

Outline and evaluate the research into eyewitness testimony.

There has been a vast amount of interest into eyewitness testimony (EWT). EWT investigate the accuracy of memory following a crime or incident worth interrogating and the types of errors make in such situations. Sometimes EWT can be unreliable, which can lead to horrific consequences in a court of law.

Rattner (1988) reviewed 205 cases of wrongful arrest (such as the case of Edward Honaker) and found that in 52% of cases, this was due to mistaken EWT.

Baddeley (1997) has reported that 74% of suspects were convicted in 300 cases where EWT was the only evidence against them.

Problems can occur at any point in the memory process, whether it is during acquisition, during storage or during retrieval. A number of different types of research have been pursued to understand the reasoning for mistaken and unreliable EWT, anxiety being one of them.

When considering the reliability of EWT, it is important to bear in mind the type of crime that is being recalled. Some crimes, such as those involving violence, are associates with high levels of anxiety in victims or onlookers. Whether anxiety really does lead to unreliable remembering depends on a number of factors.

Loftus (1979) reported a lab study which demonstrated the huge role that anxiety can play. Participants were exposed to two situations, one, a low key discussion which results in a person emerging from a room with a pen in his hand, and the other, a heated argument resulting in breaking of glass, smashing of chairs and man emerging holding a bloodstained knife. Participants were then given 50 photos and asked to identify the person.

The findings were that witnesses who had seen the man holding the knife emerge accurately identified him, 44% of the time, whereas the participants who saw the man carrying the bloodstained knife only identified him 33%. This finding has come to be known as 'weapon focus.' This is where the witnesses concentrate on the weapon rather than the person holding it, to enable them to feel safer if they know where the weapon is. However, this study can be criticised. This study is a laboratory study (lab). The variables in a lab study can be manipulated so therefore this leaves a question of bias. The study could also be accused of lacking validity, as a different picture emerges from field studies in another EWT research study. Also, this experiment raises ethical issues about the welfare of the participants who were deceived, and who many have been upset by the knife with blood on. In the same area of EWT,

Yuille and Cutshall provided evidence for the accuracy of testimony in a real life event. They interviewed witnesses to a real life shooting. Some witnesses has seen the incident close, while some from further away. The findings from this study were that those who were closer gave a more accurate account, and those who were closest provided more detail. Also, misleading questions had no effect on accuracy and those who were distressed at the time proved most accurate 5 months later.

The problems with this study though, are that the witnesses weren't participants. They had actually seen the shooting and could and most likely would have been in a lot of distress, and also, there is no way to be certain that the misleading questions had no effect, as demand characteristics are a 'dead cert.'

The next type of research is into what are known as schemas. Schemas are knowledge packages that are build up through experience and interpretation.

Cohen (1993) has suggested that there are 5 ways that schemas might lead to reconstructive memory, these being that we tend to ignore parts of a scene that do not fit the specific schema, we store central features rather than exact details, we fill in missing information to make sense of what we have seen, we distort memories for events to fit in with expectations, and we may use schemas to provide basis for a guess. This means that schemas may lead to distortions in memory.

Brewer and Treyens (1981) investigated the effects of schemas on visual memory by asking 30 participants (p's) one at a time to wait in a room for 35 seconds. The room was designed to look like an office. It contained items that are regarded as being office like, but some were purposely put there to be like 'the odd ones out,' and to see if the p's noticed.

This study found that out of all of the p's, they were more likely to recall the items that were typically 'office like.' However, 8 participants recalled the bizarre item, and some filled in different items that weren't

actually there. This shows that people can summarize what they believe to be in an office from past experience, and by being in an office, falsely remember what was in there. The problem with this study, are that the p's were deceived into believing they were just sat in there to wait, and has no chance to remember the items in there, because they didn't know what they had to do. This leaves question of bias, as well as the fact the office was staged, almost lab – like, so therefore the variables were manipulated.

The third research topic into EWT is the age of the witness.

People tend to think that a children's testimony is less reliable and that their testimony should be treated as suspect. When evaluating children's testimony, it is worth bearing in mind the useful distinction that Koriat et al (2001) made. They looked at the amount of information given by children and its accuracy. This is an unethical study, as the children are being put under quite a large amount of stress.

Gersman and Padilla (1988) found that children aged between 7 and 12 years were less accurate than adults when it came to reporting details of a filmed robbery. This study is open to criticism as adults have had more experience in life, and know a lot more than the children do, when it comes to what giving an accurate account means. This makes the study unfair.

The fourth research topic is the use of leading questions. Loftus and Palmer (1974) showed p's a film of a car crash, and asked them to recall it in interview form, asking them 'How fast was the car going when it hit the tree?'; All p's were asked the same questions, except that the word hit was variously replaced by the word 'smashed.' It was found that the word used affected the response from the participant, and can almost answer the question for them.

The fifth topic is the consequences of the testimony. As the studies have already shown, lab studies have not always been supported by evidence from real life. It is believed that witnesses will or will not give an account because of the consequences of the crime, and what they say. Foster et al (1994) tested this possibility, in a study where p's were shown a video of a bank robbery and asked to identify the perpetrator. One group was led to believe that the robbery really happened, whereas the others assumed it was a simulation. Identification was more accurate in the first group. There are many criticisms for this study. Not only were the participants deceived, they were open to demand characteristics too. They did not have fully informed consent; therefore, the study was biased.

The sixth research topic is the way in which witnesses are tested. Koriat and Goldsmith (1996) have shown that witness accuracy can be increased if tests do not rely on forced – choice format and if witnesses are allowed to give no answer if they are not sure. Also, witnesses are able to give better accounts with the right cues. Misleading information can be linked to this topic, although it itself is a separate one.

Loftus (1975) showed 150 participants a film of a car accident. When they had watched it, they were split into two groups, one of which were asked, 'How fast was the car going when it passed the stop sign?' and the other were asked 'How fast was the car going when it went past the barn when travelling down the country road,' even though there was no barn. Loftus concluded that for those in group 2, the non-existent barn added to the original memory representation when asked a week later. This study can be criticised, as they were deceived and not informed fully.

Loftus and his colleagues have made an important contribution to the understanding of eyewitness testimony and the factors to it. It is difficult to reproduce, however, the conditions in the lab exactly for practical and ethical reasons and it is quite possible that eyewitnesses remember real events rather than staged ones. In conclusion, there have been many different studies to establish exactly what defines the reliability of EWT, and each one has contributed to expand the knowledge of the mind, and memory.