

Eyewitness testimony

Closing their eyes during an investigative interview helps people to remember more accurate information about events they have witnessed. This was the conclusion of Maastricht alum Annelies Vredeveldt, who recently obtained her PhD from the University of York in England. Before heading to the UK, she graduated from the UM master's track Psychology and Law.

Vredeveldt found that participants who closed their eyes during an interview remembered more information about events they saw in violent video clips and a verbal altercation staged on a New York street. The American Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) – which, naturally, has a great deal of interest in how to elicit more and better information from witnesses and suspects – recently awarded her a grant of \$100,000 for her current research at the University of Cape Town.

Annelies Vredeveldt:

"I find cognitive and social psychology very interesting, but for me it's not enough just to understand how people function. I also want to do something with that knowledge. Legal psychology offers the opportunity to bring about change in society."

"With the FBI grant we're able to cover the costs of 12 video cameras, a training course for the police and the presentation of our results at a conference in Washington to FBI delegates involved with different interrogation techniques."

"Eventually, I'd like to become a professor at a good university."

<http://annelies.vredeveldt.com>

Vredeveldt is working with the South African Police Services to examine the feasibility and effectiveness of the eye-closure instruction in real-life eyewitness interviews. One of the major strengths of this project is that it will include witnesses from diverse racial, economic and social backgrounds, in contrast to the typical student population recruited in the majority of psychological research.

That Vredeveldt is able to acquire research funding from such an influential body not only adds a nice line to her CV; it also increases the chance that her findings will actually be put into practice. In her view, this is the interesting side of legal psychology. "My research shows that an extremely simple method can yield much more information during a witness interview. This information, in turn, can lead to important insights, and help the police to solve a case. That's why I'm doing it."

"I actually thought I had little chance of getting the FBI grant because I'm just starting out on my career, and because the research is about eyewitnesses. I figured the FBI would be more interested in the interrogation of suspects."

"In other words, this FBI grant is an important step in my career. As is the five-year Branco Weiss Fellowship that I recently received, which will allow me to study at a Dutch university whether discussing an event together will help witnesses to remember more."

"Seeing better with your eyes shut"

