

PSYCHOLOGY OF PROGRESS — REQUEST FOR RESEARCH PROPOSALS

Compensation of \$25,000 for Investigating How Human Minds Navigate Abundance

Progress is real. By nearly every measure—life expectancy, wealth, freedom, technology—humanity has never been better off. But as material hardships disappear, new psychological challenges emerge: decision fatigue from unlimited choice, more complex forms of social organization making new cognitive and emotional demands, crises of meaning without survival struggles, and other problems of modernity.

We're launching this research initiative to understand the psychological tradeoffs of cultural, economic, and technological progress. Understanding these challenges is critical for assessing and advancing human progress, and ensuring that mass abundance and freedom translate to mass flourishing.

Much relevant research already exists, and there is a lively broader cultural conversation about the perils as well as promises of modernity. Our goal with this project is to synthesize and validate: *What are the problems and tradeoffs? For whom are they real? Why do they persist? Why do they matter?*

The Opportunity:

- \$25,000 research commission
- Intellectual freedom
- Join pioneering researchers defining a new field
- Shape public discourse on progress and human flourishing
- Light-touch mentorship from field leaders

Research Themes We seek proposals from multidisciplinary perspectives exploring one or more areas:

1. Foundational Issues:

What conceptual framing allows us to systematically evaluate economic, technological, and cultural developments in terms of psychological costs and benefits?

What normative definitions of progress and human flourishing are most appropriate and useful for this initiative? What can different fields across the humanities and social sciences contribute?

Psychologically, what constitutes progress (*outcomes* like mental health, happiness, life satisfaction) and what is required for progress (*predictors* like agency, optimism, trust, grit, openness)?

How can we differentiate the kinds of psychological challenges that progress presents? (New problems caused by progress *versus* problems based on changing expectations *versus* perennial human problems that don't go away with prosperity).

2. Challenges of Expanding Freedom: How do we navigate choice overload, eroding traditions, declining social bonds, and the struggle to form identity amid shifting norms and endless lifestyle options? When and for whom do the following kinds of issues arise (if ever):

- Eroding shared morality/norm consensus, causing anomie
- Decision fatigue from unlimited choice
- Decline of family/community participation and fertility rates
- Increased social sorting, homophily, and ideological polarization
- Freedom to exit groups and institutions diminishes civility, investment in repair

3. Challenges of Material Abundance: What happens to meaning, resilience, and social cohesion when survival pressures disappear? How do we address hedonic adaptation, delay gratification, and shifting expectations? How do we optimize health and foster challenging growth over safetyism and comfort? When and for whom do the following kinds of issues arise (if ever):

- Crisis of meaning without struggle to survive or provide
- Risk aversion and 'safetyism' reducing resilience
- Hedonic adaptation diminishing appreciation of improvements
- Subjective inequality offsetting objective gains in quality of life
- Status competition replacing positive-sum endeavors and relationships

4. Challenges of Technological Change: How do convenience, information overflow, and digital life affect cognition, character, and community? How do new technologies change habits for better and for worse? What valuable traits or developmental experiences get displaced by technology? When and for whom do the following kinds of issues arise (if ever):

- Convenience diminishing character strengths
- Attention-maximizing design fosters compulsive use and narrows attention
- Automation or specialization displacing sources of meaning
- Reduced face-to-face interaction, rising loneliness, eroding trust
- Technological acceleration produces existential fears (weapons, AI, etc.)

***The example issues we include above are speculative and designed to inspire ideas and clarify the general interests and framing of our project. These themes overlap, and your ideas can span categories. You may disagree about what is occurring at all, whether it relates to progress, or whether they are really problems. You are welcome to present other ideas, even ideas that challenge basic premises motivating this proposal.**

Application Requirements

Choose the track that fits your proposal:

Track A: Foundational Questions (600 words max)

1. What foundational question will you address?

2. Why is this question essential for the psychology of progress to advance as a field?
3. What disciplines, sources, or frameworks will you draw on?
4. What would a good answer look like? How will we know you've succeeded?

TRACK B: Investigating Specific Psychological Tradeoffs (900 words max)

1. **The Problem** (300 words max)
 - What is your research question? What's the core problem or tradeoff you're investigating?
 - Why does it matter?
 - Why do you suspect the problem persists? Who do you expect suffers this problem and why?
2. **Your Approach** (300 words max)
 - How will you investigate this tradeoff empirically or theoretically?
 - What unique perspective or methods do you bring?
 - How will you establish a baseline for this problem, ensuring it is measurable? How will your approach clarify the nature and / or extent of the problem, including who faces the problem, why it persists, how widespread or costly it is?
3. **Expected Impact** (300 words max)
 - How will your approach clarify the nature or extent of the problem, including who faces the problem and why it persists?
 - What new understanding will emerge? How might this help individuals and societies manage prosperity better?

Both tracks: CV (separate attachment)

Selection Criteria

We're looking for capable researchers with interesting ideas that align with our project's approach.

We welcome both theoretical and empirical work, with a preference for empirical studies (with new or existing data) or systematic reviews and meta-analyses where appropriate.

We evaluate project potential on three dimensions:

Accurate: Rigorous and truth-seeking, producing data that is credible

Insightful: Original, offering new understanding or perspective on an issue

Useful: Findings that matter for how people and societies navigate and capitalize on material prosperity

We want researchers who can hold two truths: progress is real AND it can create genuine psychological challenges.

Avoid: Blind optimism, one-sided critiques that only see costs, nostalgic romanticism, simplistic narratives.

Embrace: Thinking in terms of tradeoffs, tensions, and competing values, taking people's choices and preferences seriously despite costs, technological or adaptationist solutions to problems, interdisciplinary approaches.

Expectations If Selected

- One white-paper to Cato Institute (paper will be owned by Cato, authors will be credited, will own their data, and may republish in academic journals)
- Two public-facing pieces (op-ed, essay, podcast, etc.)

Timeline:

- Application Window: January 12, 2026 - March 31, 2026
- Selection: reviewed and selected on a rolling basis
- Project Term: 18 months

To Apply Email psychofprogress.applications@gmail.com with subject line "Psychology of Progress Application"

Proposals may exceed the \$25,000 budget if additional costs are justified. Research groups may submit multiple proposals, but projects must be distinct—not overlapping pieces of the same work.

Your application is not a final pitch. If your project idea looks like a potential fit, we'll schedule a conversation to meet you and develop the project idea together.

If selected, you will be presented with a contract to commission your work. Acceptance of a proposal is not completed until a contract is signed.

Questions? If you're unsure whether your idea fits, apply. For questions: psychofprogress.applications@gmail.com