Forensic Psychology Decision Making: The Biasing Effects of Irrelevant Contextual Information

In many domains experts are called upon to provide research and analysis. Their expert judgment and decision making is often regarded as error-free, or at least as being objective and impartial. Drawing from the field of criminal justice, I will present research and evidence from real casework that many different types of psychological contaminations affect experts, including fingerprinting and DNA forensic laboratory decision making. Forensic evaluations are highly impacted (and can be distorted) by irrelevant contextual information or even by the context in which information is presented or obtained. I will articulate the psychological mechanisms by which forensic and other experts make biased and erroneous decisions and describe how this research can assist in identifying such weaknesses and in providing practical ways to mitigate them. I will use the HEP Hierarchy of Expert Performance (Dror, I., 2016, Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition, 5 (2), 121-127) to evaluate the decision making in forensic psychology.

Itiel Dror (PhD Harvard) is a cognitive neuroscientist who is interested in the cognitive architecture that underpins expertise. His work relates to issues underlying human performance and cognition. Dror's research examines the information processing involved in perception, judgment and decision-making. He has published over 100 research articles. In the forensic domain he has demonstrated how contextual information can influence judgments and decision making of experts; he has shown that even fingerprint and DNA experts can reach different conclusions when the same evidence is presented within different extraneous contexts. Dr Dror has been commission by the prosecution and the defence to appear in court as an expert witness in a number of countries. Itiel Dror worked with many forensic laboratories in the UK and the US, as well as in other countries (e.g., The Netherlands, Finland, Canada, and Australia) in providing training and implementing cognitive best practices in evaluating forensic evidence.