

Christopher Boscia - Illinois Eyewitness ID study

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Subject: Illinois Eyewitness ID study

In the Illinois experiment, researchers compared current witness ID techniques (simultaneous, not double-blind control group) to the sequential, double-blind process recommended by Dr. Gary Wells and others. Dr. Wells now complains that the results, which favored the control group, are not comparable because two variables rather than one were manipulated by experimenters.

His objection is a red herring. Researchers wished to compare things as they are (single-blind, simultaneous) to the procedure championed by Dr. Wells. To insure that the "control" group was unaffected – that its members did things as they always have – it would have been improper to have them employ a double-blind procedure, as doing so would have turned them into another experimental group.

Certainly, one could have created a second experimental group (sequential, not double-blind), but this is not a recommended lineup technique.

The Illinois study clearly supports the use of current photographic lineup procedures over the model advanced by Dr. Wells and others. Whether the superiority is due to lineup format (simultaneous or sequential), blindness or an interaction effect (format/blindness) cannot be estimated. Short of this, the comparison is perfectly valid.

Incidentally, I have a pretty good idea why the double-blind approach proved less accurate. In actual practice, lineups normally include a suspect whom police independently believe committed the offense. Detectives watch witness reactions carefully and will usually terminate the identification process if it seems that someone is leaning towards picking out a filler (i.e., selecting an innocent person). Naïve officers cannot prevent such errors, so in any real-world experiment single-blind should always prove more accurate than double-blind.

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