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The Thin Blue Line-Up: Comparing Eyewitness Performance by Police and Civilians☆

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Police officers are often believed to provide more reliable testimony than civilian eyewitnesses. We reviewed the available empirical evidence for this belief. There is some evidence to suggest that police officers do indeed report more accurate details about witnessed events than civilians do, particularly concerning crime-relevant details. That research finding does not translate directly to practice, however, since an average difference between police and civilian witnesses does not mean that a particular police officer in a specific case should be believed over a particular civilian eyewitness. More importantly, police officers are no better than civilians at identifying a perpetrator from a line-up and may even be more likely to make a false identification. Because eyewitness misidentifications have far more severe consequences than misreported event details, expert witnesses in court should warn decision-makers that police officers are at least as likely as the average eyewitness to falsely identify an innocent person.

Keywords: Eyewitness memory, Line-up identification, Observation, Police, Civilian, Confidence

In a court of law, a sworn statement from a police officer about his or her own observations may carry considerable weight. Statements made by civilian eyewitnesses, on the other hand, are often viewed with more skepticism. In The Netherlands, a distinction between police officers and civilians has even been incorporated in the law: a single statement by a civilian eyewitness is not sufficient to convict, but a single statement by a police officer is.[1] Many people, including jurors and judges, believe that police officers are better eyewitnesses than civilians (e.g., Benton, Ross, Bradshaw, Thomas, & Bradshaw, 2006; Deffenbacher & Loftus, 1982; Noon & Hollin, 1987; Yarmey & Jones, 1983; Yarmey, 1986).

Why would police officers perform better as eyewitnesses than civilians? We have heard various outlandish theories on this question, including one attorney's claim that police officers develop superior night vision as a result of working night shifts (D. Reisberg, personal communication, 2016). Of course, this is nonsense. Police officers have the same visual system as any other human being and are thus similar to other humans in many respects.

Another claim is that police officers are better at identifying perpetrators because they have been specifically trained in encoding and recognizing faces. Research shows, however, that face recognition training programs are not effective (see e.g., Malpass, Lavigueur, & Weldon, 1973; Malpass, 1981; Woodhead, Baddeley, & Simmonds, 1979). Similarly, instructions that improve recall of events, such as mental context reinstatement and eye-closure, do not improve face recognition performance (e.g., Searcy, Bartlett, Memon, & Swanson, 2001; Smith & Vela, 1992; Vredeveldt, Tredoux, Kempen, & Nortje, 2015). In light of the fact that people encode and recognize faces every day, it is perhaps not surprising that additional training of a few hours or even several days does not improve face recognition performance further. Besides a few exceptions

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[1] Note that there is an important practical reason for this: many small offenses, such as a parking offense or a broken bike light, would go unpunished if a single police statement were not sufficient evidence (see also Bleichrodt, 2015).

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(e.g., prosopagnosics), *all* people are experts at recognizing faces.

Although face-specific training does not help, police officers may still be better at lineup identification tasks because, as some attorneys have claimed, police officers are keenly aware of the relevant issues. For example, they know that a lineup can be biased and that instructions can bias their decisions. This argument involves two assumptions: (a) that police officers are indeed aware of these issues and (b) that this awareness leads to improved performance. From survey research among police personnel, we know that many if not most police officers are acutely unaware of how memory works and how lineup variables affect decisions (e.g., Benton et al., 2006; Odinot, Boon, & Wolters, 2015). For example, Odinot and colleagues found that half of the police officers in their sample still believed that memory works like a video camera. Moreover, even if police officers are aware of potential biases, that does not mean that they can overcome those biases. Research shows that even people who have been warned about the existence of cognitive biases or the dangers of post-identification feedback, still fall prey to those biases and external influences (e.g., García-Bajos & Migueles, 2003; Lampinen, Scott, Pratt, Leding, & Arnal, 2007; Lindner, Echterhoff, Davidson, & Brand, 2010). Thus, it seems unlikely that an awareness of relevant issues would improve police officers' lineup identification performance.

Perhaps a more plausible claim is that police officers are more likely to stay calm in stressful situations. One of the things that police officers have in common with civilians, is that a high level of stress during a witnessed incident impairs their subsequent memory performance (see Hope, 2016, for an overview). It is possible, however, that it takes a greater level of danger to produce stress in a police officer. As far as we know, there is no research examining whether the threshold at which the average police officer experiences stress differs from that of the average civilian. However, correlational research does show that officers with additional martial arts training perform better in high-pressure arrest and self-defense situations (Renden, Landman, Savelsbergh, & Oudejans, 2015) and experimental research shows that training in high-stress situations can significantly improve shooting performance (Nieuwenhuys & Oudejans, 2011) and arrest and self-defense skills (Renden, Savelsbergh, & Oudejans, 2016). If training or experience in stressful situations helps police officers to stay calm, then that might benefit their subsequent memory performance.

In this article, we will assess whether research findings support the belief that police officers are better eyewitnesses than civilians. In our discussion of differences between police officers and civilians, we will distinguish between reporting about events and line-up identification tests. We will also comment on confusions regarding the experts' consensus on this topic. Finally, we will draw some conclusions based on our review of the research.

Observation and Recall of Events

Research on differences in incident reports by police and civilian witnesses has involved widely varying tasks that require varying skills. Some studies have assessed observation skills, others memory performance, and yet others a combination of observation and memory.

In studies assessing observation skills, researchers want to know whether police officers are better than civilians at detecting criminal and non-criminal details *while* they are watching a scene (Ainsworth, 1981; Smart, Berry, & Rodriguez, 2014; Tickner & Poulton, 1975). Research on the detection of actions and people in a scene revealed little overall difference between police officers and civilians, but did reveal some small differences in the type of details to which each group paid attention. For example, police officers were more likely to falsely detect a theft that did not actually take place (Tickner & Poulton, 1975).

If witnesses report about crimes after the fact, for example in investigative interviews or in the courtroom, a complicating variable is introduced: memory. The question arises whether police officers have a better memory for witnessed incidents than civilians. Research findings on this issue are mixed. Some studies revealed no overall differences between police and civilians in the amount or accuracy of recalled information about a witnessed event (Kaminski & Sporer, 2016; Stanny & Johnson, 2000; Verinis & Walker, 1970), but in other studies, police officers did remember significantly more correct details about witnessed events than civilians, without an increase in errors (Christianson, Karlsson, & Persson, 1998; Clifford & Richards, 1977; Kalteis, 2013; Lindholm, Christianson, & Karlsson, 1997; Thomassin & Alain, 1990; Yuille, 1984). The difference between these two sets of studies might be related to the type of information reported by participants, which will be explored in more detail below.

When police officers provide written or oral incident reports, they can often rely not only on their memory of what happened, but also on external aids such as notes that they took at the crime scene or during real-time observations (e.g., perpetrator descriptions or details about the vehicle). Yet, to our knowledge, only two studies to date have assessed this combination of observation and memory (one of which was unpublished; Marshall & Hanssen, 1974, as cited in Ainsworth, 1981; and the other one recently published; Vredeveldt, Knol, & Van Koppen, 2015). In both studies, it was found that police officers reported more correct information about the witnessed event than civilians. Marshall and Hanssen found that police officers also reported more false details, whereas Vredeveldt and colleagues found that police officers were equally or even more accurate than civilians.

Beyond overall differences in reporting about witnessed incidents, perhaps a more interesting finding is that police officers report more crime-relevant information, for example about perpetrators, weapons, and vehicles, but not more crime-irrelevant information, for example about victims, bystanders, and contextual setting (Kalteis, 2013; Kaminski & Sporer, 2016; Lindholm et al., 1997; Smart et al., 2014; Vredeveldt, Knol, et al. 2015). It seems likely that this difference occurs already at the encoding stage of memory; that is, police officers pay attention to different things than civilians do.

The idea that police officers have a different perceptual focus is supported by the results of an early experiment in which experienced police recruits, novice police recruits, and psychology students were presented with a violent scene in one eye and