

Police Lineups: The Science of Getting It Right

October 11, 2016

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One night in 1984, a man broke into Jennifer Thompson's apartment and raped her at knifepoint. Throughout the attack, the college student memorized every detail of her rapist's face, promising herself that when she took the witness stand against him, "he was going to rot" in prison.

Thompson hurried to police the morning after the attack, giving them a detailed description of her rapist, filling in all the characteristics she'd memorized so carefully. The police put together a photographic lineup – the standard lineup technique in the modern U.S. – and Thompson selected a man named Ronald Junior Cotton. "I had picked the right guy," she said. "I was sure. I knew it."

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But in a 2016 study, a team led by Laura Mickes at Royal Holloway, University of London found that US-style lineups outperform UK-style lineups in terms of accuracy. It's the most recent study in a growing corpus of research examining this staple of criminal investigations. The results could have major implications not only for the design of UK lineups, but for the reliability of lineups in general.

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