LETTER TO PROSPECTIVE PHD STUDENTS

Thanks for your interest in joining our lab! I always encourage talented and enthusiastic students to apply to our department. I would be happy to tell you more about the possibility of completing your PhD at NYU in the Social Identity & Morality Lab. The message below includes information on the research we are currently pursuing, resources, open science practices, lab culture, my mentoring model, the application process, and funding.

I am NOT planning to admit a primary PhD student into the Social Identity & Morality Lab during the next few application cycles. Therefore, I encourage any prospective PhD students to apply to work with me as a secondary mentor and instead list another faculty member as a primary mentor if you wish to join us at NYU. We have a number of excellent junior faculty in our program that you should consider applying to work with as primary mentors (e.g., Ashwini Ashokkumar, Ajua Dukar, Mark Ho, Sydney Levine, Madalina Valsceanu). (Note: to remove bias from the admissions process, I don't meet with candidates until after our admissions meeting and I used structured interviews).

Research

Our lab's research over the past two decades explores the dynamics of shared, social identities (read "The Power of Us" for the best summary of all our research). Our work is grounded in the notion that our sense of self is derived from our social environment. We flexibly form social identities with groups, from partisan to university to national affiliations, and these identities have a profound influence on how we think and act in the world—providing a lens through which we interpret the social world. The **Social Identity & Morality Lab** examines what happens to people psychologically when they define themselves in terms of group memberships, from our most rapid evaluations and verbal expressions to belief updating and behavior.

We study these issues at multiple levels of analysis, ranging from large scale social networks to social neuroscience. We will only be accepting students in my lab who are committed to learning and applying this multi-level approach. Whereas many social psychology labs use a single method (e.g., lab experiments, fMRI, social media) to conduct their research, we try to use the most appropriate method for answering our psychological question. At the moment, our lab is using a mix of social cognitive tasks, global experiments (see this recent example), economic games, and computational social science (e.g., analyzing twitter or content coding websites).

The main theoretical framework we are studying is from our paper on "The Partisan Brain: An Identity-Based Model of Political Belief". If you have to read one paper, this is a good example but the best overview of our research is my book "The Power of Us". We study these issues outside the domain of partisan identity and also examine the impact of social identity on issues that matter, like polarization, misinformation, discrimination, climate change, and public health. The PhD students who really flourish in our lab are those who have an interest in testing basic theoretical ideas about social identity in a real world domain. We describe our research on our lab website and NYU recently wrote a short summary summarizing some of the studies we have been conducting.

We have provided links to the most important papers on our lab website and you can read our monthly lab newsletter to read accessible summaries about the about the latest research from the lab. I have also provided links to a sample of projects we are currently pursuing (I am particularly interested in taking students who wish to pursue the first line of research, but am open to students with an interest in the other topics). We are currently embracing large scale global collaborations to study these issues around the globe with diverse, representative samples and rich real-world data. At the core of all our research is a rigorous quantitative approach (grounded in positivism). As such, we look for students who are skilled in statistical analysis and willing to take several stats and methods courses in graduate school. (Please highlight your quantitative skills and interests in your graduate application).

Resources & Facilities

NYU offers a highly collaborative atmosphere with lots of resources for students interested in social psychology. In addition to extensive behavioral testing space, NYU also has cutting-edge research-dedicated MRI, EEG, MEG, and TMS facilities located right in the Department of Psychology and we have access to a huge registry of patients with brain lesions. Our lab also has an eye-tracker and psychophysiological testing unit (for EMG, ECG, and SCR). Finally, we have active collaborations with the NYU Center for Social Media and Political Participation. In other words, we have pretty much every tool for conducting cutting-edge, interdisciplinary research at our fingertips.

Our lab has also been well funded over the past decade. We have received grants from the National Science Foundation, Russell Sage Foundation, American Psychological Foundation, Society for Personality and Social Psychology, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, John Templeton Foundation, Society for the Psychological Study of Social

Issues, AE Foundation, and New York University, as well as grants awarded to my students. In fact, several of my PhD students have received generous fellowships from the National Science Foundation, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, and New York University. To see our latest research, here are detailed descriptions of our latest grants from the Templeton World Charity Foundation (one is a study on the effects of social media on polarization around the world and another is to build a Global Center for Conflict and Cooperation at NYU).

We have increasingly been studying real world topics and studying interventions for topics like misinformation and climate change. However, we do not have the capacity or expertise for large scale field interventions. If you are passionate about a topic like that, there are many highly skilled scholars in our Applied Psychology Department at NYU Steinhardt as well as other universities. Our lab would not be a good fit for a student with those interests.

Open Science

Our lab is also committed to transparency, integrity, and reproducibility in the conduct of scientific research. To this end, we have been posting research materials and data online via the Center for Open Science (including posting our materials, data and analytic code as well as pre-prints of our scientific papers). We only accept students who are committed to aligning scientific values with scientific practice. Although it is often overlooked, producing reproducible science also requires rigorous and thoughtful research design, analysis, and theory. Tessa West and I also teach a professional development graduate seminar that exposes students to these issues (you can see the syllabus here)

We are also very active with sharing our research and scientific outreach. We believe that scientific knowledge is a public good that should be shared in an ethical and open manner with other scientists and the public. We also share all our papers publicly, first as preprints and then as pdfs on our website. Finally, we have a popular newsletter where we share every paper with over 1000 readers. We are a great lab for students who share our passion for sharing research broadly. Members of our lab often take science writing workshops, write op-eds for the public, and build a skillset talking about science with members of the media and the general public. It is our hope that educating the public will improve scientific discourse and greater literacy on these issues. Of course, engaging the public also requires a degree of professionalism and nuance to maintain the trust of the public.

A big part of our philosophy is intellectual humility. All of us come to our research with theories, ideologies, and personal beliefs. But our lab takes a data driven approach to all of these issues. When we run a study or test an intervention, we try to listen to the data and revise our beliefs. This means you should be prepared to be wrong…a lot. If you want to prove your pet theory or push a political agenda that is not open to falsification, then this is the wrong lab for you. However, if you are excited to design rigorous studies and remain open minded about the results you will be a great fit for our lab. We believe this type of approach is more likely to benefit scientific discovery–and prove far more useful for real world application.

Lab culture

A central part of our lab culture is inclusion & collaboration. We attract students and collaborators from around the world and across the academy. As such, we have an extremely diverse lab in terms of nationality, backgrounds, expertise, and perspectives. As such, we care deeply about creating a supportive environment that will maximize everyone's happiness and success. Our students are also actively involved in shaping the lab culture and they mentor and support one another, providing everything from a sounding board to skills training. Students receive mentoring from everyone in the lab as part of their training and have a chance to mentor undergraduate and, eventually, fellow graduate students. Thus, it is critical that our lab members value collaboration over competition, embody a sense of openness and curiosity, and maintain an attitude of intellectual humility. We are only willing to recruit new lab members who share these values (if this doesn't sound like a good fit for you, we recommend a different lab where the culture would be a better fit).

Our lab is a good place for PhD students who are willing to pursue high risk, ambitious projects since many of our projects go beyond traditional lab based methods and samples. Students who wish to pursue more conventional approaches are still welcome to attend our lab meetings and can collaborate on projects. However, they would not be a good fit as a primary student in the lab. The students who flourish and enjoy our lab tend to be those who are willing to learn new methods and engage in higher impact projects. They are willing to obtain larger, more diverse samples, learn difficult new methods and statistical techniques, interact with people who have complementary expertise, and go the extra effort to ensure their research is more likely to be robust and enduring.

We have a hybrid work model, where we host hybrid lab meetings and occasionally meet virtually. However, the expectation is that graduate students are in the office 3-4 days per week during the academic year. This allows students to attend events, meet guest speakers, receive informal mentoring (from faculty, postdocs, and senior graduate students).

We treat our lab culture as a public good and the burden is on everyone to contribute to a socially and intellectually vibrant culture that, in turn, benefits everyone. We have a great tradition of senior lab members "paying it forward" by sharing support and insights to incoming lab members and expect all new lab members to contribute to this culture. This is one of the significant benefits of being in a vibrant and highly engaged lab, but it's also an expectation that all members play a role in sustaining this culture (rather than free riding, disengaging, or disparaging others). Again, we welcome people who want to be part of this culture and discourage people who do not share these values. As I note below, we balance this with a work-life balance policy to ensure no one is overburdened and people have healthy boundaries.

Mentoring model

I strongly encourage PhD students to take the lead on several projects. Becoming a first author earns them the lion's share of the credit, but also comes with significant responsibility on a project. Although we also conduct many programmatic, follow-up studies, students who are willing to pursue big questions, take initiative, and move into a leadership role tend to enjoy the lab atmosphere and fully capitalize on the resources and mentoring available to them. Of course, science is full of failure--especially with some of the projects we tend to pursue. As such, our lab also has a growth-based approach to science: we share our failures in an open, supportive atmosphere. Our lab approach was featured in the Chronicle of Higher Education if you want to learn more

As part of graduate training in our lab, students are involved in all aspects of the research process. At most labs, this entails designing studies, analyzing data, writing up the results, and disseminating the work at conferences and in journal articles. However, the students in the lab typically go well beyond this basic training. They take on many of the tasks and responsibilities that are more common among postdocs and faculty members to prepare them for the role of a professional scientist. For instance, students often co-review journal articles, co-author grants, co-organize conferences, and interact with the media who approach us to discuss their research. I also recommend them for conference panels and talks (I get asked to do far too many talks and media events so I regularly pass on these opportunities to lab members). The goal is to provide a safe and supportive opportunity to develop these skills before leaving to become an independent scientist. Applying for grants is also useful because many of my lab members earn extra summer salary or travel funding by securing grant funding. As importantly, the additional funding often allows us to pursue more interesting and ambitious research projects.

I work closely with my graduate students on all these projects. We have weekly one-on-one meetings to discuss research projects and other aspects of their graduate program. We also host a large lab meeting with students and postdocs once a week where we hear presentations, discuss research projects, comment on working papers, and host guest speakers (about 40 times a year, with breaks for holidays and conferences). We also have a lab writing group where we meet over lunch once a month to talk about our writing goals as well as a semester book club where we select and discuss a popular science book over lunch. My graduate students also plan *ad hoc* meetings with me to discuss projects, sit in graduate seminars (such as these topics), and see me and other lab members at weekly brown bag and colloquium talks. Our students often also serve as a teaching assistant for my Introduction Psych course (where they can earn extra money). And, of course, they email whenever they have other questions or issues to discuss. As such, I generally touch base with each of my students multiple times a week for most of the year (except when people are on vacation). That said, I try to give my students enough autonomy to structure their own day and work schedule as they please--what matters in our lab is not the hours you work, but the quality of your work. People who flourish in the lab are often self-driven and don't like or need to be micromanaged.

I am extremely proud of the track record of PhD student success in the lab! Of the students who have worked in the lab as my primary or secondary advisor, most have landed tenure track jobs in psychology (including Northwestern University, University of Southern California, Rutgers University, CUNY, SUNY--Stony Brook, Cornell University, University of California-Santa Barbara, University of Washington). However, a couple of students have decided to pursue non-academic jobs (at Google, United Nations and the Neuroleadership Institute). Many others are currently at postdoc positions (One is currently at Princeton and another is at Penn, and others have secured postdocs at Stanford, Yale, and NYU). We have posted a complete list of the lab alumni on our website to provide transparency about their job placements since these prospects are important to many prospective students. At last count, of all the primary and secondary PhD students and postdocs who have worked in the lab 13 have secured academic jobs and 5 have secured non-academic jobs, 2 are currently postdocs. All of them landed excellent jobs and I have no doubt my current students will have the same level of success.

We also have a very explicit work-life balance policy in the lab. We take regular holidays and August off from all scheduled meetings, plus try not to set up meetings or email one another on evenings or weekends to give people a chance to unplug from work. We also have regular lab get-togethers, such as lunches, happy hours, birthday parties, picnics, events (e.g., we recently went to a Broadway show). We also have an incredible group of alumni who visit the lab, collaborate,

and even help support current lab members. We recently hosted a conference for our lab alumni at our NYU Florence campus and plan to do this every few years to sustain our community across generations of students. We also regularly host visiting students and scholars from other countries (e.g., scholars from the UK, Brazil, Netherlands, and Spain have recently visited the lab) and these often lead to international collaborations. If this is the type of community you want to be a part of, then we strongly encourage you to apply.

Application process

If you are interested in joining our lab, please make that clear in your application—and be sure to list any other faculty with similar research interests. At NYU, we are looking for students who can collaborate with multiple faculty members. You should feel free to mention my name on your application if you would like to work with me as a primary or secondary advisor. My primary affiliation is with the doctoral program in social psychology, and I encourage you to read more on our website if you are interested in applying to the Social Psychology PhD Program. I am also interested in working with PhD students who are primarily affiliated with labs in Cognition & Perception or the Center for Neural Science, although I cannot serve as the primary advisor to students admitted through these programs due to the way our graduate student funding is administered. I currently have active collaborations with several faculty in the department, including Tessa West, Marjorie Rhodes, John Jost, Peter Gollwitzer, and Madalina Vlasceanu among others. Here is more information about the application process at NYU.

Naturally, many prospective students are eager to talk to faculty and see the facilities for themselves. To ensure fairness in the admissions process, I make the same information available to all applicants and do not meet with applicants in person until the open house. Every year, we invite the top ~20 applicants to visit NYU in February/March as part of an intensive two day Open House/Interview. This is an opportunity for prospective students to see the facilities and meet the faculty and students in person to ensure if there is a good fit. This is a lot of fun for everyone and we have funds to help offset travel costs to NYU. *At the Open House, we will present a lot of details about the program. So please save all your questions about the program or university until the open house and we will be more than happy to answer them in person!*

I can not speak directly about your chances of admittance to the program until the admissions committee reviews your complete application in December. But I want to be transparent about the fact that our program is highly competitive--we get 200-300 applications to the Social Psychology PhD Program every year. If you need help getting started, I recently wrote this column with 10 tips for applying to graduate school. I hope you find it helpful! In our program, the research statement is often what sets apart equally qualified students. Here are my tips for writing a truly outstanding research statement. The key is to clearly articulate how your research interests connect to my lab and other faculty members. Students who provide clear evidence that they have read our papers and thought deeply about how they might extend our research are usually the ones we usually decide to interview. I cannot stress this enough. If the statement sounds generic, like it was written by AI, it will likely not be competitive.

And if you are lucky enough to land an interview at NYU or another program, here is some advice we wrote for acing the interview stage. To reduce bias from the process, I use structured interviews and give prospective students a dataset to analyze to ensure they have basic analytic skills. I also give prospective students a working paper or grant to read in advance of the interview since it offers a sneak peek into our future research (which is the most common question I get at the Open House). All materials will be given in advance to allow students to prepare, solicit advice from their mentors, and do any necessary background research prior to the Open House.

Our lab is committed to ensuring equal access to opportunity to students from a range of diverse backgrounds. As a first generation college graduate, I am aware of many of the barriers that can make the application process onerous. If you are in a position of financial hardship, NYU offers an application fee waiver. You need to request the waiver prior to your application (to learn more go here). Please note that we have made the GRE optional. Hopefully these opportunities will help reduce any barriers to your application to our program.

Funding

If you are admitted, NYU offers a relatively generous funding package for PhD students that includes a minimum stipend of ~$35,000/year plus a full tuition scholarship (~$60,000/year) and benefits for five years. We also offer a summer research salary in the first year (~$6,000) and an initial $1000 to offset moving or other costs. In total, our guaranteed compensation package exceeds $450,000 over 5 years. Many students make a significant amount of *additional income* serving as a teaching assistant or instructor and by securing research fellowships. As such, there are many opportunities to increase your salary and our students make an average of $6,000/year extra from teaching (the Head TA for my Introduction to Psychology class makes an additional $10,000/semester). That said, I want to be transparent and

acknowledge that you could likely make more money working as a full time lab manager or pursuing a position outside academia.

Housing in NYC can be also expensive and this is a legitimate concern. Thankfully, many of our students receive student housing to help minimize these costs or live in areas of Brooklyn, Queen's or Jersey City with subway access to reduce costs. We also have special 6th year funding for several students and I am also committed to maximizing the potential income of the students in my lab to ensure they can focus on their academic pursuits and graduate in a timely fashion. Many write grants and secure additional salary to the standard funding package. Therefore, the total compensation of our students is often significantly higher than the minimal guaranteed funding.

As I noted above, many PhD students in my lab have won NSF Graduate Fellowships or other prestigious fellowships (e.g., SSHRC). I strongly encourage all applicants to apply for any potential funding or fellowships. This will enhance your income and could free up more time for research if you do not want to pursue teaching opportunities. As such, I would strongly urge you to apply for NSF funding if you are eligible or any other fellowships that you are eligible to receive. If you are admitted and bring your own funding, it usually results in a considerably higher stipend which can be very helpful for students. If you apply for any funding, please mention it in your application.

Finally, I strongly encourage you to apply to other programs. This will give you the best chances of securing a position in a PhD program. For instance, we have an outstanding list of lab alumni who are now successful faculty members at other universities. They are doing similar research and would be a great fit if you are interested in our lab. I strongly encourage you to review the list of lab alumni and reach out to them about similar opportunities. Similarly, here is a website with other faculty who are looking to admit PhD students this year (note that the vast majority of faculty do not use that site, but at least it signals a few labs who are actively looking). I hope you find it helpful. Feel free to share any of the links or advice in my email with your friends or fellow students who are applying for PhD programs.

Warmest wishes and best of luck with your application at NYU and elsewhere!
Jay