

Margaret Bull Kovera, PhD — Social Psychologist

JUSTICE IS DOUBLE-BLIND

We've all seen movies and TV shows where crime victims are asked to view a lineup of suspects and pick out the bad guy — the one who robbed the bank or shot the schoolteacher. In real life, just like in the popular media, the official administering the lineup often knows which person in the lineup is the suspect. And that's a problem.

Research by Margaret Bull Kovera, PhD, has found that witnesses are more likely to pick out the suspect when the lineup administrator knows who the suspect is, whether that suspect committed the crime or not. "This is an application of a basic research principle known as experimenter expectancy effects," says Kovera. "Police officers who know which lineup member is the suspect appear to communicate this information to witnesses through their behavior during the lineup administration." For that reason, Kovera and other psychologists recommend "double blind" lineups that are conducted by an administrator who doesn't know who the suspect is.

A professor of psychology at John Jay College of Criminal Justice since 2004, Kovera has focused her work on exploring the assumptions the legal system makes about the behavior of "legal actors" — i.e., judges, attorneys, police officers, witnesses and jurors. She has looked at how scientific evidence is used in courtrooms and has found that the U.S. Supreme Court has been wrong to assume that judges could discriminate between good and bad research. She has found that neither judges, attorneys nor potential jurors are very good at identifying flaws in scientific research, and the safeguards that are supposed to prevent this are not very effective.

ROOTING OUT JUROR BIAS

In her work as a consultant, Kovera looks at whether pretrial publicity has so tainted a pool of potential jurors that a fair trial would be impossible in a given jurisdiction.

"I conduct surveys of potential jurors in that jurisdiction and other jurisdictions where there was less media attention to the case," she says. "I then compare the responses from the two jurisdictions to see whether there is evidence that people in the current jurisdiction are so biased by exposure to pretrial publicity that it would be necessary to move the trial to a new jurisdiction to ensure a fair trial."

She also helps attorneys through the process of jury selection by trying to identify attitudes that predict verdicts. "Attitudes toward the death penalty will better predict jurors' guilt and sentencing decisions in a capital [murder] case than will their general biases in favor of the prosecution or defense," she says.

CHOOSING SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

Kovera has always been interested in why people do the things they do. As a child, she wondered "Why was my sister able to influence my parents much more effectively than I?" and "Why were mean girls so popular?" She didn't know that social psychology existed as a field of study until she took an introductory psych class in college. "The next semester, I took social psychology and statistics," she recalls. "The semester after that, I took research methods and I was hooked. I changed my major to psychology."



Margaret Bull Kovera, PhD, explores the assumptions within the legal system about the behavior of judges, attorneys, police officers, witnesses and jurors.

SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

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Margaret, Bull Kovera, PhD — Social Psychologist, continued

Even so, she wasn't sure she was on the right path. She had always been interested in legal thrillers and having a good argument. "People told me I would make a great lawyer, and I had every intention of going to law school after I finished my undergraduate degree," she says. A summer of working in a corporate law firm between her sophomore and junior years disabused her of that notion. When she returned to school, she took a psychology and law class. "I learned that it was possible to have a career in which I used social psychological theory and methods to question and examine the assumption that the law makes about human behavior," she says.

WORKING HARD AND LOVING IT

At John Jay College of Criminal Justice, Kovera teaches both graduate and undergraduate classes in research methods, juries, and psychology and law. "I spend much of my time conducting research, but that involves teaching as well," she says. "I have a large lab group, including doctoral, masters' and undergraduate students who are all involved in various aspects of the research I am conducting. So often when I am engaged in research, I am also teaching these students how to conduct research."

She considers herself extremely fortunate in her career choices. "I get to choose research questions that are interesting to me, which makes it easier to work the very long hours that I do," she says. "And there are moments when I am sitting in front of my computer, having just run a statistical analysis on our data to test some research question, that I am the only person in the world to know the answer to that question. I cannot think of many things that are cooler than that."

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