

Metacognitive Control and Lineup Instructions: Asking Eyewitnesses to Recollect Reduces False Identification



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Abstract

This paper finds numerous failings in the methodology of the paper “Metacognitive control and lineup instructions: Asking eyewitnesses to recollect reduces false identification”, the most serious being the lack of ecological validity in the “eyewitness event”. This paper recommends the 48-person lineup as a far superior method of reducing false identification.

Guerin, Webber & Horry [1] have conducted four experiments that led them to the conclusion that asking to recollect reduces false identifications. This paper first of all discusses methodological issues which throws some doubt on this conclusion, and then discusses an alternative which is all events reduces false identifications much more.

Methodological Issues

The authors’ predictions assume that the fillers in a lineup are very similar to the target. They wisely chose fillers that fit the description of the targets they used, but unfortunately failed to tell us what description factors were used. Were these factors similar to those which real witnesses use, which tend to be few and quite general, or many and therefore much more specific? Their theory seems to be based on the latter. In all events it would seem that actual practice does not agree with the theory.

The authors have also used female targets and lineups, an unusual practice. This could be a confounding factor due to the wide variety of female hair styles and often the distinctiveness between them. The lack of detail in their characterization of the descriptions used is especially troubling. The authors have used a quite unusual small lineup of 4 members only. It would seem more helpful for at least minimal comparison to at least use the standard 6-person lineup.

The authors refer to the ability to distinguish the culprit from the innocent suspect and go so far as to designate an innocent suspect for each lineup. This does completely make sense. Assuming fair lineups, there is no reason for the innocent suspect to stand out from the foils, and the actual task of the witness

is not to distinguish the culprit from the innocent suspect, but in target-absent lineups to distinguish the target from all the lineup members to reach the correct conclusion that the target is absent. Thus, the more reliable indication of this ability with same-size lineups is the rate of rejection of the lineup.

All these issues pale, however, beside the “eyewitness event” that they used. First of all, by simply displaying photos of the targets they strayed considerably from ecological validity in which, at the minimum, the target is seen with other people in some short video, moving. Even more serious, as opposed to the video in which the learning of the target’s features is incidental (they do not know while viewing the video that they would be wise to concentrate on the target), the witnesses in the experiment knew perfectly well that their task was to remember the target.

An alternative Lineup

Levi [2-9] has experiments extensively with the 48-person lineup. With an average rate of mistaken choices of someone in target-absent lineups about 50%, the expected rate of mistaken identifications is $50/48 = 1\%$. This rate is quite superior to what Guerin et al. [1] are recommending.

References

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