

Justice Department Turns to Psychological Science to Improve Eyewitness Testimony

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The US Department of Justice (DOJ) is tapping into psychological science — including recommendations from a forthcoming report in *Psychological Science in the Public Interest (PSPI)* — to develop new guidelines for eyewitness identification procedures.

Drawing on decades of scientific research, a team of experts — including prosecutors, law enforcement personnel, and psychological scientists — worked together to identify best practices in conducting eyewitness identifications.

The best practices recommendations set forth in the DOJ memo draw considerably on research conducted by APS Fellow **John T. Wixted** (University of California, San Diego) and APS James McKeen Cattell Fellow **Gary L. Wells** (Iowa State University), including the forthcoming *Psychological Science in the Public Interest (PSPI)* report that the two scientists have coauthored.

Among various recommendations, the memo highlights the importance of assessing eyewitness

confidence at the time the eyewitness makes his or her initial identification. Referencing the *PSPI*, the memo states that “new research finds that a witness’s confidence at the time of an initial identification is a reliable indicator of accuracy.”

As Wixted and Wells note, converging evidence indicates that when eyewitnesses make an initial identification with high confidence under specific, so-called “pristine,” conditions, confidence is a reliable indicator of accuracy. Even more importantly, when eyewitnesses express low confidence in their initial identification, that identification is prone to error, regardless of the conditions under which they make the identification.

A preprint of the *PSPI* report is now available [here](#) — the complete report, including accompanying commentaries, will be published online later this year.

As law enforcement and legal communities in the United States increasingly draw on psychological science to inform certain procedures and guidelines, researchers are working to promote similar evidence-based practices in the United Kingdom. A recent roundtable organized by psychological scientist **Laura B. Mickes** (Royal Holloway, University of London, United Kingdom) brought together researchers and practitioners to discuss how science-based practices can yield more reliable convictions and better outcomes for victims and eyewitnesses. Wixted presented findings from the *PSPI* at that event.

APS Fellow Gary L. Wells will speak at the 2017 APS Annual Convention, May 25–28, 2017, in Boston, Massachusetts.