

Discuss factors  
affecting the accuracy  
of eyewitness  
testimony essay  
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There are factors that affect the accuracy of eyewitness testimony such as emotions, fundamental attribution bias, face recognition in other races, leading questions and many more. An example of the affect factors such as leading questions can have on eyewitness testimonies is the Loftus and Palmed study (1974).

It's has been proposed that we store a series of incomplete memory fragments in our mind. When we need to recall a memory we unknowingly fill in the blanks to reconstruct a memory that can be fraught with inaccuracies. Our memory is shaped by our own beliefs of what has happened in the past which may not be an accurate depiction of events. When we have a incomplete memory or are faced with something unknown to us we use our memory of past experiences to create 'schemas'. For example in Carmichael et al (1932) study they showed two groups of participants the same set of drawings but each group was given a different set of descriptions.

When the participants were asked to recall a drawing, the way in which the drawing was previously described affected the drawing that was subsequently produced by the participant. This shows that the language used affected our memory and conjures up a set of expectations about the object - schemas. Such schemas alter our recollection of something and produces an inaccurate memory. Another form of reconstructive memory is stereotypes. A stereotype is when we attribute inaccurate characteristics to a group of people e. g. all blondes are dim or all youths are jobs. This could affect our memory recall when it comes to remembering an incident. For example when remembering a fight between two people we may be inclined

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to believe the youth was being violent went in actual fact it was an adult who was being violent.

There has been debate over whether our initial perceptions are effected by schemas or whether it is our subsequent recall that is effected. Research has shown that initial comprehension and storage are affected. However Loftus and Palmer demonstrated that the post event information (leading question) changed the original memory held for the event rather than creating a response bias. Tuckey and Brewer (2003) stereotype study showed mixed results. They found that people who were shown a video of a bank robbery recalled features that were typical stereotypes of robbers the best. For example they recalled that the robbers were male. However counter stereotype information was also well remembered for example when the belief that robbers carry guns was contradicted.

When it comes to face recognition it has been proved by Buckhout and Regan (1988) that we are poor at recognising faces from other ethnicities other then our own, this is called the cross race effect. According to Ellis et all (1979) the ease off recognising unfamiliar depends on their ethnicity. This daddy showed that when looking at unfamiliar faces the hairstyle and outline of the face are more important whereas features such as eyes matter more for the recognition of famillar faces. This is why some criminals use balaclavas to cover their facial features as it would make it harder to recognise their face at a later date. A study by Roberts and Bruce 1988 showed that masking their nose made the ability to judge gender more difficult than in the eyes or mouth were masked. Configural processing

research suggests that we recognise faces in terms of the configuration of pictures rather than each individual feature.

Poor face recognition research has found supporting results that eyewitnesses are poor at identifying possible criminal faces. Buckhout (1974) staged a purse theft and conducted lineups to test the recall of 52 witnesses -only seven correctly identified the best on both occasions. A factor that may have a negative affect on the accuracy of an eyewitness testimony is mistaken identity. We might recognise that we have seen an unfamiliar face before however we are less likely to know where we had previously seen that face. If we do not know them we may identify their face as one that resembles one that we do know e. g. on TV in, a magazine.

This affects our memory recall and causes us to accuse the wrong person in a eyewitness testimony. Configural processing can have serious implications on creating identikit pictures. Such pictures are based on individual features more than the configuration of them, this could hinder the accuracy of identification of the criminal. Ellis et al (1975) research supported this. They found only 12.5% accuracy in choosing the correct face from a set of reconstructions. A problem that arises with configural processing is that even if some of the individual features have a good likeness to the criminal the composition of the facial feature as a whole will have a different configural identity. This is because faces are recognised as a 'whole', this will reduce the likelihood of a correct identification when using such techniques.

Lastly the role of emotions can have an effect on the accuracy of an eyewitness testimony. If somebody has to give an eyewitness testimony it

can be assumed that they have witnessed the crime. This can be very frightening for the witness especially if the criminal had a weapon. However emotions can either improve recall perhaps by focusing their attention on the event and thus memorising more detail. Or, it can reduce recall by distracting the witness from paying attention to what they are seeing. The 'Yerkes Dodson law' says that recall improves with arousal up to the point of optimum arousal but higher arousal then reduces performance, this would suggest that crimes that are moderately frightening produced the best recall and that very scary crimes would produce poor recall. The 'weapons effect' proposed by Loftus et al (1987) can also cause a reduced recall as when a weapon is seen the witness tends to focus on it rather than on the face of the criminal as the weapon is more frightening.

Deffenbacher et al (2004) 'meta-analysed' studies of eyewitness recall and found that high stress had the negative impact on accuracy. However Christian and Hubinette (1993) found that witnesses to real Bank robberies who had been threatened had better recall than onlookers who were not involved. This does not support the Yerkes Dodson law, as the best recall was with the person who had the most frightening experience. However there is evidence to support the weapons effect. Evidence in a study by Johnson and Scott (1978) demonstrated that one group of participants who witnessed the man carrying a knife covered in blood were less accurate in identifying the 'criminal' than the another group of participants who witnessed a man carrying a pen covered in grease. This research supports Loftus et al's (1987) subsequent study.

In conclusion there are many factors that can affect the accuracy of eyewitness testimonies. Even when experiencing an incident we create inaccurate memories due to our emotions at the time e. g. how scared we are. Even after an incident when we recall a past experience we use schemas and stereotypes to fill in the blanks of the memory. This shows us that our memory is not an accurate depiction of our past, it can be affected by many different things and when it comes to eyewitness testimonies are memory cannot be 100% trusted.