

ORIGINAL ARTICLE: STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

Where Disciplines Meet: Why Psychology and Law Need Each Other

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Abstract

This is a short paper on the essentialness of justice professionals with knowledge in both law and psychology for justice.

The intersection of psychology and law is not merely an academic curiosity. It is a working necessity for any justice system that depends on human judgement, human memory, and human decision-making. The fusion of knowledge of these two fields, held within individuals rather than exchanged across departments, is what allows the legal system to address real-world challenges with both procedural rigour and an accurate understanding of the people it serves.

Eyewitness testimony is the clearest illustration. The legal system has historically treated it as strong evidence: a witness was present, observed events, and can recount them in court. Decades of psychological research, however, have demonstrated that human memory is reconstructive rather than reproductive (Loftus & Palmer, 1974). Memories are rebuilt each time they are recalled, influenced by stress, suggestion, the phrasing of a question, and the passage of time (Loftus, 2005). The gap between legal convention and psychological evidence here is not a footnote but a structural problem that only the fusion of psychological and legal knowledge can address. Justice is compromised whenever the system relies on cognitive processes it does not fully understand, and understanding those processes is not the law's job. It is psychology's. A legal professional who also holds psychological knowledge can

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recognise these risks and act on them within the procedural framework. One without such fused expertise, cannot.

The same tension appears in the courtroom strategies used to influence judges and juries. For example, framing effects, anchoring, and narrative construction are well-documented cognitive phenomena (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974), and skilled advocates make use of them every day. Anchoring effects have been shown to influence even experienced judges. For example, in one study, sentencing demands that were transparently arbitrary still shifted the sentences imposed by criminal court judges (Englich et al., 2006). Whether such strategies constitute ethical persuasion or subtle manipulation is not a question that can be answered from within either discipline alone. Legal practice cannot be evaluated without psychological literacy, and psychological research cannot be applied responsibly in law without an understanding of the legal context in which it operates.

The potential of fusing these fields extends well beyond critique. Risk assessment instruments informed by psychological research are now used to support sentencing, parole, and rehabilitation decisions in many jurisdictions, and reviews of their use show meaningful improvements over unaided clinical judgement when applied carefully (Monahan & Skeem, 2016). Psychological insights into decision-making can also improve how evidence is evaluated and how procedures are designed to reduce bias (Kahneman, 2011). At the same time, this potential carries responsibility. If psychological tools are deployed without sufficient legal grounding in proportionality and due process, justice risks becoming pre-emptive rather than reactive, which can lead to punishing probabilities rather than actions. The professional with fused expertise is precisely the one best placed to navigate that boundary.

A further challenge arises when psychology is asked to explain why a person committed a crime. Childhood trauma, neurological conditions, and environmental pressures can all shape behaviour, and in a courtroom the line between explaining behaviour and excusing it is thinner than most people are comfortable admitting. A legal professional without psychological training may dismiss such evidence or struggle to weigh it appropriately. A psychologist without legal training may not appreciate the procedural constraints within which mitigation must operate. The individual who holds knowledge in both fields can do the most careful work: presenting psychological evidence in a way that informs the court's decision without undermining the principle of accountability. Fused expertise is what allows explanation and responsibility to be held at once.

Looking ahead, interdisciplinary expertise is not just valuable but necessary. Artificial intelligence is already being used in sentencing and parole assessments in some jurisdictions, a development that demands fused knowledge in computer science, psychology, ethics, and law simultaneously. Genetic evidence is reshaping

what courts can know about predisposition and identity. Neuroscience is challenging long-held legal assumptions about free will and culpability. None of these developments belong to a single field, and none can be governed responsibly by professionals trained in only one.

The most consequential questions in justice sit between disciplines, and they demand professionals who carry knowledge from more than one field within a single integrated perspective. Psychology and law need each other, not as neighbouring departments that occasionally exchange notes, but as bodies of knowledge that must be fused within the minds of the people who serve the justice system. The professionals who carry that integrated expertise are the ones best placed to ensure that justice is not only done, but done well.

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