

# Eyewitness Identification: A Psychological Perspective

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## Overview

- 1) Why do witnesses make errors?
- 2) Can eyewitness errors be prevented?

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## DNA Exoneration Cases in US

- 321 cases of DNA exoneration
  - [www.innocenceproject.org](http://www.innocenceproject.org)
- Of first 250 cases analyzed (Garrett, 2011):
  - 76% of cases had eyewitness misidentification
  - 36% of eyewitness cases had more than 1 witness

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### The Value of EW Evidence

- It can be valuable, if...
  - If it was strong to begin with
  - It is preserved and tested properly

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### Trace Evidence Analogy

- Memory is a form of trace evidence
- We cannot collect a person's memory
- Each test (potentially) influences the trace evidence
- Continuously changing and degrading

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### What is the role of an eyewitness?

- Step 1: Perceive
- Step 2: Store the information
- Step 3: Retrieve
- Step 4: Communicate

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### How does memory work?

- Not like a video camera
- Memories are reconstructed
- Memory is easily subject to contamination by post-event information

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### How does face memory work?

- Occurs holistically, rather than piecemeal

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### What are the stages of memory?

- Encoding / Acquisition
- Storage
- Retrieval

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### Why do witnesses make ID errors?

- Estimator Variables
- System Variables

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### Estimator Variables

- Uncontrollable factors
  - Short exposure
  - High levels of arousal/stress
  - Long periods of delay between event and retrieval
  - Lighting
  - Witness intoxication
  - Presence of a weapon
  - Cross-race and Cross-age effects
  - Distance
  - Levels of attention
  - Etc.

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## Distance

- 2 elements:
  - People are not particularly good at estimating distance
  - Distance affects our ability to encode detailed facial features



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## System Variables

- Controllable factors (by police/investigators)
  - 911 call & Dispatcher training
  - Crime scene control
    - Co-witness contamination
  - Witness interviews
    - Cognitive interview
  - Identification procedures

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## Identification Procedures

- Showups
- Mug-shot searches
- Composites/sketches
- Lineups (photo arrays & physical)

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### Composites/Sketches

- It is very difficult to describe a person's features
- we process faces holistically (not piecemeal)

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### Lineup Theory

- The lineup is a **memory test** that is designed to give investigators more information than they had before the identification
- It is *not* a reasoning task, but a recognition task

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### Multiple Choice Analogy

- Simultaneous lineups are analogous to a multiple choice question
- Pick the best answer, **relative** to the other options
- Problem with Relative judgments:
  - one lineup member will always look more like the perpetrator than the other members, even when the actual perpetrator is **not** in the lineup.

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## Sequential Lineups

- Present lineup members one at a time
- Yes or No decision before continuing
- Witness not aware of how many lineup members
  
- Double-blind testing (all lineups)
  - Administrator does not know identity of suspect
  - Eliminates all conscious and unconscious cues
  - Increases evidentiary value of eyewitness evidence

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## AJS National Eyewitness Field Study

- Comparing Simultaneous & Sequential lineups
  - Wells, Steblay & Dysart (2011, 2014)
- Method
  - Double-blind administration on laptops
- Witnesses:
  - 497 stranger, first-attempt identifications

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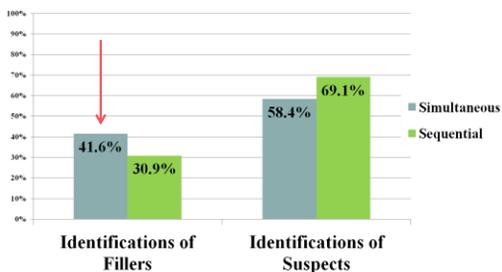
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Percentages of Suspect and Filler Identifications  
Among Those Who Made an Identification



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## Witness Confidence/Certainty

- Research on witness confidence shows that it is related to accuracy - but not strongly
- Why?
  - Many variables can increase or decrease confidence after the identification decision

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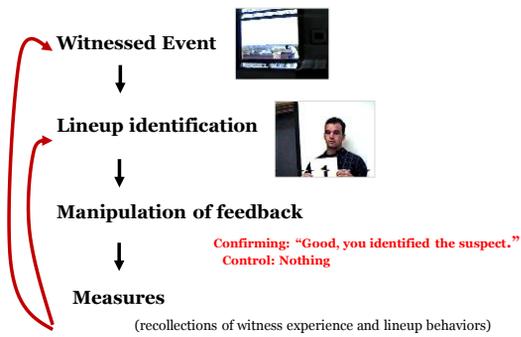
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### Post-identification feedback (Wells & Bradfield, 1998)




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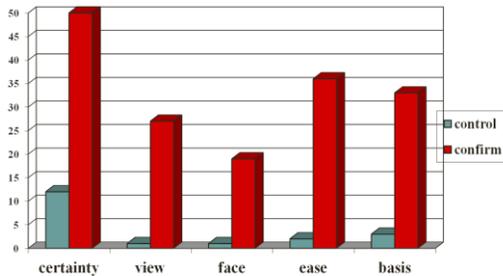
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### The Post-identification feedback effect




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### Best Practice Lineup Recommendations

- > Double-blind administration
- > Sequential presentation
  - > Laps permitted only upon request
- > Obtain confidence statement immediately after ID
- > Pre-identification instructions
- > Suspect presented in only one procedure
- > Audio/Video recording
- > Match-to-description filler selection

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### Conclusions

- > No current identification procedure eliminates the selection of innocent people.
- > Researchers have identified factors that are related to identification errors and this information can be used to increase the reliability of eyewitness evidence.

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**Thank you for your time.**

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