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IN THE NEWS

Jennifer S. Lerner and Students Partner to Understand Emotions and Decision Making



Charlotte D'Acierno '16, Jennifer S. Lerner RI '14, and Paul Meosky '16. Photo by Kevin Grady, Radcliffe Staff Photographer

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As a cofounder of the [Harvard Decision Science Laboratory](#) and a professor of public policy and management at [Harvard Kennedy School](#), [Jennifer S. Lerner](#) RI '14 studies leaders and luminaries to learn—and help them understand—how emotions and perceptions affect their choices. For example, she has discovered that anger lowers one's assessment of risk, which can alter behavior. This knowledge, along with other insights, can help all of us make better choices. A year in the Radcliffe Institute's [Fellowship Program](#) provided Lerner with the opportunity to further this innovative, data-driven research in many ways, including launching work on a book for a general audience

addressing emotion and decision making.

One of the resources the Institute provided that made Lerner's work so productive was the Radcliffe Research Partnership (RRP) program, which matches exceptional Harvard College students with Institute fellows. Lerner engaged chemistry concentrator Charlotte D'Acierno '16 and English concentrator Paul Meosky '16 in important work. They collected new data for the book, critically evaluated scientific studies for a comprehensive review paper, and participated alongside public and private sector leaders in an executive education course, Leadership Decision Making, which Lerner taught at Harvard Kennedy School. "Sitting in the course sessions deepened the students' knowledge of the field and demonstrated to them the many ways in which international leaders can make ready use of scientific research on judgment and decision making," Lerner says. Meosky considers his participation in Leadership Decision Making to be "the best week I've had here at Harvard."

The partnership allowed Lerner to write and publish a comprehensive scientific review of every experiment conducted in the last 35 years on emotion and decision making. The paper includes a new theoretical model of the emotional factors that impact decision processes, which has relevance for such policy and legal questions as whether there is a beneficial role for emotion in a woman's decision process regarding abortion—a controversial topic around which states like North Dakota are currently considering legislation.

Lerner says the collaboration with her research partners made her more systematic in her thinking: "Smart students like these two question assumptions," she says. "Overall Paul and Charlotte catalyzed our research productivity and increased our lab's joy in the process. In effect, I treated them as junior colleagues, offering them the opportunity to meet key individuals engaged in academic work on our topic as well as key individuals in applied practice," Lerner says. "I did so partly for selfish reasons—the more they learned, the more they helped me. I also did so for pedagogic reasons—the structure of the Radcliffe Research Partnership program afforded a rare opportunity to have students learn in atypical, high-impact settings."

The partnership's impact was indeed high for the undergraduates and for Lerner. "It's changed how I look at life," D'Acierno says. "Assisting with Professor Lerner's research helped make me more inquisitive and less afraid to fail because the learning experience is so valuable." And by spending so much time with Lerner in the Fellowship Program's Byerly Hall, the students experienced the life of a scholar, not only conducting research but also interacting informally with colleagues in a range of fields. "Beautiful Byerly Hall became their home away from home," says Lerner. "I still remember the day they brought everything they owned to Byerly because they had to clear out of Harvard housing for a day at the transition to summer!"

For D'Acierno, Lerner, and Meosky, the Radcliffe Research Partnership program was just the beginning of a professional relationship that will continue to make a difference in the lives of both scholar and

students. Lerner's National Science Foundation grant and an additional grant through Harvard's Institute for Quantitative Social Sciences now fund D'Acierno and Meosky. They are pursuing additional work with her, during which they will develop research presentation skills. And because Lerner began research on a topic relevant to Meosky's career goals, he will serve as a junior author on a scholarly manuscript.

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