

[Prompt was removed before submission.]

Prompt for UNC:

Statement of Purpose – Due 12/3

- 400-700 words composed of your career goals, research experiences and other psychology-related experiences, research interests to pursue within graduate school, and any other additional strengths that will make you an excellent candidate for our graduate program.

Statement of Purpose: Write a personal statement that describes

(1) your career goals and how they evolved,

(2) research experiences and other psychology-related experiences you have had that have helped to prepare you for graduate school, and

(3) research interests you would like to pursue in graduate school and why you feel UNC fits these interests.

Feel free to include any additional information that you think would help us to understand your strengths as an applicant for graduate study.

Suggested length 400-700 words.

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Statement of Purpose – University of North Carolina

Nathan Lautz

How do we make meaning of experience? I have been enthralled by this question since my introduction to the cognitive neuroscience of concepts as an undergraduate. While conducting an independent study on this topic, I discovered the theory of constructed emotion (TCE) and have followed this literature since. The TCE is an account of how we make meaning of our experiences in the case of emotion, positing a constitutive role for emotion concepts in emotional experience. Graduate training at the University of North Carolina will afford me the opportunity to contribute to this fascinating area and empower me to succeed in my goal of becoming a professor at an R1 university.

At Purdue I focused my course-work on cognitive neuroscience and the philosophy of cognitive science. This provided a foundation in areas like grounded cognition, functional neuroanatomy, and neuroimaging. Here I also performed data collection and analysis as a research assistant in social psychology, investigating factors which contribute to the (dis)continuation of close, interpersonal relationships and doctor-patient relationships. In the last two years I have taken graduate-level psychology courses at the University of Cincinnati, become a research assistant there, and conducted my own research into the nature of concepts, all while maintaining my full-time job. In addition I am independently working through the material of a graduate-level statistics course.

As a research assistant at the Center for Cognition, Action, and Perception at the University of Cincinnati I have focused on a project examining learning in a control task. We found differences in learning trajectories between individuals and cooperating pairs in learning a difficult coordination pattern and were able to explain these findings based on principles from dynamical systems theory (DST). I have spent over 150 hours in the lab – running participants, discussing future directions for this project and others, and learning the concepts and analytical methods of DST. I gave a talk about this project at the 2019 Guy Van Orden Student Research Conference and presented our findings as a poster at Midwest CogSci 2019.

Beyond my research assistant role, I conceived and developed an experiment investigating representational aspects of tool concepts. Based on the tenets of grounded cognition and using analytical methods from DST, the experiment will provide information about the content and temporal dynamics of the motor components of tool concepts. I am in the preliminary stages of first-authoring a paper on this experiment (which is currently in the data collection phase) with my collaborators. As project leader, I gained valuable experience in experimental design, programming, data analysis in R, and collaborating with others.

Over the next ten months I will continue to accumulate skills, experiences, and knowledge that will facilitate my ability to conduct research at the University of North Carolina. I plan to complete data-collection and analysis on my current experiment and prepare a manuscript for publication, complete the statistics course material I started, and gain additional knowledge of neuroimaging by taking a two-part online course on fMRI. Beyond my knowledge, skills, and experiences, I will also bring qualities like passion for the field, maturity, professionalism, tenacity, and equanimity to my graduate studies.

In the Carolina Affective Science Lab directed by Dr. Kristen Lindquist, I would have the opportunity to pursue in-depth study of emotions informed by the TCE. Particular questions I would like to research are: How do language learning and cross-linguistic diversity affect emotional experience and perception? How are the default mode and salience networks involved in emotions? What are the representational and experiential components of emotion concepts and how do they vary within and between people? How can insights from the TCE be harnessed to promote well-being and inform an understanding of emotion regulation and psychopathology?

I would also like to investigate the neural and experiential correlates of directing mindfulness to sensations in the body while inhibiting conceptual processing in emotional experience. As a Buddhist practitioner I have found this emotion regulation strategy based on the TCE effective in mitigating the intensity and negative valence of certain emotional experiences. My interest in studying well-being and mindfulness also intersects with research in the Positive Emotions and Psychophysiology Laboratory directed by Dr. Barbara Fredrickson, whom I am also interested in as an advisor.