

DIVISION OF EXPERIMENTAL CRIMINOLOGY

Dr. Cynthia Najdowski is the 2017 recipient of the *The Young Experimental Criminologist Award* in recognition of her excellence in experimental scholarship during her early career

I am honored to have been selected to receive the 2017 AEC/DEC Outstanding Young Experimental Criminologist Award, and delighted to have this opportunity to describe some of the research on which the award was based. My work is centered on understanding how social psychological phenomena shape criminal justice interactions in ways that produce miscarriages of justice for disadvantaged and victimized populations, including minorities, children, and women.

In one area of research, I study how the stereotype that African Americans are prone to crime leads Blacks and Whites to have different psychological and behavioral reactions to police officers and detectives, and, ultimately, how these differences contribute to racial disparities in wrongful stops, arrests, and convictions. For instance, my colleagues and I have demonstrated that Black but not White citizens report experiencing concern that police figures will misjudge them as criminals, both when they are asked to imagine how they feel when encountering police officers (Najdowski, Bottoms, & Goff, 2015) and in a staged encounter with a security officer (Najdowski, 2012). Further, this internal psychological state of concern—known as stereotype threat—manifests in objectively observable behavior: Black men looked significantly more nervous in the staged encounter than did White men. This is important because police often rely on suspect behavior when determining what actions to take, including whether to arrest. However, that behavior may have nothing to do with criminality. I am now collaborating with Elise Fenn and Iris Blandón-Gitlin to identify interventions that can reduce minorities' experiences of stereotype threat in police encounters.

In other work, I explore miscarriages of justice that arise when children become entangled in the criminal justice system as offenders. As an example, because juveniles are increasingly likely to be tried by jurors in both juvenile court and adult criminal court and they are also disproportionately likely to falsely confess to crimes they did not commit, I study jurors' ability to evaluate the voluntariness of juveniles' confessions. Because jurors typically underestimate the social psychological influences that prompt false confessions, they are notoriously bad at recognizing the effect of coercion on adults' confessions. My research, however, suggests that jurors are sensitive to juveniles' vulnerability to coercion and, consequently, they remain impartial when they deem that a juvenile was coerced to confess (Najdowski & Bottoms, 2012; Najdowski, Bottoms, & Vargas, 2009). Jennifer Weintraub and I will be presenting results from our recent mock trial study on these issues at the upcoming American Society of Criminology meeting. To preview, we investigated how coerced confessions impacted jurors' perceptions of other case evidence, finding that an adult's coerced confession led jurors to view evidence as more inculpatory than they otherwise would. In





contrast, a juvenile's coerced confession led jurors to perceive evidence as *less* inculpatory than they otherwise would. Thus, coerced confessions might not only increase the risk of juries wrongfully convicting innocent adults, they may also increase the risk of juries becoming more critical of other evidence that they would otherwise perceive as persuasive and, ultimately, wrongfully acquit guilty juveniles.

My last area of research also evaluates miscarriages of justice that occur when people erroneously evade punishment for their harmful behavior. Specifically, I consider social psychological factors that create barriers to justice for women victims of sexual violence, including nonconsensual pornography. Increasing availability of cameras has made it easier to take covert recordings of women's intimate body parts, and whether sexually explicit images are recorded with or without consent, growing access to the Internet has facilitated the dissemination of those images without women's permission. I analyzed criminal laws from across the United States to determine how well they address these issues (Najdowski, 2017). I found that current a variety of statutory caveats make prosecution of nonconsensual pornography difficult (e.g., definitional inconsistencies, failure to protect privacy in public contexts, stipulations related to perpetrators' motives, etc.), suggesting that legal reform is needed to adequately deal with this problem. I am now integrating theories from feminist psychology and criminology to explore how policy development related to nonconsensual pornography is influenced by broader structural features of society that propagate patriarchal ideals.

To summarize, my research addresses basic social psychological phenomena—stereotype threat, racial bias, stereotype content, attribution theory, social influences, stigma, psychosocial maturity, social reactions, structural patriarchy—but, more importantly, it is relevant to understanding important real-world issues that produce miscarriages of justice—racial disparities in wrongful criminal justice contacts and convictions; treatment of juvenile offenders; and perceptions of sexual violence against women. My overarching goal is to generate knowledge that enhances equity and justice for the most vulnerable people in our society. Receiving the Outstanding Young Experimental Criminologist Award suggests that I just might be on the right track. My sincere appreciation goes to all the mentors, colleagues, and students who have guided me toward reaching this true milestone in my academic development.