Can I Get a Witness? Differences in Juror Perceptions and Behavior Across Source Types

Clint Townsend & Paul Brewer

**Extant Literature & Theoretical Basis**
- Communication between witnesses and jurors is unique: there is no direct comparison between the two individuals, and yet how the former is perceived by the latter may have huge implications in verdict decisions.
- Several literature-based research has often thoroughly scrutinized one explicit type of witness, including eyewitnesses (see Wells & Olson, 2003), expert witnesses (see Vidmar, 2005), and police (see Slobogin, 1996).
- Significantly less work is dedicated to comparing the three types side-by-side, in terms of their influence on jurors, despite unique idealized goals:
  - Eyewitnesses are regular citizens like the jurors – both of whom ideally want the truth revealed and justice to be served – and thus, these eyewitnesses do not possess a motivation to lie or present untruthful evidence in the eyes of jurors (Wells & Olson, 2003).
  - Expert witnesses are called because their knowledge is supposed to be vast (Parrott, Neal, Wilson, & Brodsky, 2015).
  - Police are called because as representatives of the law, their trustworthiness is venerated (Slobogin, 1996).

**Procedure**
- Four-factor between-subjects experimental design (N = 196), administered through Qualtrics.
- Participants read a brief summary of a hypothetical murder trial in which a man was said to have killed his co-worker; they then viewed a short video of testimony from the trial.
- Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions: eyewitness, expert witness, police witness, unidentified.
- The video testimony the subjects viewed was constant across all conditions - it featured a middle-aged white man discussing an interaction with the defendant and his assessment of the man’s disposition and mental state.
- The manipulation of the video was a brief written description of the nature of the witness’s testimony, shown prior to the video, as well as a label indicating the witness’s identity.
- Participants completed a post-video questionnaire assessing their perceptions of the testifier’s knowledge and trustworthiness based on the identity of the testifier, the message itself, and their own personal perceptions as a theoretical juror. Participants were also asked about their opinion toward a verdict in the case.

**Conclusions and Implications**
- When respondents consciously identified the testifier as an expert, he was perceived as being more knowledgeable than when he was perceived as any other kind of testifier.
- Post-hoc analyses show this relationship was somewhat true for perceived trustworthiness.
- The perceived expert was seen as more knowledgeable and more trustworthy than the other types of witnesses; this emphasizes the importance of expert witnesses in criminal cases (Hand, 1901).
- Subjects who identified the testifier as a police officer did not find him to be any more trustworthy than an expert witness or an eyewitness. This may provide credence to the notion that individuals are more cognizant of police deception and perjury, and this may be prevalent among younger jurors, seeing as this sample utilized undergraduate students.
- Further analysis found that the perceived knowledge of a witness was an important consideration for verdict decision, in addition to a number of demographic characteristics. Not surprisingly, as respondents viewed the testifier as more knowledgeable, they became more likely to be influenced by his testimony (for the prosecution) and more likely to convict.

### Table 1. Accuracy in Identifying Witness Types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Eyewitness</th>
<th>Expert Witness</th>
<th>Police Witness</th>
<th>Not Sure</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eyewitness</td>
<td>28 (14%)</td>
<td>18 (39%)</td>
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<td>Expert Witness</td>
<td>18 (39%)</td>
<td>9 (20%)</td>
<td>3 (7%)</td>
<td>16 (33%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Police Witness</td>
<td>12 (24%)</td>
<td>8 (16%)</td>
<td>4 (9%)</td>
<td>13 (26%)</td>
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<td>Not Sure</td>
<td>18 (38%)</td>
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### Table 2. ANOVA Results Across Perceived Source Type

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**Figure 2. Mean Credibility Scores Across Perceived Witness Type**

**Figure 1. Conceptual Model**

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**References**
- Parrott, Neal, Wilson, & Brodsky, 2015
- Wells & Olson, 2003
- Vidmar, 2005
- Slobogin, 1996
- McCroskey & Young, 1981
- Cacioppo, 1986
- Wells & Olson, 2003
- Slobogin, 1996
- Parrott, Neal, Wilson, & Brodsky, 2015
- Petty & Cacioppo, 1986
- Hand, 1901

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### Table 2. ANOVA Results Across Perceived Source Type

- Perceived Trustworthiness: 4.42 (1.02), 4.98 (.80), 4.55 (1.15), 4.44 (.89), 2.12, 0.10.
- Perceived Knowledge: 4.19 (.96), 4.75 (.94), 4.32 (.99), 4.21 (.78), 2.50, 0.06.