Award for Distinguished Contributions to Research in Public Policy: Saul M. Kassin

APA's Award for Distinguished Contributions to Research in Public Policy is given to a psychologist who has made a distinguished empirical and/or theoretical contribution to research in public policy, either through a single extraordinary achievement or a lifetime of work. Saul M. Kassin is the 2017 recipient of this award for his extensive scholarship into understanding how and why suspects make false confessions, leading to greater understanding of the science of confessions and reforms to policy and practice. Kassin's award citation, biography, and a selected bibliography are presented here.

Citation

"Saul M. Kassin has devoted his life's work to understanding how and why suspects confess to crimes they did not commit, how jurors and judges react to confession evidence in the courtroom, and how individuals' behaviors and decisions can be corrupted by such evidence. This dedication has prompted legal and policies changes in the interrogation room (videotaping interrogations) and courtroom (admissibility of expert testimony). His scholarship epitomizes the translation of science into policy and has been cited by the U.S. Supreme Court. He also works tirelessly to educate police, attorneys, judges, policymakers, and the media about the science of confessions."

Biography

Saul M. Kassin was born in April of 1953 and raised in Brooklyn, then in Rockaway Beach, New York. A baby boomer at his core—a child of John F. Kennedy, the Beatles, and the Vietnam War—he spent 3 years at Brooklyn College, where in 1974, he received his bachelor of science at a cost of $53 per semester. After publishing numerous letters to the editor of the city's newspapers while in high school, Kassin thought he would major in journalism until he discovered psychology. Though an unwitting subject in one of Bob Buckhout's first staged eyewitness experiments, Kassin was inspired by, guided by, and then invited to work with Professor Arthur Reber, a pioneer in the study of implicit learning. For his courage to forge into the cognitive unconscious against a behaviorist tide, Reber to this day serves as Kassin's role model.

While at Brooklyn, Kassin was riveted by *Attribution: Perceiving the Causes of Behavior*, a 1972 book of modules edited by Edward E. Jones and others and affectionately known as the "orange attribution book." For Kassin, two intellectual heroes loomed over social psychology: Stanley Milgram, best known for his profound and controversial experiments on obedience to authority, and Fritz Heider, the Vienna-born author of *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations* (1958) and architect of attribution theory. Over the years, Kassin's work has been guided by the dual themes embodied by their research: (a) Individuals can be overwhelmed by social forces, and (b) observers utterly fail to appreciate the power of these same influences.

Kassin spent 4 years at the University of Connecticut, in Storrs, Connecticut, where he obtained his doctorate in 1978. He had entered the personality program to work with Julian Rotter on Internal-External locus of control. Rotter's interests had shifted, however, and Kassin was lucky enough to be adopted by social psychologist, teacher extraordinaire, and attribution expert Charles "Skip" Lowe. Together, he and Lowe published several papers. For his dissertation, "Causal Attribution: A Perceptual Approach," Kassin created predigital animated displays involving interacting geometrical objects, modeled after Heider and Simmel's 1944 work, to demonstrate that causality can be *perceived* not only by adults but by children considered too young to draw the requisite inferences.

Kassin next received a postdoctorate degree at the University of Kansas to work with Larry Wrightsman. Wrightsman had funding for research on jury decision-making. Former President of the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues, he was the author of two popular textbooks, and scholarly books, and was unabashed in his focus on application. For someone interested in attribution, the link to juries was a perfect fit—and Wrightsman was the perfect mentor. His interests were broad and his curiosity boundless.

In what proved to be a formative year, Kassin can still vividly recall two events from the University of Kansas. The first occurred during a visit to find housing ahead of the postdoctorate. Wrightsman graciously hosted a get-together so that Kassin could meet others in the program. As soon as he entered, Wrightsman led him into his living room and introduced him to Professor Emeritus Fritz Heider. At 82, Heider appeared physically frail but brimming with the kinds of insights that filled his writings. When Kassin arrived, Heider was looking through a tome on the history of

Saul M. Kassin
Photo by
Derek Gardner

art marveling at "universalities" in form that he believed betrayed aspects of human nature. That first meeting was followed by occasional and unforgettable afternoon tea and cookies at the home of Fritz and Grace Heider.

The second event occurred halfway through the year. After pilot testing stimulus trials for jury studies, Kassin noticed that whenever a confession was included, the conviction rate surged. People fully trusted the self-report of confessions. But how did these statements come about? After looking through a popular training manual (which meant physically walking the halls of a library and filling out interlibrary loan forms), Kassin was struck by the "Milgramesque" nature of the confession-taking process. On a hunch, he nervously asked Wrightsman if he could redirect part of their jury research program to examine confession evidence. True to his nature, Wrightsman took a chance; in 1980 and 1981, they published their first two articles in this area.

After Kansas, and 2 years at Purdue University, Kassin headed east for Williams College, tucked into the Berkshires of Western Massachusetts. Once there, Kassin continued to study attribution theory and juries. He and Wrightsman devised the Juror Bias Scale and published *The American Jury on Trial: Psychological Perspectives*. Kassin then took a 2-year assistant professor leave. In 1984–1985, he was awarded a U.S. Supreme Court Judicial Fellowship, working at the Federal Judicial Center in Washington, DC, in the company of a stellar multidisciplinary group of researchers. Then in 1985–1986, he moved to Stanford University for a postdoctorate, where he taught a seminar, took classes at the law school, and worked with Phoebe Ellsworth on the first

of two surveys of eyewitness experts published in this journal.

After his hiatus, Kassin returned to Williams, with tenure, and settled in—but not before one of those unforeseen life-path-altering "chance encounters" that Al Bandura had written about in 1982. Driving back from Stanford, Kassin exited Route 70 at the University of Kansas to visit friends. While there, he and Wrightsman and Sharon Brehm went to lunch, and Wrightsman, playing the match maker, blurted out that "Sharon is looking to write a social psychology textbook" and that "Saul can write." In 1990, the first edition of Brehm and Kassin's *Social Psychology* was published by Houghton Mifflin. In the fourth edition, they picked up coauthor Steven Fein; Brehm later dropped out, and Kassin and Fein picked up Hazel Markus. Published in 2017, by Cengage Learning, this text is now in its 10th edition (Kassin, Fein, & Markus, 2017).

Working with an array of dazzling undergraduates, many of whom went on to get their doctorates in psychology, and talking to wrongfully convicted men and women whose cases he worked on, Kassin continued to be troubled by confessions. An ethical laboratory paradigm was sorely needed for hypothesis-testing purposes. The breakthrough came in 1996 when he and his student Lee Kiechel devised after extensive pilot testing a protocol for eliciting false confessions (Kassin & Kiechel, 1996). They accused participants of crashing a computer by hitting a forbidden key. All were innocent. Yet 69% signed a confession, 28% internalized guilt, and 9% confabulated memories. These rates were heightened when participants were confronted with a false incriminating eyewitness.

Getting this first experiment approved by the Institutional Review Board and off the ground marked the start of a new era in Kassin's lab—and in the field. He and his students and colleagues went on to stage mock crimes, interview prison inmates, survey police, observe mock interrogations, and study actual cases. These studies revealed that police cannot distinguish between truthful and deceptive denials, that lawful interrogation tactics can induce false confessions, that innocent people waive their Miranda rights, that juries infer guilt from confessions almost regardless of the circumstances or other evidence, and that confessions can corrupt lay witnesses and forensic examiners through the operation of forensic confirmation biases. The evolution of this research appears in a trilogy of *American Psychologist* articles (Kassin, 1997, 2005, 2012).

In the 1990s, research on confessions took hold and the Innocence Project was founded, which used DNA testing to exonerate innocents, some of whom had confessed. The problem was beyond dispute; the need for reforms was clear. In 2005, Kassin proposed a scientific review or white paper to Division 41 of APA, also known as the American Psychology-Law Society. An author team was assembled, the proposal was approved, and in 2010, the article (Kassin

et al., 2010) was published. This paper, highly cited, has served as a template for APA amicus briefs on false confessions.

The course of events in one's life bears testament to a principle that guides Kassin's mentoring of students: *If an opportunity presents itself, find a way to seize it.* In August of 2002, while preparing for a new semester, Kassin received a phone call from an *ABC News* producer working on a story about the 1989 Central Park jogger case. They had interviewed a prisoner claiming that he had raped the jogger—not the five boys who confessed in 1989, resulting in their convictions. ABC asked Kassin to serve as an on-air analyst. Is it possible that *five* false confessions had been taken in a single investigation, right smack in the middle of New York City? Kassin did not hesitate. After poring through the case files, he had little doubt that the original confessions were false. Yet the city's newspapers were reluctant to accept the new narrative. The New York Police Department fought it. There was no public outcry. Uniquely positioned to educate the public, Kassin wrote an op-ed article entitled "False Confessions and the Jogger Case," in *The New York Times*. Six weeks later, the convictions were overturned. As seen in the 2012 documentary, *The Central Park Five*, this case had become one of those "teachable moments."

Kassin is currently a distinguished professor at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, back in New York. When recruited there in 2006, John Jay was building a new doctoral program in psychology and law. Located in Manhattan and promising to draw outstanding students from all over the world, this felt like an offer Kassin could not refuse. With John Jay as a home base, he obtained National Science Foundation funding to examine the effects of video recording interrogations. He has also worked with the Innocence Project and appeared before state commissions, judges, and policymakers empowered to reform the system.

A product of the baby boom generation, what drew Kassin into this field was not only the challenge of solving the human mind as one might a Rubik's cube, but the promise of making the world a better place. Using psychology to promote social justice, and move a system disinclined to do so, requires a laser-focused determination—in the lab and out in the world. Psychologists involved in public policy and law know all too well that while a lot has been accomplished, we have barely scratched the surface.

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