

## Arsht Research on Ethics and Community Grant

### Making Psychological Research Safe for Research on Virtues: Debunking the Situational Determination of Ethical Decisions

2012-2013

**Faculty:** Blaine J. Fowers, Ph.D.

**Students:** Tyler Lefevor, Laura Cohen, Samantha Lang, Nicole Garcia, and Giovanna Ibias

**School of Education**

#### Abstract

This study is an empirical review of the literature known as a meta-analysis, in which the strength of research effect sizes across an entire literature can be tested statistically. We anticipate including the results from 400-600 quantitative studies in our analysis. In this study, we will re-examine a long-held conclusion in social psychology that situational factors are the primary determinants of helping behavior. There is extensive research documenting the influence of situations on behavior, which has led some scholars to draw the erroneous conclusion that *only* situations influence behavior and that moral character does not play a role. This venerable reading of the literature has impeded the study of virtue and character, and undermined psychologists' confidence in the relatively small number of investigations of character. This study is particularly timely in that there is growing interest in research on moral character, but the prospects for publishing the findings is diminished by the erroneous consensus on situational determinism. This meta-analysis will document quantitatively that there is a significant occurrence of helping behavior that is not a result of situational factors. The study will use the very research results that have underwritten the situational determinism conclusion to show that this conclusion is not nearly as well-founded as its promoters claim. The original theoretical and empirical results of this study will show that the situational factor literature itself is more consistent with an Aristotelian account of character than with situational determinism. The results will support the growing interest in research on moral character. In addition to the meta-analysis, we are preparing a theoretical review of situational research that will reveal a series of theoretical fallacies in the situational determinism argument. This empirical and theoretical work will clear the ground and give theoretical justification for research on the interaction of character and situations.

Please do not copy or quote without permission. For more information, please contact the University of Miami Ethics Programs at [ethics@miami.edu](mailto:ethics@miami.edu).