

The SCORE Project for Advancing Research on Religion and Cooperation (SPARRC)
Modeling and Theory Development Workshop
January 10-12, 2027
Mexico City

Call for Proposals from Early-Career Investigators

With the support of a grant from the Templeton Religion Trust, and in advancement of its ambitious, multi-decade [Social Consequences of Religion \(SCORE\) Initiative](#), the SCORE Project for Advancing Research on Religion and Cooperation (SPARRC) will host its second methodology workshop on January 10-12, 2027 in Mexico City.

Our topic this year is **“Developing Formal Computational Models of Religious and Moral Phenomena.”** Theoretical psychologists have in recent years developed methods for teaching researchers how to translate the informal verbal theories that undergird most social-science thinking into formal computational models, generally articulated in the language of mathematics that are specific, generative, and falsifiable. These methods are new territory for many practicing social scientists, and this small, two-day workshop will provide a gentle introduction to this new way of building research programs.

This workshop will be led by two field leaders in the development and testing of formal computational models in psychology: Professors [Fieri Cushman](#) (Harvard University) and [Noah Van Dongen](#) (Erasmus University).

We welcome proposals from **early-career investigators** for **travel grants of \$3,000** to fund the cost of attending the workshop.

What is SPARRC?

SPARRC is the first Strand of the SCORE Initiative. It started in 2020 with a landscape review and analysis of the state of the literature on religion and cooperation. That review informed the design and priorities of a two-stage research phase, which it is currently in the middle of: In the first stage, Seed Grants were awarded to 11 research teams to lay the groundwork for Landmark Projects that have the potential to transform research on the consequences of religion for cooperation. A select few projects will move on to the Landmark Project Stage for additional funding next year. SPARRC also funds other field-building endeavors, including methodology workshops for early-career researchers.

Why a Methodology Workshop?

SPARRC seeks to build a community of scholars. Our main goal is to expose researchers to ideas and skills to improve the quality of their research, but we also hope the workshops will, as a side effect, help to improve the rigor of research on religion and morality in general, especially among younger scholars.

Why Formal Theory and Computational Modeling?

Formal modeling provides a common, abstract language that allows researchers across fields to share ideas and insights. It is also a useful tool for building precise, explicit connections between theoretical claims and their associated empirical tests. Finally, many formal models are “composable”—like Legos; model components can be recombined into alternative models, and different models can connect together to solve larger and more interesting problems. For an introduction to the role of formal models in social psychology, and their associated benefits for theory-building, see:

Cushman, F. (2024). Computational social psychology. *Annual Review of Psychology* 75:625-652. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-021323-040420>

van Dongen, N., van Bork, R., Finnemann, A., Haslbeck, J. M. B., van der Maas, H. L. J., Robinaugh, D. J., de Ron, J., Sprenger, J., & Borsboom, D. (2025). Productive explanation: A framework for evaluating explanations in psychological science. *Psychological Review*, 132(2), 311–329. <https://doi.org/10.1037/rev0000479>

Workshop Details

The workshop will be held at [Casa de California](#) in **Mexico City** from **January 10-12, 2027**. Programming will begin with a welcome dinner on the 10th, followed by two days of small group sessions.

Topics covered will include:

- Explanatory inference and productive explanation
- Theory specification
- Mechanism building
- Fundamentals of cognitive computational modeling
- Trial-level model fitting and model selection
- Overview of common methods including Bayesian inference, value-guided decision-making, and multi-agent cooperation and competition

Eligibility

To be eligible to apply, individuals must be:

- An assistant professor, a postdoctoral fellow, or a student enrolled in a doctoral program
- Interested in (or, even better) actively researching a religious or moral phenomenon whose validity is supported by a robust body of scientific evidence (e.g., at least one pre-registered study). Robust phenomena might be expressed in the following form:
 - Thinking about God’s protection promotes risk-taking
 - Religious people have more punitive attitudes toward victimless crimes and violations of conventional moral norms
 - Reminders of Karma discourage dishonesty
 - Reflective/analytic thinkers have lower belief in God than intuitive thinkers
 - People intuitively associate religiosity with moral virtue

Application Instructions

Proposals are due by 11:59 pm Eastern Time on **September 27, 2026**. All materials should be sent as a single PDF to **sparrc.rfp@gmail.com**. Put the words “Modeling Workshop Proposal” in the subject line of the email. If you do not receive confirmation of receipt of your application within three days of submission, please follow up via email. Funding decisions will be emailed shortly thereafter.

Proposals should include the following components:

- A **title page** with name, position, university affiliation, and contact information.
- A **narrative** of no more than 1,000 words (excluding references) that details (a) the applicant’s interest and experience with computational/formal modeling; (b) a brief description of a relevant project the applicant is currently working on; and (c) a description of the robust religious phenomenon that interests the applicant (this needn’t be the focus of the applicant’s work).
- A **reference** section (including references to support the robustness of the religious phenomenon described in (c) above).
- A complete **curriculum vita**.

Workshop Leaders

Fiery Cushman is a Professor of Psychology at Harvard University, where he directs the Moral Psychology Research Laboratory. He received his BA and PhD from Harvard University, where he also completed a post-doctoral fellowship. He served as Assistant Professor of Cognitive, Linguistic and Psychological Sciences at Brown University from 2011 to 2014. His research aims to organize the astonishing complexity of moral judgment around basic functional principles. His laboratory investigates these issues using a wide range of methods, including surveys, laboratory behavioral studies, psychophysiology, infant and child research, functional neuroimaging, economic games and formal modeling.

Noah Van Dongen is a researcher and methodologist working on theory development and explanation in psychology. He is an Assistant Professor at Erasmus University Rotterdam and head of the Data Science Center at the Amsterdam Law School at the University of Amsterdam. His research focuses on developing practical and rigorous methods for constructing, formalizing, evaluating, and improving scientific theories. He is a co-developer of the Productive Explanation framework, developer of PsychoModels, and founder of the Theory Methods Society. His broader work aims to strengthen theory development as a systematic part of scientific practice.

Project Leaders

Michael McCullough is SPARRC’s Principal Investigator. McCullough is a Distinguished Professor of Psychology and the Director of the Center for Research on Experimental Evolutionary Psychology at the University of California, San Diego. As an experimental psychologist, he tries to identify the evolutionary and cognitive foundations of human sociality, with a special interest in understanding how and why we help each other, harm each other, trust

each other, believe and do religious things, make moral judgments, and care what other people think about us.

Don Davis is SPARRC's Co-Principal Investigator. Davis is a Professor of Counseling Psychology at Georgia State University and he serves within the Matheny Center for the Study of Stress, Trauma, and Resilience. Donnie did undergraduate work at Yale and his doctorate at Virginia Commonwealth University. He completed his psychology pre-doctoral internship at Clemson University and is currently licensed in the state of Georgia. His research and clinical interests focus on human strengths and relational virtues such as humility, forgiveness, and gratitude.