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National eye

Professors' witness identification research gets attention

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CEDAR FALLS - On Monday, Oct. 21, Kimberly MacLin was brutally stabbed to death -- twice.

She lived to tell about it.

The assistant professor at University of Northern Iowa was simply demonstrating to her students what actually goes on at the scene of a crime. Two sections of psychology and law students knew a crime was going to occur, they just didn't know when. They'd already been assigned roles as everything from police officers to witnesses and attorneys. For the rest of the semester, MacLin's students will investigate her murder and try the case.

MacLin is particularly interested in one aspect of their investigation: the process of identifying the culprit. Over the past few years, she has researched the role stereotypes play in eyewitness identification.

"We have a lot of stereotypes. We use them all the time," MacLin said. "It's a normal cognitive process. They're not inherently bad."

Her research is viewed by some as so important, the ABC newsmagazine "20/20" filmed a segment about her last summer. They'll return this winter -- after she finishes the second phase of her study -- to film more.

And while a lot of research has investigated the role of stereotypes in jury decision-making, there hasn't been much studied about how stereotypes affect how people choose someone out of a lineup or their ability to remember a face.

Enter MacLin No. 2

Another UNI assistant psychology professor researches eyewitness identification as well. His research focuses on face recognition and memory and is considered so important by some that he's called around the country to consult for defense cases. His name is Otto MacLin, and he's Kim's husband.

"The basic question is how is it that we're so good at remembering so many faces, when faces pretty much look alike?" Otto said.

Beginning his research career at the University of Texas at El Paso, Otto worked with eyewitness identification expert Roy Malpass. He was introduced to the problems that occur in lineup construction.

"A bad lineup will encourage people to guess, and possibly the innocent person will be selected," Otto said. "A good lineup will cause someone that doesn't have a memory of it to reject the lineup, and ... if the witness has a good memory trace of it, it will allow them to identify the person with confidence."

It's very easy to mess these things up, Otto said. "Everything matters."

For instance, Otto was consulted recently about a case in which a photo of a suspect was broadcast nationally on "America's Most Wanted." After an arrest was made, eyewitnesses were shown the same photo in a lineup and asked to identify to perpetrator.

Did they remember the face from the scene of the crime or from the television broadcast? Otto's role was to present this element of doubt to the attorneys, judges and juries responsible for determining the suspect's fate based on others' identification.

"Whether he's a good person or not, he deserves a fair trial," Otto said. "I think a lot of people think that we're getting people off. Often what we do is get them reduced sentences."

In 1999, Malpass was part of a team assembled by the National Institute of Justice to create guidelines for lineup construction. "Eyewitness Evidence: A Guide for Law Enforcement," was distributed to major metropolitan police departments and is available to everyone on the Internet.

Kim said the guide helps law enforcement officials create "structurally fair" lineups. All photos used must match the physical description of a suspect. For example, if the suspect is described as having braids, every photo used must be of a person with braids.

Kim's current line of research began when one of her students, using a structurally fair lineup, could not get subjects to choose the person they had seen committing a mock crime.

"They were not selecting the guy they saw in the video," Kim said. "It was driving her nuts. And I looked at her materials, and I knew which guy they were picking. He looked like a creep."

In Kim's study, using a structurally fair lineup, when people were given physical descriptions

only, they chose photos with equal frequency. But when they were asked to identify the armed robber, they almost always chose the same photo.

"When you add information about the crime, they default to some sort of criminal stereotype that often is based on facial expression or an actual physiological feature or lots of other things," Kim said. "We've done this study with about 40 lineups and hundreds of subjects, and we've been replicating the results over and over again."

So, her research is challenging the current notion of structurally fair lineups. The second phase is going a step further, to see if stereotypes can actually alter someone's memory. Because her study is still going on, Kim can't discuss details. She thinks -- or perhaps, fears -- she'll discover that people's stereotypes are so strong that they might override actual memories.

Meanwhile, her student "witnesses" are experiencing the complexity of eyewitness identification firsthand. "Most of the witnesses are like, 'It happened so fast,'" Kim said. "That's how it happens in the real world."

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