Rebecca S. Frazier Research Statement

I seek to understand and facilitate group-oriented behaviors such as cooperation, leadership/followership, and ethics. Why do we join groups and decide to cooperate with others? Why do we follow leaders and what are the expectations that we have for them in return? What role do leaders play in encouraging cooperation and ethical behavior? What are the factors that influence ethical behavior and how can they be used to create sustainable moral communities?

**Groupishness.** Why do people join groups and decide to cooperate with others? Human beings have a dual nature—we are both selfish and highly groupish. We want to preserve our own interests and distinctiveness, yet we often care deeply about the success of our team and we find meaning in our group memberships. We even seek out opportunities to lose ourselves in groups (for example by engaging in synchronous activities with others) and we want to cooperate with others towards self-transcendent goals such as preserving the environment, protecting the sanctity of human life, or even contributing to science (for an example of my self-transcendent efforts in this domain see Nosek et al. 2011; OSF, 2012, In Prep). My research explores how, when, and why we decide to join groups and to set aside our personal or selfish interests for the greater good of the group.

As a social psychologist, I examine the influence of personal factors such as political ideology and moral beliefs, as well as situational forces such as the norms for behavior within a particular environment or group. For example, I have shown that conservatives are more likely to prioritize the group over the individual when the group is a small local group such as their community or family, whereas liberals are more likely to prioritize the group when considering larger groups such as humanity, (Frazier, Nosek, and Haidt, In Prep). I argue that these differences in group prioritization behaviors may be driven by divergent moral beliefs—while liberals tend primarily to make moral judgments based on harm and fairness (is someone being hurt, is this action fair to everyone involved?) conservatives tend to consider additional more group-oriented moral concerns such as ingroup loyalty, respect for authority, and purity/sanctity (Is this action hurting the group? Does it disrespect authority or the ways things have been done previously? Is it disgusting, impure, or profane?). This greater focus on group-relevant moral concerns may explain why conservatives are more likely to prioritize smaller, local ingroups over individuals, whereas liberals take a more utilitarian perspective and focus on prioritizing universalistic groups. In my future work I’d like to continue to explore how differences in these group-oriented moral beliefs may predict people’s willingness to prioritize the group, link their identity to that of the group, and engage in self-sacrificing behaviors on behalf of the group.

In addition to our individual moral beliefs, there are a number of situational factors that may influence our desire to join groups and act cooperatively in the pursuit of group goals. For example, I’m interested in how competition can increase group cohesion and promote cooperation within the ingroup (see Lai et al. 2012 for an example of how I used a team competition simulation to form novel group associations and decrease implicit racial bias). In addition to competition, situations of group threat can also affect our desire to connect with groups. For example, I’m investigating whether people are willing to shift their standards for heroism in response to a group-related threat as a means to reaffirm their group level identity (Frazier & Trawalter, Ongoing). It’s possible that part of the reason we have heroes is not simply
because individuals act heroically-- but rather that we need to call some people heroes in order to mitigate anxiety from group identity threats.

**Leadership/Followership.** What are the functions of leadership and followership? Why do we let some people lead and why do we choose to follow? Leadership is a ubiquitous feature of human social groups and it often comes with strong expectations and responsibilities. Leaders are expected to (and do) care more about group goals than other group members and followers perceive them as being more justified than others in engaging in group benefitting actions—even when those actions are unethical (Frazier, Wills, & Nosek, in prep). Yet, while we may cut our leaders more slack when they engage in unethical actions, we may simultaneously hold them to a higher moral standard than other members of the group. Leaders may be given a certain degree of moral flexibility when their actions benefit the group, but when they engage in selfish actions or bring negative consequences to the group I predict that they may be punished more harshly than other group members and face ostracism (Frazier, Wills, & Nosek, Ongoing).

In addition to punishing leaders for the actions they commit, we sometimes hold leaders accountable for the actions of their followers as well. With Bobbie Spellman, I’m currently investigating this “Captain of the Ship” phenomenon whereby the captain (or leader) has a responsibility to go down with the sinking ship and be held accountable for the actions of his or her followers. In the law this sort of accountability is called imputed liability—the idea that leaders and others in positions of power (parents, caretakers, and managers) can be held legally liable for the actions of those under them. However, legal standards for liability and accountability do not always match the perceptions held by the public, so I’m working on understanding how and where they diverge and what these divergences imply for our understanding of causality in the law and the mind.

In addition to basic expectations about how leaders should behave, we also have strong expectations and stereotypes about who should lead. One of the most prevalent of these stereotypes is the idea that leaders should be men. While increasing numbers of women are entering the workforce each year and self-reported (explicit) gender stereotypes are decreasing, unconscious (implicit) stereotypes associating women with family and men with career persist (Frazier, Kesebir, & Nosek, In Prep; also see Nosek, Hawkins, & Frazier, 2011, 2012 for more broad reviews of implicit social cognition). These stereotypes feed into the perception that women should be or are at home with their families while men pursue career and leadership opportunities. In my prior work, I have developed an empirically-based leadership training program for young underprivileged girls designed to leverage positive role models and increase leadership self-efficacy (Frazier, Innella, & Hoyt, 2009). In the future, I’d like to extend this work by investigating situations in which gender and leadership stereotypes may more closely align (for example, when the leadership situation calls for relational expertise) and the intersections between race, gender, and leadership (with Ashleigh Rosette at the Fuqua School of Business).

The associations surrounding leadership not only encompass expectations about how leaders should behave, or who they should be—but can also include beliefs about what leadership actually is. We all hold stereotypes and beliefs about what it means to be a leader and while there are some traits we more commonly associate with leadership (such as masculinity,
competency, dominance, and extraversion) we all differ slightly in these associations. One particularly interesting association is that of leadership and ethics. While we often want our leaders to be ethical, ethics is not always the first thing that comes to mind when we think of leadership. In fact, ethical leadership is sometimes said (humorously) to be an oxymoron. In one of my ongoing projects, I’ve been exploring individual differences in the extent to which community leaders implicitly associate the concepts of leadership and ethics. With Dave Mayer and Scott De Rue at the Ross Business School I’m working with real organizational leaders to see whether those who implicitly associate ethics and leadership (and thus hold ethics more centrally relevant to their conception of leadership) are more likely to act ethically or be rated as ethical within their organization.

**Ethics.** What are the factors that influence ethical behavior and how can they be used to create sustainable moral communities? What is the best way to encourage ethical behavior? In many business and educational contexts we try to teach ethics in the hopes that we can promote sustainable ethical behavior that will transfer from one context to the next. However, there is still relatively little evidence that such transfer is possible. There is hardly any evidence that ethics education will change ethical behavior. To fill this gap, I’ve been evaluating the effectiveness of existing ethical education programs and to trying to identify whether ethics classes do anything, and if so, then what is the active ingredient? (Howe, Frazier, Haidt, In Prep).

In addition to teaching ethics, ethical behavior can be promoted by creating ethical systems that anticipate and minimize the impact of biases on ethical decision making. With Jonathan Haidt, Dan Ariely, Francesca Gino and others I have created EthicalSystems.org, a website designed to translate research on behavioral ethics into concrete suggestions for how to create ethical systems. Ariely and Gino have repeatedly demonstrated that despite the fact that most of us view ourselves as highly ethical individuals, most of us still frequently engage in small dishonest actions. For example, when we think it’s unlikely that we will be caught or held accountable for our actions we are much more likely to inflate our performance on a math test or take home an extra pencil from work that. Small changes in the environment, however, such as getting people to sign an honor pledge at the beginning of a task can dramatically decrease these dishonest behaviors (Shu & Gino, 2012). In addition to these small situational changes, my work explores how ethical systems can be created by leveraging aspects of our group-oriented human nature and the group-binding moral values of ingroup loyalty, respect for authority, and purity/sanctity (see Frazier & Haidt, in Prep for a review). For example, I have found that organizations with shared moral values and social norms tend to have higher cooperation and pro-social behavior both within and outside of the organization (Frazier & Haidt. Review Paper In Prep; Kluver, Frazier, & Haidt, 2012; See also ethicalsystems.org). In future research, I’d like to directly investigate the effects of priming or eliciting group-oriented moral beliefs on ethical behavior and to better understand how these moral beliefs can be used to create moral communities in which selfishness is suppressed and cooperation and trust are facilitated.