

UCSB professor uses Simpson trial to study persuasion techniques

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Ito, attorneys are ultimate 'case' study

UCSC professor Kathy Kellermann sees the O.J. Simpson trial in an unusual way – she treats it as a living laboratory.

Kellermann, an associate professor of communication who specializes in the techniques of persuasion, is using the so-called Trial of the Century as the ultimate case study.

The subjects of her research – Judge Lance Ito, Deputy District Attorney Marcia Clark and defense attorneys Johnnie Cochran Jr. and Robert Shapiro – have become household names since the June 12, 1994, murders of Nicole Brown Simpson and Ronald Goldman.

Throughout the trial, Kellermann has studied Ito and the lawyers, along with Simpson himself, to see how they interact in the courtroom and how they use – or misuse – persuasive techniques.

She also is examining how people can achieve goals in a conversation, how they provide information and how they gain compliance. She plans to publish her research in various papers and journals.

“It’s a unique opportunity,” said Kellermann. “What you have here is a real situation. There are identifiable constraints, clear persuasive goals and outcomes.” Because the trial has become a

media circus, Kellermann hit a jackpot of available information. All the court transcripts are available on the Internet; nightly television shows highlight key testimony and motions; and newspapers and magazines devote massive space to the Simpson case.

“Any time I’m home, I watch,” said Kellermann, who received her doctorate at Northwestern University. “I have the trial live (on television) each week. I like it. I thrive on it.”

Access to Ito’s courtroom is extremely limited. Seven open seats are awarded to the public daily in a lottery, and Kellermann won a spot last week as the trial surpassed the 120-day mark.

The “live” experience, she said, makes all other venues pale.

“On television, all the richness of people goes away,” explained Kellermann, who will be on sabbatical in the fall and winter to complete her research. “It’s almost as if they’re faded. The people have such presence, O.J. Simpson has such presence. It’s a multidimensional thing the television takes away. Television gives a uni-dimensional view of them.”

In terms of persuasion, Kellermann is examining how those in the trial change attitudes and behaviors. “Clearly they’re

trying to influence one another,” she said. “The judge is trying to get the attorneys to behave, the attorneys are trying to get witnesses to say things.”

One type of persuasion involves a “liking kind of argument,” where a person gets others to like him or her in order to assert more influence, Kellermann said.

“You see them doing this with the jury,” she said. “Much more emotion is displayed to the judge than is ever displayed to the jury. The attorneys will show they don’t believe testimony. Marcia Clark smiles to herself. They are signals the jury can read.”

Another aspect of her research focuses on “the dynamics of the strategic use of emotion, how it is used purposely, when do they show outrage, anger and incredulity... We know the emotional appeals of a crowd. You tend to associate with that emotion.”

Although Kellermann has watched as much of the trial as any addict, she won’t hazard a guess on the jury’s verdict.

“I’ve tried to avoid taking a position,” she said. “My role is to study it as objectively as I can. I haven’t heard all the testimony, so I’m holding off judgment.”