Social learning may be one of the more important forms of adaptation available to poor households in settings with absent or unreliable formal sources of information. Dr. Leonard examines and tests the ways that households share information in seeking health care in one area of Northern Tanzania. Households can choose between a wide variety of providers if they are willing to pay the sometimes significant costs of traveling to facilities. Previous work in similar settings shows that the choices made display significant understanding of the value of health care, even for services whose quality cannot be directly observed. The research of Dr. Leonard shows that households learn about the unobservable qualities of doctors from the experiences of other households in their villages. This research can identify the impacts of learning because individual providers are often replaced, sometimes with better doctors, sometimes with worse doctors.

Dr. Leonard will present his findings and show (1) that households change the way they visit new providers as they learn about quality, visiting better providers for marginally progressively more severe illnesses over time and (2) households improve their outcomes as they learn about quality by choosing the appropriate doctors when they are sick. However, it can take up to four years for households to become confident in their assessments of new doctors, suggesting a role for formal and reliable sources of information about quality. These findings demonstrate the importance and limitations of social learning in adaptation to changing situations.