Leadership Decision Making
Abstract of Grant from National Science Foundation
24 July 2008

Principal Investigator: Dr. Jennifer Lerner

Anger has been shown to bias perceptions of risk, which can fundamentally shape leaders' most critical decisions. In one early experiment, we found that individuals who felt angry tended to engage in riskier behaviors than did individuals in a neutral emotional state. Having discovered this connection between risk-taking behavior and anger, we will explore the effect more deeply by comparing the behavior of participants from the general population to those of elite leaders.

Our large, diverse sample of high-level decision makers—representing governments, militaries, non-governmental organizations, and corporations—will participate in a series of programmatic experiments. Simultaneously collecting biological, behavioral, cognitive, and emotional data will allow us to draw implications for real-world behavior. We will examine whether anger triggers optimistic responses even when real behavior is measured, real money is at stake, and angry people are compared to those in a neutral state. We will also interview our leader-participants to learn about their decision making in a less structured format.

As an example, one of the planned experiments will examine the degree to which leaders adhere to long-term goals and strategies rather than being distracted by presently salient information. Specifically, we will study whether and how anger and accountability affect the tendency to focus too many resources on an immediate, temporary solution at the cost of a long-term, permanent gain. We predict that angry participants, as compared to neutral participants, will focus so much on winning battles that they will ultimately lose the war. We also predict that angry participants who are accountable only for their end result will take a more long-term strategy than those accountable for short-term decisions, while angry participants who have no accountability will fall in the middle. Our results will be used to educate leaders and the public about how anger may affect their most risky and important decisions.