems to be effective in helping people save more in their company-sponsored 401(k) plan. Another nudge that has been effective in boosting 401(k) enrollment, active choice, requires that people make an explicit decision about enrollment within a specific time frame. Active choice has also shown promise as a method for getting people to sign up for home delivery of prescription medications, which helps them to keep up with their healthcare regimen. A third nudge, implementation intentions, has been shown to significantly increase receipt of the flu

vaccine, simply by encouraging people to create a concrete plan for when they would go to get the vaccine.

Changing aspects of the environment and providing decision-making aids like nudges are useful tools for improving life outcomes for people, but one common approach that seems to be relatively ineffective is information-based education. Laibson and fellow economist George Loewenstein of Carnegie Mellon University agreed that when it comes to behaviors like healthy eating or saving for retirement, most of us already have the information we need. The problem is that there are other competing interests that often overtake the behaviors we know are good for us. As Loewenstein pointed out, nutritional labeling perfectly illustrates the popularity and pitfalls of information provision. Policies that require the inclusion of nutritional information on restaurant menus have not produced consistent evidence of reductions in people's calorie intake, and it is possible that healthy choices at one meal are offset by less healthy choices at other times in the day.

The projects presented at the roundtable highlight the potential of research approaches that harness the strengths of economics and psychology. These interdisciplinary approaches can help us understand the environmental and individual obstacles that people have to overcome in order to engage in behaviors like eating less or saving more. By bringing together scientists from several disciplines, the NIA hopes to promote rigorous research programs that can test interventions at various levels and identify the strategies that are most likely to support adaptive aging on a large scale. The hope is that this kind of research can help us to successfully weather difficult times and lead us to a healthier, wealthier future.