

Alibis: Generation, Consistency, Corroboration, Believability, and Detection – Introduction to this Special Issue

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This special issue highlights recent developments in the field of alibi research. These include a shift from self-report studies to behavioral paradigms; a broadening in the literature to study not only suspects, investigators, and legal decision makers, but also alibi corroborators; and an expansion of the research to include alibi-related memory issues rather than a sole focus on social impact factors. Additionally, this special issue addresses the many misconceptions that exist when it comes to the appraisal of consistency in the context of alibi accuracy and truthfulness. © 2017 The Authors Behavioral Sciences & the Law Published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd

In the legal sense, an alibi is considered “a defense that places the defendant at the relevant time of the crime in a different place than the scene involved and so removed therefrom as to render it impossible for one to be the guilty party” (Nolan, 1990). Alibis as a subject offer many perspectives for psychological research. Numerous parties are involved in the process of generating (suspect), corroborating (alibi witness), and evaluating an alibi (investigators, jurors, judges); memory plays a role as well as social psychological factors. Despite the diversity of this field of research, legal psychologists have only recently become interested in the psychological issues related to alibis. A literature search of the term ‘alibi’ on Web of Science generates three hits for 1988–1997, 11 for 1998–2007, and 43 for 2008–present day. As a comparison, close to 2,500 and 3,000 hits are returned for the terms ‘eyewitness’ and ‘deception’, respectively (1988–2017).

In the light of such a young, emerging field of research that is still in the process of developing, one approach to deal with alibi-related questions that might come to mind is to draw from eyewitness research; for example, when making assumptions about the capacity of suspects to recall their whereabouts at a particular point in time in the past, or about an alibi witness’s ability to recognize an innocent suspect. While eyewitness research may have some answers relevant to alibi-related questions, this special issue points to important differences in these literatures, deeming the recent upsurge in studies specifically addressed at alibi-related issues well justified. As Crozier, Strange, and Loftus (this issue, pp. 6–17) point out, there is a slowly growing acceptance of memory errors in eyewitness accounts. However, the legal system has yet to recognize the applicability of memory errors to an innocent suspect’s alibi, emphasizing the need for awareness of memory functioning and malleability in this field.

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Furthermore, eyewitnesses tend to have a memory advantage over someone providing an alibi because they will in most cases realize during the course of a crime that their account will be of interest to investigators. Alibi witnesses, on the other hand, especially those who are unfamiliar with the suspect, will typically not notice anything remarkable about the non-criminal event they will (much) later be asked to testify on (see Charman, Reyes, Villalba, & Evans, pp. 18–36; Crozier et al., pp. 6–17; Price & Dahl, pp. 60–74). Additionally, eyewitness testimony frequently concerns incriminating evidence, whereas alibi evidence is more likely to be exculpatory. As a consequence, eyewitness evidence is more likely to be subject to confirmation and investigator biases (Ask & Granhag, 2007; Ask, Rebelius, & Granhag, 2008; Kassin, Dror, & Kukucka, 2013). In contrast, testimony provided by alibi witnesses is more likely to come under investigator scrutiny (see Price & Dahl, pp. 60–74; cf. Sauerland, Mehlkopf, Krix, & Sagana, 2016).

This special issue also provides us with insights into several novel developments in alibi research. For one, there is a shift from self-report studies to behavioral paradigms, providing us with answers concerning attitude–behavior consistency, allowing for a more accurate estimate of individuals' behavior in real life (cf. Baumeister, Vohs, & Funder, 2007). Second, there is evidence that the literature is broadening. While previous research frequently focused on suspects, investigators, and legal decision-makers, this special issue includes two studies that address research questions tailored to the special situation of alibi *witnesses* (i.e., corroborators). Marion and Burke (pp. 37–59) studied the truthfulness of alibi witnesses in a behavioral study. In this, they allow for a first comparison between the individuals' *beliefs* about the truthfulness of different types of alibis, people's *self-reported* willingness to support false alibis (e.g., Culhane, Hosch, & Kehn, 2008; Hosch et al., 2011) and participants' actual behavior. Charman et al. (pp. 18–36) present a new paradigm for testing the memory of potential alibi witnesses. Their findings demonstrate the vast gap between the demand for non-motivated alibi witnesses to make an alibi believable, on the one hand (Culhane & Hosch, 2004; Dysart & Strange, 2012; Olson & Wells, 2004; Olson & Charman, 2012), and the difficulty of coming up with such a witness, on the other hand – simply because such potential alibi witnesses may not remember seeing the suspect. Additionally, it will be more difficult for an alibi witness to accurately recognize a once-seen stranger, compared with a familiar person (Johnston & Edmonds, 2009). Together with Crozier et al. (pp. 6–17), Charman et al. advocate the need for research into alibi-related memory issues rather than solely focusing on social impact factors. While Charman et al. focus on the alibi witness, Crozier et al. elaborate on the occurrence of natural memory errors in (repeated) alibi accounts provided by suspects. They argue that such errors can cause an alibi to be perceived as proof of guilt, rather than innocence.

Another important recurring theme of this special issue concerns the role of consistency in alibis. Indeed, alibi evaluators seem to value consistency above anything (e.g., Culhane & Hosch, 2012; Dysart & Strange, 2012; Strange, Dysart, & Loftus, 2014), despite its lack of value when determining truthfulness (Granhag & Strömwall, 2001, 2002). In this context, Crozier et al. (pp. 6–17) comment on the natural occurrence of inconsistencies in memory reports and how these may be interpreted as a sign of deception when they are identified in a suspect's alibi account. Price and Dahl (pp. 60–74) had participants conduct a computer-based investigation to study the effect of statement consistency and age on the perception of alibis. Their findings

emphasize the strong value attributed to the consistency of statements made by an alibi witness, even when the interval between these statements is as long as 5 years. Studying false alibis, Sakrisvold, Granhag, and Giolla (pp. 75–90) found support for the idea that that false alibis provided by pairs of suspects and alibi witnesses were, in fact, more consistent than truthful alibis provided by pairs of suspects and alibi witnesses. This contradicts the general belief that inconsistencies are a sign of deception (Culhane & Hosch, 2012).

Finally, this special issue provides us with some cues as to how one can determine the truthfulness of an alibi. Sakrisvold et al.'s findings suggest that lack of variation between the alibi stories generated by a suspect and an alibi witness could be an indication of false alibi corroboration, debunking the very myth of consistency above everything that currently seems to rule in the courtroom. Furthermore, findings by Marion and Burke (pp. 37–59) show that the closeness of the relationship between the suspect and an alibi witness can be predictive of alibi accuracy. In all, this special issue demonstrates that alibi research has developed into a prospering field of research and we expect much more to come in the next decade.

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