How Not to Enhance the Confidence–Accuracy Relation: The Detrimental Effects of Attention to the Identification Process

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This study (N = 218) examines potential moderators of the confidence-accuracy (CA) relation in eyewitness identifications. The design included five experimental interventions (accountability, context reinstatement, retrospective narration, hypothesis disconfirmation, and hypothesis generation), as well as one trait measure (public self-consciousness). Although the interventions were hypothesized to enhance the CA relation relative to a control condition, they did not do so. In fact, quite contrary to our initial expectations, only participants in the control condition displayed unqualified insight into their identification accuracy. We conclude that attempts to enhance awareness of the thoughts and reasoning process involved in an identification decision may frequently have minimal, or even counterproductive, effects. Instead, results of decision process measures suggest that the CA relation might be more effectively enhanced by increasing the salience of relatively automatic decision criteria (e.g., “did his face ‘pop out’ at me?”) and decreasing the salience of algorithmic identification strategies (e.g., “was I thorough in making my decision?”).

INTRODUCTION

Research on the eyewitness identification confidence-accuracy (CA) relation examines a fairly simple but important question: Are accurate identification decisions made with more confidence than inaccurate ones? The issue has both great theoretical relevance—i.e., can people accurately introspect on the adequacy of their memories and decision-making processes?—and practical relevance—i.e., how should courts and juries weigh eyewitness confidence? Wells, Lindsay, and Ferguson (1979), among the first to directly assess the CA relation, reported an overall correlation of r = .29. Interestingly, a recent meta-analysis of 30 studies (Sporer, Penrod, Read, & Cutler, 1995) found exactly this same correlation.

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If this .29 figure is accurate, eyewitness confidence on average explains less than 9% of the variance in identification accuracy. Such findings are somewhat distressing because they suggest that eyewitness confidence may be greatly overvalued by jurors (Cutler, Penrod, & Stuve, 1988; Lindsay, Wells, & O'Conner, 1989; Leippe, Manion, & Romanczyk, 1992) and by our legal system as well (Neil vs. Biggers, 1972). The usefulness of eyewitness confidence as a predictor of identification accuracy may depend, however, on certain key moderator variables. For example, Bothwell, Deffenbacher, and Brigham (1987) showed that confidence is a better indicator of accuracy under optimal encoding conditions than under poorer encoding conditions, and Sporer et al. (1995) showed that confidence is a better indicator of accuracy for eyewitnesses who have chosen someone from a lineup (i.e., "choosers") than for those who have rejected the lineup (i.e., "non-choosers").

Beyond the effects of encoding conditions and choosing on the CA association, however, there have been few robust effects. This study considers some of the variables that previous research indicates may increase the magnitude of the CA relation. These include accountability (Kassin, Rigby, & Castillo, 1991), context reinstatement (Krafka & Penrod, 1985), and public self-consciousness (Kassin, 1985). We also examine the influence of three additional variables that existing theory suggests may enhance the CA relation: retrospective narration, hypothesis disconfirmation, and hypothesis generation.

**Accountability**

Accountability exists when a person believes that his or her judgments or actions will be monitored by others (Tetlock & Kim, 1987), a state of mind that Kruglanski and Freund (1983) have termed evaluation apprehension. Research suggests that accountability leads to more complex information processing (Chaiken, 1980; McAllister, Mitchell, & Beach, 1979; Tetlock, 1983), which might reasonably be expected to increase the CA association. Other studies have shown that accountability improves metacognitive accuracy (insight into the accuracy of one's judgments) in other contexts (Cvetkovich, 1978; Hagafor & Brehmer, 1983), suggesting that it may have similar effects in the context of eyewitness testimony.

The influence of accountability on the CA association is by no means certain, however. Whereas Kassin et al. (1991) report some evidence that accountability enhanced the CA association, a study by Murray and Wells (1982) suggests that an opposite conclusion might be warranted. In Murray and Wells' study, participants led to believe a staged crime was a simulation were somewhat skilled at calibrating their postdecision confidence levels to their identification accuracy, whereas those led to believe the staged crime was real displayed no confidence-accuracy association. Presumably, participants in the latter condition believed that their judgments would be subject to more intense scrutiny than those in the simulation condition did, and accordingly felt more accountable for their identification decisions Be-