Envisioning a better world

Researchers are using APF Visionary Grants to better understand and reduce incidents of racially based police shootings, campus sexual assault, biased medical decisions and more.

By Tori DeAngelis

A week and a half after police shot and killed teenager Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, New York University’s Jay Van Bavel, PhD, was watching news of a similar event unfold in nearby St. Louis. According to reports, a mentally ill young man, Kajeme Powell, was brandishing a knife a few feet away from police after he was found shoplifting. The police shot him several times and killed him.

As it turns out, an onlooker videotaped the event on a cellphone, proving that Powell was farther away than police had previously claimed.
While many would see this discrepancy as a probable police cover-up, Van Bavel, a social psychologist, thought there might be a psychological explanation.

“Maybe they were hyperthreatened in the context of racial conflict and racial stereotypes, and as a consequence, their perception of distance was slightly faulty,” says Van Bavel, who has conducted research showing that when people feel socially threatened by another group, they estimate representational landmarks to be closer than they actually are. For example, New Yorkers who feel threatened by immigration are more likely than others to think Mexico City is closer than it is, he found.

Thanks to a Visionary Grant from APF, he will be able to explore this relevant social topic some more. Van Bavel plans to analyze archival databases of police shootings and conduct lab studies of mock shootings to see whether race-based threats influence people’s perception of distance, and whether these perceptual biases predict negative outcomes, such as unnecessary shooting.

“If race is one of those things that distorts a perceived threat, you could see how it could potentially have major costs in terms of loss of life,” he says. “It would be great to be able to prevent that.”

Van Bavel is one of 10 recipients of the 2015 grants, which provide seed funding for innovative projects by early career psychologists and graduate students. The grants, which go up to $20,000, are awarded for research, education and intervention projects that use psychology to solve social problems in four areas: understanding and fostering linkages between behavior and physical health; reducing stigma and prejudice; understanding and preventing violence; and addressing long-term psychological needs in the aftermath of disasters.

This year, the highly competitive program chose awardees from 99 applicants, says APF Executive Director Elisabeth Straus.

“Each year APF’s Visionary applicants submit innovative projects that continue to astound,” she says, “and this year was no exception.”

More perspectives on racial bias  Other grantees are looking at how issues of racial discrimination may affect important areas such as medical decision-making, as well as how research can be used to improve antidiscrimination interventions.

Cynthia J. Najdowski, PhD, an assistant professor at the University at Albany, State University of New York’s School of Criminal Justice, is examining whether and how racial bias may lead to erroneous medical diagnoses of child abuse — more common when children and their parents are poor, black or both, research finds.

Less clear is why doctors make those errors, says Najdowski. To get at answers, she plans to conduct two studies. One is a lab study that examines how likely medical practitioners are to make wrong judgments based on the race or economic status of a child and his or her parents. The second is an analysis of medical records to see whether racial stereotypes are fueling the kinds of evidence practitioners seek out in cases of potential child abuse.

Like Van Bavel, Najdowski’s aim is to translate any positive findings into evidence-based information for potential interventions.

“My hope is to prevent misdiagnoses that have implications for social welfare and legal involvement,” she says, “and simultaneously ensure that children receive the care they need.”

With her grant, Monnica Williams, PhD, who directs the Center for Mental Health Disparities at the University of Louisville, will focus on improving the science that informs interventions related to racial microaggressions. These actions — seemingly innocuous comments and subtle or dismissive gestures that send denigrating messages to people of color — are widely discussed in diversity workshops, academic courses and clinical training. However, there’s little scientific guidance on creating evidence-based interventions from this material, she says.

Williams hopes to fill that gap by developing a validated measure of the likelihood and frequency of racial microaggressions as experienced by ethnic-minority college
students, and using it to design and evaluate a workshop for black and white students that she is developing based on several existing interventions.

“We are only now starting to appreciate the profound mental health consequences of racism, even in its most subtle forms,” Williams says. “This intervention could be an important step in preventing racism and promoting racial harmony.”

In another study, Columbia University graduate student Rebecca Mohr will explore whether having an “intersectional identity” — a social identity made up of multiple stigmatized identities, such as a black lesbian — tends to make a person relatively invisible to others.

She will examine the question by looking at others’ perceptions of such people, as well as how intersectional individuals process these reactions to them. In one study, for example, she’ll test whether observers more readily identify an act as sexist if the target is a white woman versus a black woman, based on research showing that people are more likely to think of a white woman first when they think of women in general. She also will measure the stress responses of intersectional individuals when they experience these passive forms of discrimination to see if their responses differ from those who experience more blatant bias.

If her theory holds, it could draw needed attention to a type of bias that likely affects millions of people, she says.

“My hope is this research will expand the way that we think about and identify discrimination,” she says.

Mind-body connections Three award winners are using their grants to look more closely at how physiology and behavior interact, with potential applications for improving health.

Lindsay Nagamatsu, PhD, an assistant professor in the school of kinesiology at Western University in Ontario, Canada, is testing whether a low-cost, noninvasive medical measurement — electroencephalography, or EEG profiles — can prevent falls in older adults. Nearly a third of seniors experience one or more falls per year, and such accidents can lead to hip fractures, hospitalization, phobias about falling, high health-care costs and even death.

Her work draws on research that she and others have conducted using higher cost technology, such as functional magnetic resonance imaging, showing that older people who fall are weak in brain areas such as functional connectivity between key brain networks and visual-spatial processing. Theoretically, EEG readings could provide the same information at much less cost, and be used as a biofeedback device to help older people strengthen the relevant brain areas, she says.

On the other end of the age spectrum, Georgia State University assistant professor Erin C. Tully, PhD, will examine the physiological, social, cognitive and behavior profiles of children high in the ability to understand and share others’ happiness, called empathic happiness, thus far an understudied group. She’ll compare the findings with similar measurements in children prone to aggression, as part of a line of research examining biomarkers for potential use in preventive interventions for kids at risk for violent and other negative behaviors.

For her grant-winning research, University of California, Irvine, graduate student Sachiko Vanessa Donley is targeting a slightly older age group, looking at whether physiological stress reactions may influence risky teen behavior in the face of peer pressure. Two research areas support the possibility: one showing that teens experience physical stress responses when they are worried about negative evaluations from peers, and the other showing that stress responses can disrupt people’s ability to make good decisions.

Donley will compare the way teens react on physiological stress measures when they think they’re being negatively evaluated by teens, or by adults.

If her hypothesis is correct, teens will react more strongly to peer evaluation, she says. If that is the case, the information could eventually be used for such practical purposes as informing police and courts about a previously unconsidered factor that could play a role in some teen criminal behavior, she says.
Helping traumatized women here and abroad

Finally, grant recipients are looking at ways to help women who have undergone very different traumas.

Ohio University assistant professor Ryan C. Shorey, PhD, will conduct a randomized controlled trial aimed at preventing sexual assault of women on college campuses. It will address key factors related to sexual assault by men, including a high likelihood of drinking alcohol before the act and endorsing unhealthy sexual norms, such as the idea that sexual aggression is OK.

A random cross-section of college men mandated to undergo an alcohol-reduction intervention will be assigned either to a group-based intervention for reducing alcohol use; a group-based intervention that addresses unhealthy sexual norms; both interventions; or a wait list. At two, four and six months postintervention, they will then provide self-reports on alcohol use, sexual activity and other relevant issues.

The results could lead to interventions that prevent sexual assault and numerous other alcohol-related consequences on college campuses, Shorey says.

Jessica Lambert, PhD, an assistant professor at California State University, Stanislaus, and Alyssa Banford, PhD, an assistant professor at Alliant International University in San Diego, will use their grant to help develop a framework for understanding the long-term impact of mass trauma on ethnic Tamil women in Sri Lanka. The population suffered through a decades-long civil war that ended in 2009, as well as a tsunami that hit the country’s west coast in 2004.

More than 89,000 Tamil women were widowed as a result of the war, and they’ve also had to cope with the social and economic upheaval wrought by the war and the storm, says Lambert.

“These women have been exposed to a range of potentially traumatic events over a long period of time, and many continue to face poverty and stigma related to being a widow,” she says.

The team will evaluate a range of risk and resiliency factors associated with the women’s recovery, and make recommendations on culturally-appropriate, community-based psychosocial interventions that the Sri Lankan women themselves can implement, Banford adds.

“Our hope is to uncover and find ways to meet the mental health needs through interventions that are delivered, culturally understood and sustained within and by members of the community,” she says.

For more information on the Visionary Grants, visit www.apa.org/apf/funding/visionary.aspx.