

# Factors affecting witness accounts



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## Witnesses Accounts and the Reality

The information given by an informant may vary significantly with the actual information or what happened on the ground. The most basic question that interviewers, whether in the justice system or in research always grapple with is how to know whether the informant is giving the truth (Dean & Whyte 1958). It would be difficult to determine whether this information is the actual absolute truth. However, most interviewers use epistemological approaches to detect the level of truth in the interviewee's information. Navarro (2012) asserts that the researches that have been conducted over a long period have not come up with a single conclusive modality of truth detection.

Witness accounts may also lack a level of truth or may vary from the reality that transpired at the scene of the event. This difference can be motivated by several factors that range from the effects of the environment to psychological factors. This essay examines the main reasons that can lead to a distortion of the witness accounts from the reality. Specifically, the paper looks at the deflection of the truth due to perception and the effect of long-term memory on the accounts given by the witness.

Laub (1992) examines the effect of age and long term memory on the ability to reconstruct the happenings of the Holocaust. At the time of the happenings, the author was a small child that had little knowledge of the happenings in the world. It has to be remembered that the events lasted some time and at the time of the witnessing, the author was already an adult. The author appears to have had a precocious development at the

initial stage of life, making him to be able to make out the events. Through learning the basics of this event and the impact of age, the author is able to clearly understand the happening as they should have been. The only difference is that the ability to exaggerate or distort the information is quite high. In the long term memory, the author cannot single out the specific details of each even and has to fill in the missing information from common knowledge.

The deflection of the accounts given, in this case, is based on the learning experience on the subject that the witness has had over a period. In (Dean & Whyte 1958), this long term effect of learning on the memory of a witness is described as cognitive formulation. The common knowledge here is that what the witness will have learnt over time will cause a difference on the accounts are given and the actual truth. In Callender (2011), the temporal aspects of philosophy are discussed with regards to the existence of the self. In this study, the author opines that there is a possibility of change in individuals over a period whether physical or in mental strength through learning. The discussion about eternalists is also reviewed by this study. It demonstrates the fact that eternalists perception of different times as analogous to the difference in locations. The argument presented by the eternalist here is that different events that occur or exits at different times give the specific times different images. It is, therefore, possible to have a different perception of time and the events that occurred at those times. This spatial difference and learning is what supports the notion that it is possible to have a different of account from the real happening.

A prevalent emotion in time also has an effect on the objectivity of the judgment of an agent or individual (Campbell-Sills, Barlow, Brown, & Hofmann 2006). At the time of delivering an account of happenings, the emotional component of the witness are likely to impact on the testimony because this was not present at the time of the occurrence of an event. The argument here can take two facets: first it is difficult to give a real simulation of the events that transpired in terms of emotion. Secondly, the impact of the prevailing emotions of another individual could distort the contents of the account. As a result, emotions play a double role in the delivery of the accounts of witnesses both of which are subjective on the long term memory. On rare cases, the judgment of a person to give an objective account despite the subjective effect of the emotions has also taken place. In this case, emotions are not considered but the correct and proper outcome as is the norm is the guiding principle.

Apart from the emotional context generated in the long term memory of a person through learning, it is possible that the effect of subjective perception could generate a level of difference. In subjective perception, the main idea is that everyone develops a meaning of the world as they so experience it. As a result, the difference in the experiences that have been gathered in the long term memory of individuals could be the cause of difference on the level of perception. In psychology, subjective perception and the resultant impact on the result of surveys is the main reason for disputing the level of accuracy of a research. This notion of subjective perception mainly concerns the researches that are conducted through the use of observation and non-scientific method. The reason for the bias in the observation and non-

scientific methods is that each individual's observation would be different from the reality. And this also informs the difference in accounts of eye witnesses.

Perception is closely related to the aspect of objectivity in individuals. Coon (2006) illustrates this objectivity role of perception as the ability of one to just recognize and believe what they see. When one sees something, the mind registers the image generated and can recognize the image. Other sensory stimuli information is also perceived by the brain. The sensory input is first received by the appropriate sensor then taken through the recognition process which utilizes the knowledge that is already owned by the individual. The brain compares the input by the data or information that the individual has learnt over time and selects the closest information that the same individual has of the same input. The mechanism of perception is can also be used to explain the idea behind an illusion. It is common knowledge that illusions are things that can be perceived wrongly. The simplest explanation that can be given in illusions is that the senses send a wrong signal to the brain for interpretation returning a wrong conclusion. The result of illusions can also weigh in on the major differences of witness account as compared to the reality. This is mainly attributed to the wrong interpretation or the ability of an event to have more than one interpretation

The comparison mechanism in perception is the main reason there could a difference in the perception of different persons. It has been known that there are objects which can be perceived in more than one way. Apart from the different perceptions of a similar object, there is a possibility that different persons might have different perceptions. A common example of

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the difference in perception is the fact that different persons might perceive a similar color in two different ways. This condition is usually referred to as color blindness (Brewer, & Heitzeg, 2008). Color blindness is a common reason for the difference of the witness accounts in cases where the witness is required to pin point the actual color of an object. The result is that while the color could be known or perceived singly by many, a witness could give a different account of the same.

In perceptual learning, humans tend to develop a habit or a distinct pattern of learning. These patterns of learning if altered could result to the distortion of the information that is received by the individual. According to Coon (2006), these patterns are imparted by the prevalent norms in a society. It also gives an example of an inverted picture of a human head. Most persons walk upright and as such a human mind is accustomed to learning facial differences at an upright posture. Significant differences can be noted if the same picture of a human head were looked at from the two perspectives.

The perception mechanism as described in human psychology has two parts that involve the detection and the search mechanisms. According to Shiffrin & Schneider (1977), this process can either be automatic or controlled by an individual. Once the attention of a person has been drawn towards some stimuli input, the control of the process is shifted to the brain power. In a controlled perception, the study found out that the mechanism is serialized. It also requires a high level of input by the user which could limit the amount of information one retains in the whole process. In an automatically controlled process, the input of the user is limited and as such much of the

processing power of the brain is focused on generating the conclusion of the perception exercise.

These two different forms of perception could be the basis of the difference between a witness account and the reality. As notes, if the process was automatically triggered then the witness could end up with much information as it can which could be the truth anyway. However, if the process is controlled by the individual, it is possible that there could be a large amount of information (Shiffrin & Schneider 1977) that is left out in the process. The study further explains that it is difficult to ignore, alter or delete from the long-term memory of a person if the perception was automatically instigated.

Apart from memory and perception factor, Undue egocentrism is also a factor in deflecting the opinion of the witness that can cause a difference between the account given by a witness and the truth. This argument proposes that the impact of subjectivity on the minds of individuals is the main cause of the distortion of the account. An example of this would be an account given of a vehicle accident. A witness can state that the driver of the vehicle that was swerving was drunk at the time, and nothing else could be affecting the driving. This is an egocentric opinion or emotions that foster the belief that such driving must only be caused by drinking. Studies that have been conducted on the distributive justice judgment indicate that the basis of the conclusion either the norms or the egoistic self-serving notions (Ramsbotham, Miall, & Woodhouse 2011). Apart from these forces, egocentrism is also part of the judgment that could lead to a skewed judgment in giving witness accounts.

In conclusion, the level of accuracy in most of the accounts given by witnesses would be varied from the truth. At an early age, a witness would give a different account from the account given after a longer period usually in adulthood. The reason behind this level of difference is that as a person grows, the details in the long term memory can be forgotten or lost. Apart from the loss, there is a possibility that the learning process changes the ideas that a person has. The level of knowledge will shape their opinion and how they would have reported the whole event at an early age. It would take a precocious ability to reproduce the exact account owing to the time difference and the learning process.

Perception is also an important aspect (Kuehn1974) of the delivery of a witness account. The main reason which can lead to the difference in the accounts given and the reality include the ability of certain objects to have double perception. A possibility of confusion through the illusion is also a factor that could limit the accuracy of the account. As an individual experiences a world from childhood, the experiences are custom to the person and can also affect the accuracy or the information that is given. It is, therefore, important to have the individuals who verify the accounts of witnesses to take into account the impact of all these factors on the truth value of the account.

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