Global Research Review in Business and Economics [GRRBE]
ISSN (Online) 2454-3217, ISSN (Print) 2395-4671
| Open-Access | Volume 12, Issue 06,
Pages 33-36 ||2026||

Eyewitness Identification and Evidentiary Reliability: Safeguards Against Memory Contamination

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ABSTRACT

Eyewitness identification presents a distinctive evidentiary problem because the process used to obtain and repeat an identification can alter the memory evidence later presented in court. Reliability therefore depends on the history of the evidence, not merely the witness's sincerity or confidence at trial. This conceptual and comparative article draws on Oxford-published scholarship and the identification procedures contained in England and Wales's PACE Code D to develop a framework for preserving and evaluating identification evidence. It distinguishes the original observation, the first recorded account, the identification procedure, subsequent exposure and courtroom presentation. The analysis examines early documentation, procedural independence, repeated testing, confidence records and the complementary roles of preventive safeguards and expert explanation. It argues that legal scrutiny should reconstruct the evidentiary sequence before assigning weight to the final account. The proposed framework is intended to support principled evaluation across common-law settings while recognising that admissibility rules and procedural obligations remain jurisdiction-specific.

KEYWORDS: eyewitness identification; evidentiary reliability; memory contamination; identification procedures; expert evidence; criminal justice.

1. INTRODUCTION

A sincere witness can be mistaken, and a confidently expressed identification does not reveal the entire history of the evidence. The witness may have viewed photographs, discussed the event, participated in an identification procedure and encountered information about the investigation before testifying. Evaluating only the final account risks treating the product of this sequence as an untouched record of the original observation. The legal challenge is not resolved by declaring eyewitness evidence either reliable or unreliable in general. Reliability depends on the circumstances under which an observation was made and an identification obtained. Courts and investigators need a disciplined way to examine those circumstances without assuming that confidence, consistency or apparent honesty can answer every relevant question. This article proposes an evidentiary sequence framework. Its central argument is that identification evidence should be assessed through its development over time. The framework connects preventive procedures with later legal evaluation and distinguishes the preservation of evidence from the explanation of its limitations at trial.

Method and Jurisdictional Scope:

The article combines conceptual analysis with a limited comparative examination of procedural material. The seven scholarly sources address identification research, expert evidence, judicial witness assessment, calibration and probabilistic reasoning. Six are journal articles; Wixted's (2023) contribution is a scholarly reference article in the Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Psychology. England and Wales's PACE Code D provides an original procedural source (Home Office, 2023). This is not a systematic review of memory research or a comprehensive account of the law of identification. The source selection addresses the relationship between evidence collection, reliability and legal scrutiny. PACE Code D is used as a jurisdiction-specific example, not as a rule binding other common-law jurisdictions. Application in Guyana would require separate consideration of domestic authorities and procedures. The framework distinguishes established procedural requirements from recommendations developed in this article. It does not calculate the probability that a particular witness is

correct. Nor does it propose replacing the court's assessment of the whole case with an abstract psychological classification.

Memory Evidence and Its Procedural History:

Wixted (2023) explains that memory evidence can be altered through testing and subsequent exposure, and places particular importance on the first appropriately conducted test. This account supports distinguishing an initial identification from later repetitions. A witness's later certainty may reflect a changed evidentiary situation rather than an independent confirmation of the original observation. The practical consequence is that repetition should not automatically be counted as multiple independent sources of support. If the same witness repeatedly identifies the same person after prior exposure, the later event is connected to the earlier one. The legal analysis should examine that connection instead of treating numerical repetition as evidential multiplication. Sincerity remains relevant but answers a different question. A witness who honestly reports a mistaken memory is not necessarily lying. Conversely, recognising the possibility of memory error does not establish that a particular identification is false. The task is to examine the conditions affecting the evidence and the limits of the conclusions that can reasonably be drawn from it. This distinction should shape courtroom questioning. Asking whether a witness is certain may reveal present conviction, but it does not reconstruct what the witness originally observed or what information was encountered subsequently. Questions about the evidentiary sequence are necessary to understand the significance of the answer.

Preserving the First Account:

The first recorded description provides a reference point against which later developments can be examined. PACE Code D requires the witness's initial description to be recorded and generally preserved before specified identification procedures occur, subject to its detailed provisions (Home Office, 2023, para. 3.1). This requirement illustrates the legal significance of preserving early evidence rather than relying solely on retrospective recollection. A useful record should distinguish what the witness volunteered from information introduced through questioning. It should preserve uncertainty, omissions and qualifications rather than convert them into a more definite narrative. An accurate account of uncertainty can be more informative than a polished statement that conceals how the description was obtained. The proposed framework also records relevant exposure before the first formal procedure. A witness may already have seen a circulating image or heard another person identify a suspect. Such information does not automatically determine admissibility or weight, but it belongs in the evidentiary history. Without it, later decision-makers may misunderstand what the procedure actually tested. Records should remain retrievable in their original form. A summary can assist administration, but it should not displace the underlying account. Differences between versions may matter, and an unexplained absence of the earliest material restricts the ability of both prosecution and defence to examine the evidence fairly.

Independence and the Identification Procedure:

The procedure should be examined as a test of a proposition, not as a confirmation ritual. Its design, instructions and administration can affect what the witness understands they are being asked to do. The organisation should therefore document the material presented and the relevant exchanges, not merely the final selection. PACE Code D assigns responsibility for specified procedures to an identification officer who is ordinarily of at least inspector rank and not involved in the investigation, with stated exceptions and related provisions (Home Office, 2023, para. 3.11). This separation illustrates one approach to reducing the entanglement of investigative expectations and identification administration. It should not be confused with a claim that every jurisdiction requires an identical arrangement. For institutional design, the relevant question is whether administrators can influence the test through knowledge, communication or conduct, and what arrangements reduce that possibility. Where complete separation is difficult, the reasons and alternative safeguards should be recorded. Resource limitations should be made visible rather than hidden behind an unsupported assertion that a procedure was independent. The witness's response should also be preserved accurately. Selection, rejection and uncertainty are different outcomes. A record that treats anything short of a definitive rejection as support for the suspect risks misrepresenting the result. The framework therefore requires an account of what the witness actually said and did, including any inability to decide.

Confidence, Repetition and Subsequent Information:

Confidence should be located in time. Wixted (2023) distinguishes the evidential significance of early memory reports from later accounts affected by contamination. The appropriate conclusion is conditional: the circumstances and timing of a confidence statement matter. It would be equally misleading to assume that all confidence is worthless or that confidence expressed at any stage reliably establishes accuracy. An immediate record should preserve the witness's own language where practicable. A later paraphrase such as very confident

may conceal hesitation, qualification or a different original expression. The proposed practice is intended to improve the transparency of the evidence; it does not assign a universal numerical probability to particular words. Subsequent exposure should be documented as part of an ongoing chronology. Relevant events may include further identification exercises, discussion with others and information about the investigation. The point is not to presume contamination from every contact. It is to ensure that a court can examine whether a later statement provides new information or reflects the influence of what occurred after the first account. Investigators should be cautious about treating a later improvement in certainty as an uncomplicated strengthening of the case. The chronology may support several interpretations. A reasoned evaluation should identify those possibilities and seek independent evidence where available, rather than selecting the interpretation most favourable to an existing hypothesis.

Measuring Reliability Without Simplistic Rankings:

Research comparing identification procedures involves methodological choices. A procedure may change correct identifications, false identifications and the frequency of no selection in different ways. A headline claim that one method is more accurate can conceal which outcome is being measured and what trade-off is involved. Luby (2017) develops a log-linear approach to analysing lineup data and explains how it can complement receiver operating characteristic analysis. The contribution demonstrates that procedure evaluation requires attention to outcome categories and sources of uncertainty. It does not establish a single procedural ranking that can be applied without regard to design and context. Legal and policy audiences should therefore ask what a comparative finding actually supports. Evidence from controlled research may illuminate a mechanism while leaving questions about implementation in ordinary investigations. A procedure's theoretical advantages may also depend on staff training, consistent instructions and adequate records. The framework proposed here prioritises auditable conditions over a universal declaration that one format is always best. Institutions should select procedures in light of relevant evidence and applicable law, document deviations and examine outcomes. This approach preserves room for methodological development without making every criminal proceeding depend on resolving an entire scientific debate.

Schauer and Spellman (2017) distinguish forms of calibration and examine why the legal system has difficulty evaluating a judgement against an assessor's previous performance or an independently known truth. Their analysis concerns legal judgement more broadly than eyewitness identification. It clarifies a limitation relevant here: a witness's expressed confidence, a procedure's performance in research and a court's confidence in its verdict are different quantities. None can be substituted for another without explaining the inference and the evidence supporting it.

Expert Explanation and Preventive Safeguards:

Stein (2003) argues that expert testimony concerning cognitive research should be admitted in many instances to assist evaluation of identification evidence. Park (2003), while recognising possible value, emphasises cost and uncertainty about competing expert testimony and directs attention towards improving identification procedures. These contributions identify complementary levels of intervention. Preventive safeguards aim to preserve evidence before the problem reaches court. Expert explanation aims to assist interpretation of evidence that has already been collected. The second cannot recreate a missing original account or remove an exposure that has already occurred. The first cannot eliminate every question about the meaning of a witness's response. A proportionate institutional approach should therefore avoid choosing between prevention and explanation as if they were substitutes. Better records can make expert evidence more focused. Conversely, expert analysis can reveal recurrent procedural weaknesses that training and policy should address. The relationship becomes productive when each function operates within its competence. Experts should also distinguish general research propositions from conclusions about an individual witness. Scientific findings may identify conditions associated with greater or lesser reliability, but they do not ordinarily permit direct access to the truth of a particular memory. Legal decision-makers need a clear account of the inference being offered and its limits. A wider judicial literature reinforces the need to articulate assessment criteria. Chlevickaitė et al. (2020) examined trial judgments issued by three international criminal institutions between 1996 and 2019, evaluating witness-assessment practices against relevant psychological and criminological scholarship. Their study addresses international criminal testimony, not a controlled comparison of identification procedures. Its contribution to this framework is institutional: professional experience should be accompanied by explicit reasons for accepting particular indicators of reliability and by scrutiny of whether those indicators have an adequate evidential foundation.

A Framework for Judicial and Institutional Review:

The proposed review begins with five questions. What was the original opportunity to observe? What was recorded before formal identification? How was the first procedure conducted? What relevant information or testing followed? How does the courtroom account differ from the earliest available evidence? These questions organise inquiry without predetermining the outcome.

The resulting chronology should identify gaps as well as events. Missing records may prevent confident conclusions about what occurred. The legal significance of a gap depends on the applicable rules and the circumstances, but the uncertainty should not be concealed by treating absence of documentation as proof of proper procedure. Institutional audit can examine whether records permit this reconstruction across cases. Useful measures include the availability of initial descriptions, completeness of procedure records and reasons for departures from established arrangements. Audits should assess evidential quality rather than reward identification rates. A system measured only by selections may create incentives inconsistent with accurate testing. Training should use realistic examples in which an apparently strong final account rests on a weakly documented sequence. Staff can then practise identifying the missing information and preserving it in future cases. The educational objective is disciplined evidence handling, not general distrust of witnesses. Training should also address the interpretation of probability. Dahlman (2025) reports an experiment in which five hours of Bayesian-thinking instruction improved lawyers' recognition of probabilistic fallacies. This finding supports testing targeted education rather than assuming that professional status ensures statistical competence. It does not establish that the same intervention improves verdict accuracy. An identification-focused exercise could ask participants to explain why a procedure's success rate under specified research conditions does not, by itself, supply the probability that the defendant in a particular case is guilty.

2. LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The analysis is constrained by a selective scholarly base and a single principal procedural example. It does not resolve disagreements about every identification format or establish the current admissibility rules of jurisdictions beyond the material examined. Future research should investigate how well evidentiary chronologies are preserved in practice and whether improved documentation changes legal evaluation. Eyewitness reliability is best assessed through the history of the evidence. Early accounts, procedural conditions, confidence records and subsequent exposure should be examined together. Preventive safeguards and expert explanation serve distinct but complementary purposes. By reconstructing the sequence before evaluating the final statement, legal institutions can make more transparent judgements about what identification evidence supports and where uncertainty remains.

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