

# The accuracy of eyewitness testimony and repressed memories



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The Accuracy of Eyewitness Testimony & Repressed Memories Many courts of law have relied on eyewitness testimony and some have made attempts to access repressed memories of those who were at the scene of a crime (Buckhout, 1974). However, it has become evident that eyewitness testimony may not be the most accurate evidence to use when trying to ascertain the perpetrator of a crime, because there are many different elements that affect how accurate testimony is. Groups of people may also often recall the same incident in many different ways, which has been shown by the research (Loftus, 1994). The purpose of this paper is to summarize the findings about eyewitness testimony and repression of memory by psychologists.

Although many people rely on eyewitness testimony, there are a huge number of factors which can influence the way that a victim or other witness recalls the perpetrator of a crime. For example, the stress of being a victim of, or viewing, a crime can mean that some people remember certain elements more vividly or psychologically adapt the memory to make it more bearable (Loftus, 1994). Additionally, there is evidence that cross-racial identification issues, meaning that many eyewitnesses have proven difficulty identifying a perpetrator from a race other than their own (Buckhout, 1974). Pressure from law enforcement agencies can also make a difference, as those who cannot correctly remember the individual in question may feel forced to make a rash judgment that does not correlate with the real criminal (Loftus, 1996).

Another common problem that comes from identifying a perpetrator comes from the fact that the witness usually assumes that the actual criminal is present in the line-up, and thus will feel forced to choose from one of those  
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presented to him or her (Loftus, 1996). However, line-ups can be composed of a group of people that happen to fit the description given, or those who were in the area at the time and do not always contain the perpetrator (Loftus, 1996). Police and law enforcement can help to prevent this problem by giving line-up instructions that inform the witness of this fact and ensuring that the witness does not feel pressure to make an immediate judgment, although this does not always work in practice (Bernstein, Penner, Clarke-Stewart & Roy, 2011).

It is also a common belief that people can repress memories of traumatic events and then later retrieve these memories (using counseling or otherwise), which could then be used in a court of law. This idea is still really controversial amongst psychologists, with some believing that there is strong evidence for the phenomenon (Bernstein et al, 2011), and others believing it to be completely impossible and likely to lead to the creation of false memories (Bernstein et al, 2011). As with the eyewitness testimonies, there are a number of problems that come from relying on repressed memories. There is evidence that what appear to be repressed memories are actually a combination of real memory and outside influences (such as the media, pressure from family and friends, or influence by law enforcement) which means that they are not reliable (Loftus, 1994). As with eyewitness testimony, there is strong evidence that they may actually be unreliable and have not always correlated to DNA or fingerprinting evidence, particularly when the situation has been particularly traumatic (Loftus, 1994).

## References

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