

The fashion scout and the cop: Scanning the streets with similar methods for different targets

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New York City fashion scouts and police officers often rely on a well-honed gut instinct to help make critical judgments of total strangers.

One group hunts beauty; the other, criminality – all in the same concrete jungle.

But these apparently disparate groups of expert evaluators actually have a lot in common, according to research by the University of Cincinnati's Stephanie Sadre-Orafai.

"These seemingly common sense ways of evaluating [criminality](#) and/or beauty are culturally, socially and historically located, and they are connected," says Sadre-Orafai, an assistant professor of anthropology in UC's McMicken College of Arts & Sciences. "Their similarities reveal a broader cultural logic that has the potential to be shifted but is reinforced daily through the institutionalization and public acceptance of these practices."

Sadre-Orafai will present her research "Street Suspicion: Experts & Types in Post-9/11 New York City" at the American Anthropological Association's (AAA) 112th annual meeting to be held Nov. 20-24 in Chicago. This year's theme is "Future Publics, Current Engagements." AAA, founded in 1902, has more than 12,000 members, and annual meetings typically draw more than 5,000 attendees. Sadre-Orafai will

present her research Nov. 22.

"As much as we say appearance doesn't matter, it does matter," Sadre-Orafai says. "This research is trying to link together how New York City as a space gets carved up in particular ways – where you find the criminal elements and where you find the beautiful elements. These really aren't disparate practices, they're super connected."

This study builds upon ethnographic research in the fashion industry that Sadre-Orafai began in 2003. She mostly focused on casting directors, a very select group of mediators responsible for shaping the pool of modeling talent by scouring familiar territory for the young and beautiful. Sadre-Orafai found these casting directors had been similarly indoctrinated into the industry and the talent they'd choose often resulted in over-representation of certain kinds of people.

For this latest research, Sadre-Orafai compares what she's learned about fashion scouting to the New York City Police Department's controversial stop-and-frisk program. The practice is based on the 1968 U.S. Supreme Court case *Terry v. Ohio*. It allows [police officers](#) to stop pedestrians and frisk them for weapons or contraband based on reasonable suspicion of criminal intent. Opponents of stop-and-frisk allege it unfairly targets certain racial and ethnic groups.

"There are certain kinds of ideas about multiculturalism at play. The scouting is allegedly to bring more diversity to fashion, more 'realness.' Stop-and-frisk is intended to create a safer space," Sadre-Orafai says. "This research examines how these ideas are really dependent on the imaginations of the individual scouts or officers who don't have formal training. There isn't science behind it. It's fuzzy science, but it has huge consequences."

Sadre-Orafai is considering expanding her research to include

corrections officers. For now, she hopes her presentation will serve as a provocative piece to start conversation about broader issues of surveillance.

"My core philosophical question here is, 'How do you really know something?'" she says. "We need to trouble that a little bit more."

Provided by University of Cincinnati

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