

Champions of Psychology: Saul Kassin

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This is an ongoing series in which highly regarded professors share advice on the successes and challenges facing graduate students.

APS Fellow **Saul Kassin** is Distinguished Professor of Psychology at John Jay College of Criminal Justice and Massachusetts Professor of Psychology at Williams College. After receiving his PhD from the University of Connecticut, he worked as a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Kansas. He was later awarded a U.S. Supreme Court Judicial Fellowship and served as a postdoctoral fellow and visiting professor in the Psychology and Law Program at Stanford University. He is the author of numerous textbooks and has co-authored and edited various scholarly books, including: *Confessions in the Courtroom*, *The Psychology of Evidence and Trial Procedure*, and *The American Jury on Trial: Psychological Perspectives*. Several years ago, Kassin pioneered the scientific study of police interrogations and confessions, with an emphasis on why innocent people confess to crimes they did not commit and the impact of this evidence on juries. He has also studied eyewitness identifications, focusing on questions pertaining to “general acceptance” within the scientific community. Kassin is also a Fellow of APA

and has served on the editorial board of *Law and Human Behavior* since 1986. He has testified as an expert witness in state, federal, and military courts; lectures frequently to psychologists, judges, lawyers, and law enforcement groups; and has appeared as a media consultant on several national and syndicated news programs.

What led you to choose psychology?

I can't say that I know. I found myself reading psych books on my own in high school — mostly Freud, Jung, and the classic personality theorists. When I got into college, I was interested in both psychology and journalism. Then I took a course on the history of psychology with Arthur Reber. It was awesome. Arthur invited me to work in his lab, collecting data for his astonishing experiments on implicit learning. I was hooked. I flew through college in three years, applied to graduate school and did not turn back.

How did you go about developing your current research interest?

After getting my PhD at the University of Connecticut, [where I did] attribution research with Charles Lowe, I took a postdoctoral fellowship to work with Larry Wrightsman at the University of Kansas. I was interested in attribution theory and Larry was studying juries; the match was perfect.

Focused on juries, I was determined to collect and pilot test as many stimulus trials as I could get my hands on for use in research. Right away, it was clear to me that while many jury researchers were studying the effects of physical attractiveness and other non-evidentiary cues, mock jurors quite clearly followed the strength of the evidence. This realization led me to shift focus from jurors to the evidence on which they based their decisions. In particular, I couldn't help but notice that every time a stimulus trial had a confession in it, all response variability was eliminated. Everyone voted guilty.

That observation sparked my interest in confessions, the so-called gold standard in evidence. The more I scratched the surface, the more I realized how important it was to develop a psychological science of confession evidence. To this day, the phenomena I encounter in this area continue to shock me.

How did you select your graduate program?

While working in a cognitive lab as an undergraduate, I read a book that had just come out — a collection of now classic attribution articles that most of us called “the orange attribution book.” Some of it was downright profound, so I applied to the University of Connecticut personality program, hoping to work with Julian Rotter who had devised the I-E scale for research on locus of control. He moved on but I then managed to work with Charles “Skip” Lowe on attribution theory.

What were the most rewarding aspects of graduate school for you?

To this day, I look back on graduate school as an intense but very rewarding experience. I worked hard and played hard. The first time I stepped in front of a class as a TA, I had just turned 22. I remember wondering if the students would even listen to me and was shocked when they did. As for research, well, I thought that was so much fun I couldn’t believe that someone would actually pay me to do it.

What suggestions do you have for choosing a mentor?

I think there are three important characteristics to look for in a mentor: That his or her research area excites the student, that he or she be in a productive stage of life, and that he or she have a history of being supportive of graduate students — which means generous with time, money, authorship, and intangibles. Students also differ in terms of the amount of autonomy they want. Find a mentor who is on the same page, someone who gives enough but not too much direction.

How does a graduate student become a first-rate researcher?

To become a first-rate researcher, you’ve got to find a topic that you feel passionate about, then immerse yourself in the literature and go out of your way to work on basic skills—the stats, writing.

What advice would you give to graduate students who want to have careers in academia?

Keep your options open. Too often when I travel I talk to graduate students who pigeon-hole themselves early on as researchers on track for a university or as teachers headed to a small college. Graduate school has a way of sparking new interests and bringing out hidden talents. Don’t narrow your options too early; be prepared to surprise yourself.

What do you see as the future of psychology?

Psychology is in a great place. The foundations of the discipline have been broadly built and widely applied. As a result, today’s students may find themselves one day not only in psych departments but in schools of medicine, business, law, and education. Society is becoming increasingly empirical in its approach to problem solving. And for problems that involve matters of human behavior, psychological science leads all other disciplines.

How did you go about getting your first job once you had attained your degree? How long were you employed at your first job?

Right out of school, I took a postdoc at the University of Kansas. I really can’t overstate the value of that experience — particularly for me. I had flown through college in three years and graduate school in four, so having time to catch my breath, collect my thoughts, write up my dissertation, and plan the next

step — without having to teach or serve on committees—was invaluable. After the one year, I accepted a position as assistant professor at Purdue University, where I spent two years before moving to Williams College.

If you could design the ideal program for training graduate students, what would it be like?

Excellent graduate programs already exist, so there is no need to invent a new wheel. But programs do differ, so the trick for students is to identify and put themselves into the right one. I don't think a single model works for all students. Some are drawn to basic science, others want to solve practical problems; some want autonomy; others need direction. To me, an ideal program is one that has more than one concentrated area of strength and encourages students to work in more than one lab. In this way, every student gets a chance to establish his or her own identity.