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Don't rain on my parade

THE value of identity parades is questionable. For a start, the number of people in a normal line-up means that the chance of picking the suspect by chance is a lot higher than a statistician would consider safe for any scientific test. Then there is the question of whom it is meaningful to put in a parade besides the suspect. But most dangerous of all is the risk that a witness may be "led" into a choice by remarks, whether chance or deliberate, by somebody involved in conducting a parade.

This last risk, at least, is well recognised. But there is a widespread assumption that, an identification having been made from a parade, subsequent banter can do little harm. Not so. According to Gary Wells and his colleagues at **Iowa State University**, even remarks made two days after an identity parade might compromise a witness's eventual reliability in court.

Dr Wells's research, just published in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, took more than 250 subjects and showed them a video of what appeared to be a terrorist planting a bomb. At one point, the camera focused in so that the man's face was clearly visible. The subjects were then shown a photographic line-up of six people who looked similar to the "bomber". In fact, none of these photos actually was of the bomber. Nevertheless, with a bit of encouragement to make some sort of choice, every one of the subjects identified one of the pictures as being of the bomber--itself an observation that raises questions.

Having made a choice, the subjects were assigned at random to one of a number of groups, each of which was treated differently. Dr Wells wanted to find out both the effects of feedback, and how they changed depending on when the feedback was given. The three sorts of feedback were: none at all; a confirmation that the subject had picked the correct individual; or an observation that the wrong individual had been picked. This feedback might be given either immediately, or at a second session which took place 48 hours later. The subjects were also asked (again, either immediately, or after 48 hours) a series of questions about how confident they were in their choice, how good a view they had had of the incident, how much attention they had paid, and so on.

Dr Wells expected, from previous results, that those who had immediate confirmation that they had picked the suspect would be more confident about their decision than those who had not. He was not disappointed in this expectation. The new and worrying result was that exactly the same thing happened even when the first "confirmation" that a subject had chosen correctly happened 48 hours after the identity parade. That, if it is confirmed by subsequent research, has great implications for the reliability of witnesses in trials, since it is easy to design codes of conduct that prevent immediate feedback, but harder to devise ways of stopping details slipping out later.

This matters because research has shown that, in America at least, it is not only the fact that a witness picked out a suspect in an identity parade that matters in court. The confidence with which the witness defends the choice under cross-examination sways verdicts. Identity parades have long looked unsatisfactory as material evidence. This result is another reason to question them.

GRAPHIC: Who dunnit?; Another strong reason to distrust identity parades