

*F*rom the Chair

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Fun with Numbers

*M*ark Your Calendar...

Happy Valentine's Day!

Spring Vacation!

Student Scholarship
Recognition Day (SSRD)

Last day to w/d from full
semester courses

April 4th
Advising and Dessert

Commencement

CLA Web Registration

The first three words do not constitute an oxymoron — honest! One could easily make the case that quantitative literacy is important enough in contemporary society that “everyone should try it — like spinach!” At the same time, however, playing with numbers can be a fascinating way of gaining insight into human beings’ “comedy of errors” when it comes to understanding questions of risk and uncertainty.

Of course, some of these errors would be a lot more humorous if they didn’t have such significant consequences. One area where our misunderstanding of risk and probability looms especially large is in the courtroom. Whether it’s DNA testing, predictions of violence, data on health hazards, or any one of a number of other topic areas, judges, juries, and attorneys are increasingly called upon to comprehend quantitative estimates of risk and uncertainty. Sometimes the errors in using such information comes from an honest misunderstanding; at other times, the errors come from deliberate deception or strategic manipulation of the numbers.

In his book *Calculated Risks: How to Know when Numbers Deceive You* (2002, Simon & Schuster Publishing), cognitive psychologist Gerd Gigerenzer describes a particularly interesting bit of testimony and strategy from the O. J. Simpson murder trial. As most of you may know, O. J. Simpson, a retired Hall of Fame football player and celebrity, was tried for the murder of his wife, Nicole Brown Simpson, and her companion, Ronald Goldman. Evidence suggested that there had been been a history of domestic violence in the Simpsons’ relationship. The prosecution sought to use this as evidence to suggest that her husband, O. J., was in fact the murderer.

Harvard attorney Alan Dershowitz, consulting for the defense attorneys, apparently played an important role in O.

that domestic violence is not a good

for crime reports, the defense argued that there walean one homicide for every 2,500 incidentof domestic abuse.

Clearly, it is very rare that domestic violence ends up in murder. The defense argued that testimony abouo0o past domestic violence therefore h-(d)*tad little diagnostic or “probative” value. Instead, such

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