

EYEWITNESS TESTIMONY

People who were present at the scene of an accident or crime are often questioned by the police and asked to provide a description of what they saw, heard and/or smelt. These descriptions are called eyewitness testimonies.

They are an important part of many police investigations and often provide crucial evidence in subsequent legal proceedings although decades of research suggest they are unreliable.

Memory is reconstructive, meaning it may be altered with each retelling and can become contaminated by post-event information. Memory also degrades over time, underlining the importance of developing techniques that allow officers to elicit accurate information as quickly as possible.

LINE UPS AND IDENTIFICATION

This research focuses specifically on the use of line-ups in the identification of suspects. In real police investigations, eyewitnesses may be asked to view a line-up. They will be asked whether the culprit (the person who committed the crime) is present in a line-up made up of a suspect (someone the police believe committed the crime) and a small number of foils.

A variety of line-up formats exist, including live line-ups (physically present suspects, who are viewed from behind a one-way mirror) and photographs and/or videos of suspects. Witnesses may view the individuals simultaneously (all at the same time) or sequentially (one after the other).

FALSE POSITIVE RESPONSES

Forensic researchers often ask participants to observe a staged crime/event and then to identify the culprit (person who committed the crime) from a selection of people, called a line-up.

When the culprit is present in the lineup it is called a target present lineup but when the culprit isn't present in the lineup it is known as target absent lineup.

In a target present lineup the participants have a lot of responses correct identification, a false positive response or a false negative response.

FURTHER UNDERSTANDING

What is correct identification in a line up?

Correct identification is when the participant correctly identifies the culprit who has committed the crime from a lineup.

What is false positive response in a line up?

Imagine you have a magical treasure map, and you're looking for hidden treasures, like shiny gems. Sometimes, this map might make you think there's treasure in a certain spot when there isn't. That's what we call a "false positive."

What is a False negative response in a line up?

When we use line-ups or pictures to identify someone, a "false negative" means the line-up or pictures didn't show the right person, even though that person was actually there.

What is a Foil?

The foils are generally people who look physically similar to the suspect.

CHILDREN AS WITNESSES

Children as young as five are relatively accurate when faced with a target-present, simultaneous line-up, but children as old as 13 struggle to correctly reject target-absent line-ups.

When kids see a grown-up like a researcher or a police officer, they usually think the grown-up is in charge. So, when they're asked to pick out someone from a group of pictures, they might feel they have to choose someone, even if the right person isn't there. They might not realize that it's okay to say, "None of these pictures are the right one."

CONCLUSIONS

The researchers concluded that, since the children were able to identify the cartoon characters with almost 100 per cent accuracy in target-present lineups, cognitive factors (e.g. faulty memory) were not responsible for the lower success rate in correctly rejecting the foils in the target-absent line-ups. They were clearly able to recognise the characters and, therefore, logically should have been able to recognise that none of the foils was Dora or Diego; yet some of the children still made errors.

Pozzulo et al. conclude that these errors must be caused by social factors – that is, incorrectly believing that the researcher would prefer them to make a positive identification, regardless of whether they felt it was right or wrong, and despite the researcher saying that the target person may not be in the line-up. It was also concluded, as expected, that children are less accurate than adults when faced with unfamiliar human actors and generally more prone to giving false positive responses (incorrect identification).