

To what extent has psychological research shown Eye Witness Testimony to be reliable and accurate?

There are many cases that both help and hinder the reliability and accuracy of EWT (Eye Witness Testimony). One experiment conducted by Loftus and Palmer showed strong results of unreliability and inaccuracy. They gathered a group of American students and showed them a video of a car accident. They then asked them several questions including "At what speed do you think the cars were going when they (hit/smashed/collided/bumped/contacted) each other?" Only one verb was used per participant. Loftus found that the estimated speed changed depending on the verb they used. The verb affected part of the participants' memory of the incident. This is strong evidence to show that EWT is highly unreliable as it can be affected by leading questions such as that of Loftus and Palmer's.

But this theory can be criticised by the idea of demand characteristics. There is no way of knowing that the participants weren't subconsciously trying to please the experimenters by giving them the answer they think they wanted to hear. This would greatly affect the internal validity of the results. However, to combat this criticism, Loftus offered money for accuracy in the questions, therefore cancelling out the chance of demand characteristics having an effect. She found that the results were no different and that participants still answered incorrectly. This reassured the idea that EWT can be altered by leading questions and so can be unreliable and inaccurate.

Another study that may help to support this idea is Bartlett's schema theory. Participants were told a story called "The War of the Ghosts" and were then asked to recall it after different intervals of time. Bartlett found that participants subconsciously changed the story to make it familiar to their own culture and language by rationalising certain details of the story. The inaccuracies increased over time. Bartlett concluded that people change details based on existing schemas that the brain has from previous experiences. The same thing could apply to EWT. Eyewitnesses could change their account of a crime without even realising just because it makes it more familiar to their own existing schema, therefore making their testimony highly unreliable. This theory has high ecological validity because schemas play a major role in everyday life.

However, there is a study that suggests EWT might be highly reliable and accurate. Conway et al. conducted a study on Flashbulb memories. He believed that a significant event having distinctive meaning and emotional impact would be highly memorable, creating a flashbulb memory. He used Margaret Thatcher's resignation as an example and people's memory of the event were assessed. Conway found that 86% still had vivid, detailed memory of the event, thus creating a flashbulb memory. This shows that if the event is emotionally important enough, then EWT can be considered very reliable and accurate. It suggests that flashbulb memories are more enduring and so less subject to forgetting. The likely nature of the event that an eyewitness would be asked to recall is probably going to be emotionally significant and so therefore is probably going to cause a flashbulb memory for the witness. This suggests that EWT can in fact be reliable and accurate, even more so than other types of memory. However, it is hard to know whether the accuracy of people's memory of Mrs Thatcher's resignation was due to flashbulb memory or just the fact that they may have seen it on the news and heard about it and therefore recalled and rehearsed it several times, enough for them to remember it in detail. This questions the validity of this study and in conclusion, the reliability of EWT.

In contrast with this idea is the theory of repression. This was developed by Freud, who said that any severe anxiety-causing material might be dealt with by repression. It is described as motivated forgetting without conscious awareness and is usually caused by traumatic events or extremely distressing memories which threaten an individual's well-being. This may include witnessing a crime. If a person was extremely traumatised by seeing a violent act, they may repress certain details, calling into question the accuracy and reliability of their testimony. However, this theory is hard to evaluate because they are extremely hard to retrieve and creating them in an experimental condition would be highly unethical. But there is one study by Williams that took this into consideration by taking existing cases and analysing the victims of violent crimes. He found that 38% had no conscious memory of the event at all. This supports the idea that repression may cause EWT to be unreliable and inaccurate.

There are few studies to suggest that EWT can be found as accurate and reliable. The majority of research seems to suggest that they are in fact inaccurate and unreliable. This is due to things like repression, which causes memory loss due to traumatic incidents. It is also due to witnesses rationalizing the events that they see and making it more familiar to their own schema. Overall, EWT cannot be depended on as a reliable piece of evidence.