

Decision Processes Colloquia

Monday, February 23, 2026

Where: JMHH 360

When: 12:00 – 1:20 pm

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Cycles of Distrust: How Decision-makers Perpetuate Disadvantage and Distrust

ABSTRACT:

When people and groups are mistreated, how do leaders and decision-makers respond? Ideally, they would engage with victims to repair damage and restore trust. However, we identify circumstances in which decision-makers avoid victims, perpetuating cycles of disadvantage and distrust. Decision-makers expect victims to be distrustful, which can decrease their willingness to work with victims. These dynamics create double disadvantage: victims initially mistreated by one party are then neglected by others. This neglect can increase victims' distrust of decision-makers and their institutions, perpetuating the cycle. In Studies 1 and 2, we test our core hypotheses with important leaders: public health officials and local government officials. In Studies 3–5, we use tightly-controlled experimental paradigms that employ incentive-compatible economic games, demonstrating these effects with decisions in real time and documenting the full cycle of mistreatment, avoidance, and distrust. In Study 6, we introduce a control condition and demonstrate that our effects extend to dyads: professionals are less willing to negotiate with those who have been poorly (vs. well) treated by previous negotiation partners. The current work provides theoretical insights into victimhood, disadvantage, and trust, while illuminating psychological processes underlying pressing societal issues: institutional distrust and inequality.

