Age differences in eyewitness testimony

Eyewitness testimony is the description an onlooker gives in court, unfolding what they saw had happened at a specific occasion which is been investigated. It mainly includes identification of perpetrators or the details of the crime scene. Mainly recollection of events is detailed, but not always. This recollection is the proof to demonstrate what happened from witness's perception. In past, Memory recall had been the most reliable source of information but recently forensic psychologists had claimed that memories and individual observations could be unreliable as it could be differently moulded, modified and biased.

However, many countries are making changes in how eyewitness testimony is presented in court. Since early 20th century, many psychologists had questioned the reliability of eyewitness testimony. Its believability was first questioned by Hugo Munsterberg, who first developed the field of forensic psychology. He doubted the consistency of observation and memory in " On the Witness stand". Eyewitness testimony is a significant region of research in cognitive psychology and human memory. Research has shown that juries are often unable to differentiate between a false and accurate eyewitness testimony.

The confidence level of the witness is often seen by jurors to connect with accuracy of their statements. Psychology had built scientific literucture on eyewitness identification and cautioned justice system with the issues associated with it. Eyewitness testimony research's looks at systematic variables or estimator variables. Estimator varibales can be categorised in four main sections: characteristics of the witness, testimony, or testimony

evaluators and events. Systematic variables are variables which have or are possibility controlled by justice system.

The following two estimator variables: age of witness and gender were discussed further in this study. According to Binet (1889) eyewitness's behaviour had been focus of philosophic conjecture and debate. " Many early philosophers pondered who the most accurate eyewitness testimony was, believed males been better witnesses than females" (Bringmann & Bringmann, 1986). William Stern (1903-04) started work on gender differences in eyewitness identifications. His study consisted of 24 secondary and junior boys of secondary and junior schools and 8 young females.

With the influence of traditional view, Stern (1903-04) reported that " males subjects were better in remembering facts and less influenced by misleading questions". As thinking process changes with age, an obvious critic to this test is that these two groups are not comparable. Whereas some theorists (Shepherd, Ellis, & Davies: 1982) reported women displayed better performances in eyewitness tasks than men. On Contrast, as per (Bringmann & Bringmann, 1986) when children were tested with a complex picture, no gender differences were found.

Also no gender differences were found when Stern's method was used among same age groups (Cunningham & Bringmann, 1986). A motivation picture used in Stern's research (1903-04) and complex picture used in Bringmann and Bringmann's research is the main focus of this study. Between the age of 18 and 50 years, 40 undergraduate students (20 males and 20 females) voluntarily participated in the research. Upon participation,

a course credit was given. There wasn’t a significant age differences among both groups.

Two different Pictures were used as experimental stimulus. The first picture (P1), 16-in by 20-in scene of an “ old fashioned farm-house kitchen”. This picture showed mother, father and children who are about to eat dinner. Second Picture (P2) was a 12-in by16-in watercolour and ink picture of a busy street crossing. It showed a school bus accident which was hit by a sedan at a busy street. This picture portrayed different kinds of cars, buses, delivery trucks, animals, people and their activities.

It was made visually complex and less commonplace or familiar. Questionaire1 was attached with P1 and questionaire2 with P2. Both questionnaires consisted of 10 questions: 5 “ factual” questions and 5 “ leading” questions about the picture’s content. Questions for P1 were from Stern’s (1903-04) interview guide and P2 were from Bringmann and Bringmann (1986)’s eyewitness questionnaire. Presentation for both questionnaires were same with “ factual” question been asked. Factual questions looked for genuine details of the picture like: “ Is there a woman in picture?” Leading questions referred to information not present in stimulus present like: “ Did a boy or girl ride on the skateboard? ”.

Male and female participants were individually examined by a female examiner. Each participant sighted and responded to questions on both the pictures. Randomly participants were taken to testing site and alternately evaluated the order of stimulus presentation (P1P2, P2P1). After instructed to carefully attend the short memory task, participants were shown P1 for a min.

Soon after immediately, they are asked 10 appropriate questions. Then, participants were shown the second picture (P2) and immediately 10 questions related to picture's contents were asked. A neutral tone of voice was used to present the question. Oral response of each participant was recorded and scored. Cunningham and Bringmann (1986) established the scoring rules: " 1" for correct response and " 0" for incorrect response. No specific response like " I don't Know" was scored correct for leading questions and incorrect for factual questions.

Paired- difference t test was used to test the prediction of no difference in combined scores, separate gender scores and order of stimulus presentation (P2P1, P1P2). Factual and misleading scores with differences in combined scores were analysised. Using same method, there was no significant differences were found between gender groups and order of presentation (P1P2, P2P1). With the order of presentation, there was a considerable difference in paired scores were found, regardless of gender. When P1 was shown first, participants correctly answered more questions about P2 and vice versa.

This " priming effect" or repetition was commonly found by memory research and had been described by many psychologists like Collins and Loftus (1975) and McNamara (1986). Priming effect is an closely connected memory in which exposure to one stimulus influenes responses of later responses. The study showed that Cunningham and Brignmann's research (1986) had yield no significant gender differences in accuracy of recall or resistance in misleading information among adults. With Current

socialization patterns, It could be possible that Stern’s gender groups are undergoing many chnages and becoming insignificant.

As per Maccoby and Jacklin (1974), there are no stable gender differences found in many lab tasks as “ an experimental artifact is resposible for observed dofferences”. From a complete review of eyewitness research, Loftus (1979, p- 163) concluded that “ Psychologial research on the effects of sex differences on eyewitness abilty has produced results that are equivocal”. Basically, Cunningham and Bringmann (1986) contended that it is not important “ who” is the better eyewtness but “ how” males and females might be better eyewitness (p-556).

From legal point of view, age of witness is a considerable relevant variable in eyewitness testimony. Problems of eyewitness testimony are diffcult to be analysied when sole witness is a minor. Eventhough older adults are assumed to be more compent but age-related disadvantages related to observation and memory can not be ignored. Many studies have shown 12 years younger children and older adults doesn’t remember eyewitness information well as compared to older children and young adults (Cohen & Harnick, 1980; Yarmey & Kent, 1980).