The Eyewitness Post-Identification Feedback Effect:
What is the Function of Flexible Confidence
Estimates for Autobiographical Events?

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SUMMARY
Suggesting to eyewitnesses who mistakenly identify someone from a lineup that they identified the right person leads them to recall having been more certain, having a better view during witnessing, and having paid closer attention during witnessing. The post-identification feedback effect is robust and has profound forensic implications because the courts rely on witnesses’ answers to these questions to make decisions about the reliability of the identification. The effect seems to occur because there is not an accessible memory trace formed about these retrospective judgments, thereby making witnesses rely on an inference process that responds to the feedback. We speculate on the function served by a cognitive system that does not form accessible memory traces for these judgments. Copyright © 2009 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Mistaken eyewitness identification testimony accounts for more of the DNA-proven convictions of innocent people than all other causes combined. As of this writing, 232 people who were convicted by juries have been officially declared innocent based on forensic DNA tests; 179 of these were cases of mistaken eyewitness identification (Innocence Project, 2009). The eyewitnesses in these cases were highly confident on the witness stand, claimed to have had a good view of the culprit, and claimed to have paid close attention during witnessing. As a result, these witnesses were highly credible despite being mistaken.

How can this happen? In particular, how can an eyewitness be positive and yet mistaken? Generally, confidence is related to the accuracy of autobiographical memories and, in fact, this is also true of eyewitness identification. Although estimates of the magnitude of the confidence-accuracy relation in eyewitness identification vary as a function of the data set and the methods used to assess the relation, high-confident witnesses are more likely to be accurate than are low-confident witnesses in their identifications from lineups (e.g. see Brewer, Keast, & Rishworth, 2002; Brewer & Wells, 2006; Sporer, Penrod, Read, & Cutler, 1995). Of course, the confidence-accuracy relation is not perfect and this means that there can be some instances in which eyewitnesses are positive yet mistaken. But, our interest is concerns a more specific phenomenon that is capable of producing high confidence in mistaken eyewitnesses.

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The current article concerns a highly reliable and robust phenomenon that helps us pinpoint one important source of this confidence-without-accuracy problem as it relates to eyewitness identification testimony. We review this research on this phenomenon, called the post-identification feedback effect, and the psychological processes that appear to be operating. Then, we ask the kind of question that Baddeley (1988) asked, namely ‘But what the hell is it for?’ In particular, we ask what function might be served in the cognitive system by the processes that give rise to the post-identification feedback effect.

THE POST-IDENTIFICATION FEEDBACK EFFECT

The post-identification feedback effect was first shown by Wells and Bradfield (1998). In the first experiment, participants were shown a short video of footage from a surveillance camera that captured the image of a man who committed a murder (participants do not see the murder itself). Participants were then told that they study was concerned with eyewitness identification and were shown a photographic lineup of five people. The photo lineup was the one actually used in the original criminal investigation of the murder except that, unbeknownst to the participants, the image of the actual murderer was removed. Participants were then asked to try to identify the person from the surveillance video (Figure 1).

All participants made an identification from the photo lineup and, because the actual culprit was not in the lineup, all participants’ identifications were mistaken. After making their identification, participant-witnesses were randomly assigned to receive either confirming feedback from the experimenter (‘Good, you identified the suspect’) or to

Figure 1. Grey scale copy of the original target-absent lineup
receive no feedback.\textsuperscript{1} Then, participant-witnesses were asked a series of questions. The critical questions included: ‘At the time you identified the person in the lineup, how certain were you that the person you identified from the photos was the gunman you saw in the video?’ ‘How good of a view did you get of the person in the video?’ ‘How well were you able to make out specific features of the gunman’s face from the video?’ ‘How much attention were you paying to the gunman’s face while viewing the video?’ ‘To what extent do you feel that you had a good basis (enough information) to make an identification?’ ‘How easy or difficult was it for you to figure out which person in the photos was the gunman?’ ‘After you were first shown the photos, how long do you estimate it took you to make an identification?’ and ‘On the basis of your memory of the gunman, how willing would you have been to testify in court that the person you identified was the person in the video?’

The results showed that every one of these questions was significantly influenced by the confirming feedback. The direction of the effects are as expected: confirming feedback leads witnesses to recall having been more confident,\textsuperscript{2} having a better view, paying more attention, having a better basis for their identification, taking less time to make an identification, and being more willing to testify that they identified the right person.

Readers should note that the confidence or certainty being discussed in the article refers to retrospective confidence or retrospective certainty. In relation to the post-identification feedback effect, the question takes the form of ‘When you identified the person in the lineup, how certain were you that you picked the right person?’ Hence, we consider the post-identification feedback effect to be an example of a changed autobiographical memory. In effect, the post-identification feedback effect paradigm asks witnesses to recall their state of mind (e.g. how certain they were), recall the cognitive processes that they engaged (e.g. how much attention they paid), and recall the conditions they were experiencing (how good their view was). Because they were randomly assigned to the feedback treatment after they had already experienced these matters, differences in their reports represent changes to their autobiographical accounts.

Since the original Wells & Bradfield studies (1998), the effect has been repeatedly replicated (Bradfield, Wells, & Olson, 2002; Charman & Wells, 2008; Dixon & Memon, 2005; Douglass & McQuiston-Surrett, 2006; Hafstad, Memon, & Logie, 2004; Lampinen, Scott, Pratt, Ledding, & Arnal, 2006; Neuschatz et al., 2005, 2007; Quinlivan, Neuschatz, Jimenez, Cling, Douglass, & Goodsell, 2009; Semmler & Brewer, 2006; Semmler, Brewer, & Wells, 2004; Skagerberg, 2007; Wells & Bradfield, 1998, 1999; Wells, Olson, & Charman, 2003; see meta-analysis by Douglass & Steblay, 2006). The effect has been shown with children (Hafstad et al.) as well as older adults (Neuschatz et al., 2005). The effect occurs even if the feedback is delayed for days or the feedback is given immediately and the measures are delayed for days (Quinlivan et al., 2009; Wells et al., 2003). Even more impressive is the fact that the post-identification feedback effect has now been demonstrated to occur with real eyewitnesses to serious crimes (see Wright & Skagerberg, 2007).

\textsuperscript{1}‘Good, you identified the suspect’ is the generic manipulation used in most post-identification feedback effect studies. A subset of studies have used co-witness information (e.g. ‘Your co-witness identified the same person’ or ‘You identified the same person that has been identified by 97% of the participants’).

\textsuperscript{2}We use the terms confidence and certainty interchangeably.
The real-world significance of the post-identification feedback effect

It would be difficult to overestimate the real-world, applied significance of the post-identification feedback effect. In the United States, eyewitnesses’ testimony about their certainty, view, and attention are primary factors specifically named by the US Supreme Court as criteria that lower courts should use to decide whether an eyewitness’s identification is reliable (Manson v. Braithwaite, 1977). This important Supreme Court ruling remains the ‘law of the land’ to this day (Wells & Quinlivan, 2009). Even if the Supreme Court had not specified that certainty, view, and attention are important indices of eyewitness identification accuracy, research shows that people, including jurors, naturally use eyewitnesses’ statements of their certainty, view, and attention to decide whether they are going to believe the eyewitness (see Bradfield & Wells, 2000). At the same time, feedback from detectives who administer lineups to witnesses is a routine practice in most jurisdictions in the United States. In response to the research findings on post-identification feedback effect and publicity that the findings have yielded, some jurisdictions (such as North Carolina and New Jersey) have recently banned giving witnesses feedback before the witnesses make a statement of their certainty (Wells, 2006). However, most jurisdictions still permit post-identification feedback from lineup administrators, which change witnesses’ post-lineup statements of their certainty, view, and attention.

If the post-identification feedback effect were a small effect, then perhaps the real-world concern would not be great. But, the effects are in fact quite large. One way to express the magnitude of the effect is in terms of the effect size metric $d$, which is the number of standard deviation units of the effect. In psychology, a small effect is $d = .2$, a medium effect is $d = .5$, and a large effect is $d = .8$. In their meta-analysis that included over 2400 participant-witnesses, Douglass and Steblay (2006) reported that the average effect size was .79 for the certainty question. But, perhaps an even more meaningful way to express the magnitude of the post-identification feedback effect is to look at how post-identification feedback elevates the number of mistaken eyewitnesses who end up expressing high levels of confidence. This is because only those witnesses who express higher levels of confidence are going to be allowed to testify. In the original Wells and Bradfield (1998) experiment, approximately 15% of the mistaken eyewitnesses reported confidence levels of 6 or 7 on the 7-point scale (i.e. positive or nearly positive in their expressed confidence). But, that figure rose to 50% in the confirming feedback condition. The difference (35%) means that one out of every three of these mistaken eyewitnesses became positive or nearly positive merely because of the feedback comment made by the lineup administrator. Another way to describing this result is to say that the feedback comment more than tripled the number of highly confident mistaken eyewitnesses. The Douglass and Steblay meta-analysis also shows strong average effects on other important retrospective measures, such as witnesses’ retrospective reports of how good their view was ($d = .50$), the attention they paid ($d = .46$), the ease with which they were able to make their identification ($d = .80$) and the speed with which they report having made their identification ($d = .45$).

Understanding the post-identification feedback effect process

What is the process through which the post-identification feedback effect occurs? The dominant interpretation has revolved around the idea that eyewitnesses have little or no accessible cognitive trace for the key retrospective judgments that they are asked to make (Wells & Bradfield, 1998). Although witnesses have an autobiographical memory of
witnessing the event and making an identification, eyewitnesses cannot recover any kind of memory for how certain they were at the time of the identification, how good their view was, how much attention they paid while witnessing, and so on. As a result, they must infer values for these variables based on other available information. If there was confirming feedback, then they use the feedback information to infer that they ‘must have’ been certain, had a good view, paid close attention, and so on. This has remained the dominant interpretation of the post-identification feedback effect for over a decade with only slight modifications. For example, in their original conceptualization, Wells and Bradfield argued that eyewitnesses never formed any memory traces for these judgments at the time (i.e. no online record was made). More recent treatments have been somewhat agnostic on that point and instead simply state that the original traces are not accessible (Neuschatz et al., 2005; Wells, Olson, & Charman, 2003). Inaccessibility could be due to there never being a trace in the first place, the trace being formed only weakly, or to other factors that make the trace inaccessible, such as forgetting, interference, and so on. It is difficult to prove that traces for these judgments never existed at all, so the more general accessibility hypothesis is the more defensible one and it is the one that we will use here.

What memory traces are relevant for these judgments? It depends on the judgment in question. In the case of attention or view, they would need to return their minds to the witnessed event itself. In the case of confidence or the time to make an identification, they would need to return their minds to the identification event. Of course, the accessibility hypothesis should not be construed as positing that witnesses have no accessible memory traces for the witnessed event or for the identification event. However, these specific aspects of the event experience (e.g. attention paid) and identification experience (confidence felt) are presumed to have low accessibility.

One line of evidence supportive of the accessibility interpretation for the post-identification feedback effect comes from a moderator effect first shown by Wells and Bradfield (1999). If the post-identification feedback effect occurs because there is little or no accessible memory trace for these judgments (e.g. no memory for how good one’s view was, how certain one was at the time of identification), then creating such a trace prior to feedback should moderate the post-identification feedback effect. Wells and Bradfield (1999) tested this by replicating the original post-identification feedback effect but also including conditions in which prior to getting feedback some participant-witnesses were instructed to think privately about their certainty, view, and attention. The idea was that this private thought manipulation would create a pre-feedback memory trace for these judgments that participant-witnesses could use after feedback when asked to recall their certainty, view, and attention. The results showed that the private thought manipulation served to inoculate participant-witnesses against the post-identification feedback effect. An important feature of this manipulation is that the pre-feedback thought manipulation was private thought. Had the participant witnesses given their pre-feedback answers publicly (e.g. written them down or told the experimenter), then the inoculation effect might be attributed merely to a consistency or commitment effect.

The inoculation effect of private thought also rules out another interpretation of the post-identification feedback effect, namely that participant-witnesses who receive confirming feedback are merely engaging in some form of positive public self-presentation. It might be argued, for example that participants who receive confirming feedback now feel free to present themselves as having known that they made the right identification all along (inflate their retrospective certainty reports) even while knowing privately that they were actually uncertain. But, if this public self-presentation interpretation is correct, then the private...
thought manipulation should not eliminate the post-identification feedback effect. After all, no one else knows what the participant-witnesses’ private thoughts were and, therefore, there is nothing about the private thought to prevent the participant witnesses from going ahead and inflating their public reports after receiving confirming feedback.

Quinlivan et al. (2009) also tested the inoculating effect of having participants think about their retrospective judgments prior to feedback, this time using earwitnesses rather than eyewitnesses. Importantly, this study included some conditions in which measures of the effect (the retrospective judgments) were delayed by 1 week. The inoculation effect of pre-feedback thought was replicated when the measures were taken soon after the feedback, but the private thought manipulation did not prevent the post-identification feedback effect when measures were taken 1 week later. In fact, the post-identification feedback effect fully rebounded after a 1-week delay in the inoculation conditions. It is as if the inoculation ‘wears off’. This is quite understandable if it is assumed, as did Quinlivan et al., that memory for the pre-feedback thoughts about certainty, which were instilled through the thought manipulation, decayed at a faster rate than did memory for the feedback. The idea that witnesses would remember confirming feedback better than they would remember their pre-feedback judgments over time is not particularly surprising. These judgments are not ‘natural’ memory categories. The thought manipulation created memory traces for these categories only because witnesses were asked to spend time thinking about them. Feedback, in contrast, is a natural memory category that relates to many things central to the ego. There is broad agreement in social psychology that people have a strong need for positive self-regard and are likely to be vigilant in noticing, remembering, and using external information that is related to self-regard (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Leary & Baumeister, 2000). Confirming feedback is not just any bit of information; it is information that relates to self-image (I was right!) and is not likely to be easily forgotten. Witnesses might remember their pre-feedback confidence for a while (thereby inoculating against the post-identification feedback effect), but in the long run witnesses will better remember the fact that they were told they made an accurate identification. Hence, the inoculation effect seems to last less than a week.

The idea that confirming feedback might relate to self-image could also help explain why disconfirming feedback is generally not impactful in comparison to confirming feedback. Douglass and Steblay’s (2006) meta-analysis comparing disconfirming feedback to no-feedback shows $d$s of $-0.21$, $-0.08$ and $-0.14$ for confidence, attention, and view, respectively (vs. $d$s of $0.79$, $0.46$ and $0.50$ for confirming feedback compared to no-feedback).

Another line of evidence suggesting that participant witnesses do not normally have access to memory traces for their pre-feedback certainty comes from studies in which participant witnesses were asked to report both their pre-feedback certainty and their current (post-feedback) certainty (Semmler et al., 2004). After confirming feedback, participant-witnesses individual reports of their pre-feedback (retrospective) certainty are, for all practical purposes, identical to what they report for their current (post feedback) certainty. Not only are the answers to the two questions virtually identical for each participant, but also it does not matter which of the two (retrospective or current) is asked first. Hence, participants feel highly certain after receiving confirming feedback (current confidence), which is a perfectly normal response to confirming feedback and does not itself represent any memory change, but they also think that their certainty has not changed. This is consistent with the dominant hypothesis that participant witnesses have no accessible pre-feedback trace of their certainty.
The empirical evidence seems to support the idea that witnesses do not have accessible memory traces for retrospective certainty. Nevertheless, when asked soon after they answer the retrospective certainty question, Wells and Bradfield (1998) found that about one-third of participant-witnesses will say ‘yes’ if asked whether they think that the feedback influenced how they answered that question. Importantly, however, Wells and Bradfield compared those who said ‘yes’ to those who said ‘no’ and found that the effect was equally strong for both groups. Hence, it appears that participant witnesses cannot sort themselves into those who were affected (or more affected) and those who were not affected (or who were less affected). Again, this is what would be expected if there is no accessible pre-feedback trace of certainty to which to compare current certainty.

If there is no accessible pre-feedback memory trace, why do some participant witnesses, albeit a minority, say ‘yes’ when asked whether feedback influenced them? Why does not everyone just say ‘no’? There are two reasons to believe that participants are simply making a plausible inference based on their implicit theories about how events influence people. First, it should be noted that the frequency of ‘yes’ responses dropped to nearly zero for questions such as view and attention (Wells & Bradfield, 1998). In other words, whereas a minority of participant witnesses said that the feedback might have influenced their answer to the certainty question, almost no one said that the feedback influenced their answer to the question about view or attention even though feedback affected those answers as well. This suggests that participant witnesses were engaged in plausible guessing about whether they might have been influenced and it seems less intuitively plausible (i.e. does not fit their implicit theory) that feedback would influence what someone says about the view they had or the attention they paid. People probably perceive that reports of view and attention are matters of fact that can be accessed by thinking about the original event whereas certainty is a ‘fuzzier’ concept that is not directly tied to concrete aspects of the events (cf. Reyna, Mills, Estrada, & Brainerd, 2006).

Applications of an implicit theory or plausible guess do not require that the witness have access to a pre-feedback memory of their certainty in order to guess that the feedback affected their answers. Recent work, using what Charman and Wells (2008) call the counterfactual paradigm, tends to support this view. Participant-witnesses who received confirming feedback were asked to answer the retrospective judgment questions a second time under the hypothetical (counterfactual) assumption that they had instead been in the no feedback condition. Similarly, those who received no feedback were asked to answer the retrospective judgment questions a second time under the counterfactual assumption that they had instead been in the confirming feedback condition. Participants were able to make adjustments in the proper direction (i.e. toward the alternative condition), but the patterns of these adjustments across two experiments suggest that participants were simply engaging implicit theories rather than relying on pre-feedback memory. Consider, for example that those in the control condition never actually experienced the feedback and yet were able to guess how they might have responded had they received feedback. Particularly telling is the fact that those in the control condition actually overestimated the impact that post-identification feedback would have had (i.e. their answers significantly ‘overshot’ the mean retrospective confidence of the confirming feedback condition).

Although the accessibility hypothesis fits the post-identification feedback effect data fairly well, there are other possible processes. One possibility is that, in the absence of feedback, people try think back to the relevant events and actually find some sort of information to make the judgment. In contrast, when they have post-identification feedback, they rely almost solely on inferences from the outcome. In other words, it is
possible that the appearance of inaccessibility is due to a heavy reliance on feedback (e.g. because it is a fast and frugal cue) when it is present whereas, in the absence of feedback, more effortful accessible traces are used. However, this possibility is difficult to reconcile with the inoculation effect, in which the creation of accessible traces prior to feedback serves to eliminate the feedback effect.

In summary, the post-identification feedback effect is a well-replicated autobiographical memory phenomenon with strong effect sizes. It appears to occur because people do not have accessible memories for these key retrospective judgments (e.g. confidence at the time, view, attention) and therefore rely on inferences based on available information. Feedback is a powerful form of information, particularly when is confirming, and this results in making autobiographical judgments that are consistent with the feedback.

**BUT WHAT THE HELL IS IT FOR?**

Articles in this issue of *Applied Cognitive Psychology* each address one or more phenomena in autobiographical memory and then ask the question that Baddeley (1988) asked, ‘But what the hell is it for?’ Baddeley argued that it is helpful to ask what the function is of any particular psychological phenomenon because it can cause us to look at them in different ways and ask different questions. In the case of the post-identification feedback effect, our question is not about the post-identification feedback effect, but instead about the memory system that produces it. More specifically, what function might be served by a cognitive system that does not make an accessible online mental record of the amount of attention paid, the view that a person had, or the confidence that one had in making a visual recognition memory decision?

In some ways, we think that the answer to the ‘What the hell is it for?’ question is somewhat obvious. The cognitive system has limited resources and must be selective because there are myriad possible types and levels of information to process in even the simplest of environments (Kahneman, 1973). Selectivity is complex, influenced by such factors as the nature of the event, the goals of the individual, and the shaping effects of evolutionary factors. The weapon-focus effect, for example in which witnesses are less able to identify the culprit’s face if there is a weapon (Steblay, 1992), is perhaps quite functional for survival. There are trade-offs that the cognitive system has to accept when selecting what to process and what to remember.

Consider now the post-identification feedback effect. Cognitive resources devoted to online meta-cognitive monitoring (e.g. ‘How much attention am I paying?’) probably have a cost. Can a person simultaneously form a memory of the not only of the episode but also of the level of attention that is being given? In the real world, while trying to interpret what is happening and extract meaningful information while witnessing a crime (or experiencing any life event), would there not be a cost to those central goals by also trying to make a mental record of how good one’s view was? We suggest that a cognitive system that would devote cognitive resources to making an accessible memory record of variables such as view and attention is likely to be a poorly performing and somewhat dysfunctional system. From an evolutionary perspective, the individual who sees a bear and spends cognitive resources developing a memory trace for how good his view is of the bear or how much attention he is paying to the bear is more likely to be bear meat than he is to be one of our ancestors. The task at hand is likely to always be more important for success (e.g. survival) than are retrospective reports on cognitive processes that were happening at the time.
People clearly do form some traces of events as natural by-products of performing tasks. People generally recall if they were happy or sad when something happened, for instance, and that is a functional trace to have because it can signal whether to seek such events in the future. In contrast, we find it difficult to think of a significant function that would be served by people creating an accessible memory trace for the judgments underlying the post-identification feedback effect (certainty, view and attention) other than for purposes of testimony invented by modern courts of law. And, as far as we can tell, courts have been asking eyewitnesses to testify about these retrospective meta-memory types of judgments for the last century or two, at most, thereby having no consequences for the evolution of basic processing rules of the cognitive system. That memory needs to be generally accurate is clear; but for daily purposes memory does not need to have the level of accuracy is required in the modern legal setting. Although it could be argued that people should form traces of such judgments in order to determine whether they have a weak or strong memory, it seems more reasonable to simply use outcome information (whether they are right or wrong) to make that determination. And, because cognitive resources would need to be expended (at the cost of performance) to develop accessible traces of these judgments during the events, the cognitive system gives no priority to such processing.

Recall that the inaccessibility hypotheses of the post-identification feedback effect postulates that witnesses answer the certainty, view and attention questions by inferring levels of these variables based on all information available at the time the witness is asked to make these judgments. Feedback, when available, drives witnesses’ estimates because there is no accessible memory trace regarding attention, view, and certainty on which to base their estimates. These heuristic-type inferences (e.g. ‘I was correct, so I must have paid good attention’) can have dire consequences in legal system with eyewitnesses when confirming feedback follows a mistaken identification.

It seems likely to us, however, that the eyewitness identification situation might be unique in some ways because, for most of the problems that people encounter, the heuristic or inference process might work just fine. It seems reasonable to presume that positive feedback, accuracy, confidence, viewing conditions, and attention are probably positively correlated and, hence, the level of one can be reasonably inferred from knowing the level of one or more of the others.

The inference process might be stated as follows: ‘I received positive feedback, so I was probably accurate in my identification; I was accurate so I was probably also confident; and I was confident because I had a good view and paid close attention’. To the extent that this reasoning is generally valid for most real-world problems, it might be among the ‘simple heuristics that make us smart’ (Gigerenzer, Todd, & the ABC Research Group, 1999). In fact, it can be argued that false feedback is rare enough in real life that the cognitive system is wise to use feedback as if it were valid and make adjustments accordingly.

In other words, whereas the post-identification feedback effect is a huge problem for the legal system and contributes to wrongful convictions, the heuristic-like inference process underlying it might be a usually valid process that has good outcomes. Humans sometimes need to be ‘fast and frugal’ (Gigerenzer et al., 1999) and answer questions quickly or in the absence of full information. Much of the time heuristics and inferences can work very well in the absence of full knowledge. In fact, results from many studies comparing heuristic thinking to rational thinking have demonstrated that heuristics used in many real-world situations yield at least as accurate decisions as rational thinking (Gigerenzer et al., 1999; Hutchinson & Gigerenzer, 2005).
Final remarks

Baddeley (1988) said ‘...when we see a temptingly-elegant experimental phenomenon, we should pause, and ask ourselves the question, “But what the hell is it for?”’ (p. 15). Our phenomenon of interest (the post-identification feedback effect) intrigued us because it is easy to empirically demonstrate, it is highly reliable, it has large effects on many variables, it is robust across situations, it has profound forensic relevance, and it has led to policy and procedure reforms in numerous police jurisdictions in the United States (Wells, 2006). Furthermore, we know quite a bit about variables that moderate the post-identification feedback effect and we have at least a rudimentary understanding of the processes that appear to give rise to the effect.

The post-identification feedback effect seems to occur because the witness does not have an accessible memory trace for the questions being asked (about view, attention and certainty) and must, therefore, use an inference process. If there is confirming feedback, then the feedback information is used in making inferences about view, attention, and certainty.

We found that our attempt to answer Baddeley’s question made us think about the post-identification feedback problem a little differently. It led us to postulate that the reason that there is no accessible memory trace for these critical judgments (certainty, view, attention) is because cognitive resources are directed at more central goals (e.g. interpreting the event) and because cognitive effort directed at creating accessible memory traces for these judgments would interfere with achieving the central goals. The post-identification feedback effect is a problem, but we now think that it could make eyewitnesses even less reliable if they were devoting cognitive resources to forming online records of their view, attention, and certainty: Eyewitnesses already make substantial errors in their identification accuracy and this extra cognitive load could make things worse. More generally, a cognitive system that expends resources creating traces that make it immune to the post-identification feedback effect could wreak havoc on the lives of people as they went about experiencing everyday events.

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