

Putting Research Evidence into Practice using The Mystery Face Procedure (2017)

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Final report

In addition to researchers from The Open University, we would like to acknowledge the help and support of the policing organisations involved in the consortium, both for arranging access to policing personnel and for their advice and suggestions regarding research questions and methodology.

Focus of the research - An evaluation of current visual identification procedures in the UK suggests that they do not represent evidence based practice and indeed contradict many of the recommendations made by researchers (e.g. through the British Psychological Society or the American Psychology and Law Society). Unlike many areas of policing, this cannot be attributed to either equivocal research results or the complexity of the recommendations - as the recommendations are both simple and robust, and generally fairly easy to implement (for instance that the officer conducting the parade should not know the identity of the suspect). The aim of the current project was, therefore, to determine what barriers there might be to implementing the findings from research and the recommendations of established research bodies. Two specific factors were focused on: whether research evidence is being communicated to policing personnel effectively; and whether the methods used by researchers in this area lead to effective application. These factors were based on previous research evaluating the problems encountered when trying to translate research on visual identification procedures into practice at the time of the last major change to Code D of the PACE Codes of Practice, which regulates visual identification evidence, in 2003.

Research approach - This project comprised of surveying the experiences and opinions of policing personnel regarding research on visual identification procedures. In an initial phase, an online questionnaire was constructed and disseminated through the policing partners in the consortium. The final version of the questionnaire included amendments and additional items suggested by the consortium steering group members and the expert personnel they consulted. The questionnaire was completed by 215 respondents from many different forces as well as the NCA - about half worked in ID suites or their equivalent. The second stage of the project comprised focus groups that were conducted with officers working in ID suites in the London Metropolitan and Greater Manchester Police forces. Whilst the online questionnaire asked relatively broad questions about experience and opinions of relevant research, research methodologies and research engagement, the focus groups explored one particular, recent evidence-based recommendation involving the use of the 'Mystery Face Procedure' - a technique designed to reduce misidentifications by placing a silhouette of a head in a video parade to allow witnesses to indicate a negative response in the same way as they would a positive response. In particular, the focus groups were designed to explore the

opinions of the officers to the procedure and the research conducted on its use, and to determine what additional work would be needed to translate the research evidence into practice.

Main findings - The main finding of the online survey can be summarised as the police respondents largely being unaware of research findings or even that relevant research is being conducted. In addition, where the police are involved in research it rarely leads to evidence based practice. For example, 87% of respondents had not been involved in research projects, and although 60% of those that had said the research was at least fairly relevant to practice, 75% said that the research had not led to any practical outcomes for the police. The data pertaining to knowledge about research was equally as worrying. Half of respondents indicated they did not know researchers had even made recommendations about practice, 20% that they knew researchers had made recommendations but had no idea what these might be and only 5% that they knew what the recommendations were. In addition, 56% indicated they had never read anything about relevant research and only a further 25% had read something about research in policing magazines. It is clear that research evidence is not being communicated effectively to the police which means the majority are unaware of the procedures that have been developed by researchers. Of the five specific techniques that were included in the survey, 73% of respondents knew nothing about them and only 3% said they were very familiar with the technique. Although communication seemed to be the primary problem, there was also evidence that some standard aspects of research methodology were perceived as having a negative effect on the relevance to practice. For example, conducting research in a laboratory (38%), conducting research outside the UK (28%), a non-ecologically valid delay between crime and ID procedure (40%) and particularly instructions and procedures not conforming exactly to PACE (64%) were all perceived by some respondents as problematic.

Initial analysis of the focus groups corresponds with the results of the online questionnaire, in that the world of research around policing and the practice of policing seem to be quite distant; indeed, the participants in our focus group not only indicated no experience at all of ID evidence research, but no knowledge of any research about policing. However, all the participants were in favour of a higher engagement with research. The focus group participants also pointed to the legal barriers to turning evidence into practice, and that procedures such as the Mystery Face need to be legally authorised before being used in a real case. In general the focus groups highlighted a passive orientation towards research outcomes and a reactive orientation towards laws and procedures, and the delays that gaining legal acceptance of new procedures can involve.

Possibilities for future research - It was only possible to conduct focus groups at two locations and only about one specific technique within the timeframe of the current project. Given the utility of this research, a logical next step would be to extend the project by incorporating more geographical locations and additional identification procedures that have arisen from research. The lack of knowledge about research, or even that any is being conducted, revealed by the online survey, requires follow-up questionnaires that examine possible solutions in more depth. There is also a need to explore whether current techniques that are not based on evidence, are effective or problematic. We have begun such work with Thames Valley Police, and it would be useful to extend this to other forces.

Implications for how this evidence might shape practice - We are hoping that more detailed analysis of the focus group data will inform additional research designed to translate the Mystery Face procedure into practice. In addition, the general results suggest that communication between researchers and policing personnel is a significant problem, and also suggest possible means for improving this and more effectively informing practitioners about research evidence. The online survey revealed that 68% of respondents said that their current access to research findings was

either non-existent or 'not good', whilst only 4% said it was either good or excellent. A follow-up question asked about specific dissemination mechanisms, and subscriptions to paper journals (25%), social media sites and blogs (21%) and online discussion forums (26%) were generally only seen as useful or extremely useful by a small minority. However, online access to original articles (42%) and particularly online access to summaries of research (73%) were perceived as being useful or extremely useful developments. Researchers at the OU have designed a database of non-technical research summaries aimed at policing personnel, and the current project suggests that this could be a very useful model for improving the effectiveness of evidence based policing by overcoming the key barrier of poor communication between researchers and the police.