

Factors affecting the accuracy of eyewitness testimony:

Leading Questions, Post-Event Discussion, and Anxiety

Leading Questions - are questions which are phrased in a way to suggest a certain answer, for example, 'Was the offender holding a weapon in his right hand?'. This implies a weapon was used and leads the witness to agree.

Post-Event Discussion - usually occurs when there is more than one witness to an event. The witnesses may discuss what they have seen with others, and this could influence the accuracy of their recall.

Anxiety - is a state of emotional and physical arousal, which can be a normal response in stressful situations. This can however affect the accuracy of eyewitness testimonies.

All of these factors are believed to affect the accuracy of eyewitness testimony.

Leading Questions

Loftus and Palmer (1974) conducted a classic experiment to investigate the effect of leading questions on the accuracy of eyewitness testimony. Their 1st experiment with 45 American students asked participants to watch a video of a car crash and recall what they had seen on a questionnaire. However, Loftus and Palmer were only interested in the response to one critical question about the speed the cars were travelling. Each participant was placed in a different condition where the verb in the question varied;

'How fast were the cars travelling when they.... into each other?'

There were five conditions; smashed, hit, bumped, contacted and collided. They found that participants' estimate of speed for the smashed condition (40.5mph) was greater than the others. The verb smashed makes participants feel the car is travelling faster than it was. They suggested that leading questions can significantly affect the accuracy of eyewitness testimony and distort memory of the original event.

Post-Event Discussion

Gabbert et al (2003) investigated the effect of post-event discussion on the accuracy of eyewitness testimony. The participants watched a video of a girl stealing money from a wallet. They were either tested individually (control group) or in pairs (co-witness group). All the participants in the co-witness group discussed the crime together. The results showed 71% of the witnesses in the co-witness group recalled information they had not actually seen. Also 60% of the witnesses in the co-witness group said that the girl was guilty, despite not seeing her commit a crime. In contrast the control group with no discussion gave 0% of mistaken information.

Anxiety

Research has shown that anxiety can have both a negative and positive effect on eyewitness testimony, but this varies with each individual.

Clifford and Scott (1978) found individuals who witnessed a violent attack remembered fewer details about the event compared to a control group who saw a less stressful version. This shows that high anxiety can have a negative effect on eyewitness memory. In addition, Clifford & Hollin (1981) examined the relationship between the level of violence and recall. They found that the higher the level of violence depicted, the poorer participants' recall of an assault.

Valentine & Mesout (2009) also supports the negative effects of anxiety on memory in their study in the London Dungeons. They explored the ability of visitors to the London Dungeon, to describe and identify somebody encountered in the Horror Labyrinth, as a function of their state anxiety. To validate the measure of state anxiety, participants wore a wireless heart rate monitor whilst in the labyrinth. High state anxiety was found to be associated with a higher heart rate. Subsequently, visitors completed questionnaires about their experience in the dungeon, and it was noted that the higher the anxiety of a witness the less accurate the recall and the less likely the participants were to correctly identify the culprit.

Anxiety can, however, have a positive effect on accuracy of memory.

Yuille and Cutshall (1986) conducted a study using witnesses to a real-life incident and found that recall accuracy of a stressful event involving weapons was remarkably accurate, even after time. They reported that witnesses were still accurate 4-5 months after the event.

Christianson & Hubinette (1993) questioned 58 witnesses of real-life bank robberies in Sweden 4-15 months after the event and found that those threatened in some way (high anxiety) had improved recall and remembered more details.

Individual differences play a large part in the effects of anxiety on eyewitness testimony. There is no 'one size fits all' rule about the effects of anxiety on accuracy of EWT, everyone is different.

