

Accuracy of eyewitness testimony

What might make an eyewitness misremember an event?
Two explanations are misleading information and anxiety

Misleading information
Definition: Incorrect information given to an eyewitness, usually after the event has taken place.

Leading questions

Definition: Questions that suggest a certain answer. For example, 'Did you see the knife?' suggests that there was a knife.

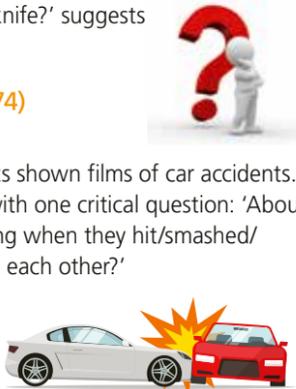
Loftus and Palmer (1974)

Procedure
Lab experiment. 45 students shown films of car accidents. Asked series of questions with one critical question: 'About how fast were the cars going when they hit/smashed/collided/bumped/contacted each other?'

Results

Smashed	→ 40.5 mph
Collided	→ 39.3 mph
Bumped	→ 38.1 mph
Hit	→ 34.0 mph
Contacted	→ 31.8 mph

Conclusions
Leading questions may cause us to 'reconstruct' our memory of an event, making it less accurate.



Post-event discussion

Definition: Where two witnesses have a conversation after an event which may contaminate a witness's memory for the event.

Gabbert et al. (2003)

Procedure
Pairs of participants were shown a video of a girl returning a book to an office from different viewpoints — each participant could see details their partner could not. For example, only one partner could see the girl steal a £10 note. Each pair discussed what they had seen before being individually tested.

Results
71% mistakenly recalled details that they didn't see but had discussed.
0% in a control group reported details they didn't see.

Conclusions
'Memory conformity' may cause inaccurate eyewitness testimony.



Anxiety

Definition: A state of emotional and physical arousal (for example, worried thoughts and increased heart rate).

Johnson and Scott (1976)

Procedure
While waiting for the study to begin, participants heard voices in a next door room. A man ran out holding:

- a pen covered in grease
- a knife covered in blood

Participants then had to identify him from 50 photographs.

Results
Pen and grease: 49% accuracy.
Knife and blood: 33% accuracy.

Conclusions
Anxiety caused by the weapon narrowed the focus of attention, reducing recall of peripheral detail (for example, the man's face). Called the 'weapon focus effect'.



Exam tip
As all of these studies took place in laboratories, you can evaluate them all in a similar way using your research methods knowledge (for example, high control over variables and ease of replication). But take care to make the evaluation specific to the study.

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