

Characterising the Science of Forensic Handwriting and Signature Examinations: The Links Between Handwriting Behaviour and Identification Evidence

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The Forensic Expertise Profiling Laboratory (FEPL) provides research programs aimed at characterising skill associated with forensic practitioners' perceptual and cognitive processes. Forensic Document Examiners (FDEs) use these processes almost exclusively when determining the authorship of questioned writings. In spite of the routine use of handwriting evidence in courts of law internationally, the nature of the expertise and the theoretical claims made by the community of FDEs, until recent times, has remained almost devoid of programs that assist in the assessment of the validity of the science and its underlying theories, including the elucidation of potential error rates. This has led to significant criticisms of the field, particularly in the USA, which have been widely reported in the forensic literature.

To date over 50,000 blind trial opinions have been collectively expressed by participants from 9 countries on handwriting and signature tasks. The data collected thus far has resulted in numerical insights into facets of FDEs' skills (such as estimates of potential error for differing levels of opinion and the determination of the probative value of opinions regarding different questioned writing types). In addition the program has provided an experimental platform where aspects of the underlying theories of Forensic Handwriting Identification and FDEs' behaviour can be investigated. Examples of these investigations are testing class/individual and complexity theories, the determination of the effect of forger practice on the validity of FDEs' opinions, the impact of FDEs examining original versus photocopied writings and the assessment by FDEs of relative writing speed.

This presentation will provide an insight into the relationship between motor control theory and handwriting identification. Information will also be provided regarding the expertise profiling program including the experimental procedures, the revision and corrective action approach to assist in skill development and monitoring, and the impact of the results on method and reporting procedures.

