

A blind man's bluff: choice blindness in eyewitness testimony

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Valorisation

In writing an addendum about “knowledge valorisation” a clear definition of the term seems to be in order. That is because assigning value to knowledge could be interpreted differently in different settings. According to the Valorisation Centre of Maastricht University “valorisation is the process of creating value from knowledge, by making this knowledge available and suitable for economic and social exploitation and to translate this knowledge into products, services, processes and new business”. A careful reader may notice that the definition in itself at times parallels knowledge to a “product” while at other times parallels knowledge to a “thing”. The analogy of knowledge as a “product” suggests that knowledge can be traded on a market with buyers and sellers. Therefore, the value of knowledge is determined on economic basis. The analogy of knowledge as a “thing” however, implies that knowledge can be given not only monetary but also social value (Andriessen, 2005). While the view of knowledge as a product is (arguably) appropriate for certain parts of the technical, medicinal and natural sciences, this approach is hardly applicable for the humanities and social sciences (Andriessen, 2005). Research in the field of social sciences generates more than economic value alone. Thus, for scientific disciplines such as psychology and law we certainly have to take a broad perspective on valorisation.

Regardless of discipline, science contributes to the preservation of our social fabric, culture and democracy. Importantly, science and scientific knowledge has its own intrinsic value, beyond the additive value that comes from valorising in terms of societal growth. According to the philosopher Karl Popper (1902–1994), new insights and theories are considered to be valid for as long as they have not been proven wrong and the advancement of science is based on conjecture and refutation (Popper, 1969; as cited in Jonge & Louwaars, 2009). However, the increasing focus on valorisation through patents and licenses puts constraints on the attempt to confirm or refute scientific findings, a process vital for the scientific advance (Jonge & Louwaars, 2009). Therefore, naturally raises the question of why universities are turning their back on academic freedom, where scientific knowledge is valued for what it is. Why universities choose to clash with the traditional scientific values of openness, transparency and the sharing of knowledge? According to Jonge and Louwaars (2009) there are three main reasons: a) funding bodies implement the valorisation policies through inclusion of economic parameters in their contracts, b) universities invest in economic valorisation to generate additional income, and strengthen their position in public–private partnerships, c) there is a “herd mentality”: everybody seems to invest in intellectual property so universities do the same to maintain their position at the frontier of science and to maximize their freedom to operate.

Within this adverse business environment universities struggle to maintain their status as research institutes and to be given access to resources which allow them to conduct high quality research, as we do in Maastricht University. Though I consider

the struggle of the universities in many ways unfair I will make use of the constructive ambiguity of the term valorisation and valorise the current work only to its social impact. As highlighted in the closing of the general discussion (Chapter 10), one should consider one's personal moral compass to determine for him or herself how many cases of innocent people incarcerated as a result of choice blindness manipulations constitute a problem worth attention. Thereby, I abstain from assigning any direct or indirect monetary value to human life and dignity as well as social welfare. Finally, note that since the practical relevance and the innovative nature of this line of work have been stated in detail in various chapters of this dissertation, I will repeat them here only briefly.

Relevance

The present dissertation aimed to establish the relevance of choice blindness for eyewitness testimony, to explore the moderating factors of the phenomenon, and to unravel the mechanisms underlying choice blindness. Through an in depth investigation we replicated and extended previous work thereby showing that by the time witnesses are questioned in court, a large proportion would fail to realise that they are sitting in front of the wrong defendant or that their statements contain inaccuracies. Clearly, mistaken or deliberate manipulations of even minor details can impede the accurate reconstruction of an event, therefore producing long delays on solving a crime, and possibly incriminate innocent suspects. Additionally, the issues emerging from our line of work raise question about the current understanding of decision making, particularly in the eyewitness context.

Target Groups

This dissertation aimed primarily to answering the question of whether choice blindness is relevant for eyewitness testimony and explore moderating factors for the phenomenon. Thus, it is relevant for law enforcement agencies, the legal professionals and policy makers. Through the present work we illustrated that mistaken or deliberate manipulations can obstruct justice and possibly incriminate innocent suspects. Furthermore, this dissertation must be of interest to members of the scientific community working in various fields including decision making and memory. Additionally, it targets researchers who are interested in the implementation of the choice blindness paradigm in understanding human decision making in various fields such as political and medical and business sciences. Foremost, the present work targets members of the general public who may find themselves in situations similar to those described in the present dissertation. The present results alert them to the possibility of being unaware to surreptitious changes in the outcome of their decision in their encounters in and outside the legal context.

Activities and Products

The issues emerging from our line of work directly appeal to and emphasize the importance of blind lineup administration procedures that leave little room for surreptitious manipulations. Specifically, our line of work underscores the importance of the lineup being administered by an officer who is not involved in the case and does not know who the suspect is. If this is not possible the witness should be instructed that the administrator does not know who the suspect is (Wells et al., 1998). Finally, the findings of Chapter 7 underscore the importance of camera recordings during the interviewing process. This is particularly important in light of findings indicating the relevance of blindness phenomena in the field of interrogations and false confessions (Sauerland, Schell, et al., 2013; Sauerland, Schell-Leugers, & Sagana, 2015).

Innovation

The work described in the present dissertation has opened a new chapter in the choice blindness literature. Our lab was the first worldwide to examine choice blindness in the context of eyewitness identification and testimony. Our work along with that of the pioneers of choice blindness has stimulated researchers across the Pont, and specifically at Irvine University, to investigate blindness for identification decision and its relation to the misinformation effect.

Schedule and implementation

Our early work (Chapters 1-4) has already evoked interest outside the scientific community which has resulted in media appearances (e.g., journal appearances in “Limburger” and the “Volkskrant”). As such some of the results of the present dissertation have been communicated to a broader audience, therefore serving the purpose of informing the public about the hazards of blindness manipulations in the eyewitness setting and beyond. Knowledge valorisation is and will continue to be stimulated by communicating findings of this dissertation within the scientific community through journal publications, conference presentations and organised symposia (e.g., choice blindness symposium at the 1st International Convention of Psychological Science, 2015).

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