



The Reliability of Eyewitness Testimony in Criminal Justice

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DESCRIPTION

Eyewitness testimony has long held a pivotal role in the criminal justice system, often influencing the outcomes of trials and investigations. It is considered one of the most compelling forms of evidence, largely due to the perceived reliability of first-hand accounts. However, research in forensic psychology has increasingly highlighted the limitations and fallibility of eyewitness memory, raising critical questions about its evidentiary value and the psychological mechanisms that underpin it.

Memory is not a flawless recording of events, but rather a reconstructive process susceptible to various influences at every stage-encoding, storage, and retrieval. During the encoding phase, factors such as stress, lighting, distance, and the presence of a weapon can impair the ability to accurately perceive and register details. For example, in high-stress situations like violent crimes, the stress hormone cortisol can narrow an individual's focus, often referred to as "weapon focus," which causes peripheral details such as the perpetrator's facial features to be missed or misperceived.

Once an event is encoded, the memory must be stored, and during this period, it is vulnerable to contamination through post-event information. This includes leading questions posed by law enforcement or attorneys, discussions with other witnesses, or media coverage. The misinformation effect, a well-documented phenomenon, occurs when incorrect information introduced after the event becomes integrated into the witness's memory, altering their recall. This effect has significant implications in legal contexts, particularly during repeated interviews or when witnesses are exposed to suggestive questioning.

Retrieval, the final stage, is also fraught with challenges. The pressure to recall information accurately in a courtroom setting can lead to memory distortion or overconfidence. Eyewitnesses

often express a high level of certainty about their recollections, yet research shows that confidence does not necessarily correlate with accuracy. Jurors, however, are inclined to equate confidence with credibility, which can result in miscarriages of justice when confident but mistaken witnesses provide erroneous identifications.

One of the most controversial aspects of eyewitness testimony is the use of line-up procedures. Traditional lineups can be highly suggestive, particularly if the administrator knows who the suspect is and unconsciously influences the witness. Double-blind procedures, where neither the administrator nor the witness knows who the suspect is, have been shown to reduce such biases. Furthermore, sequential lineups, where individuals are presented one at a time rather than simultaneously, help to minimize comparative judgment and improve identification accuracy.

Age and individual differences also play a role in the reliability of eyewitness testimony. Children and older adults tend to be more susceptible to suggestion and memory distortion. Cognitive development in children and cognitive decline in older adults can impair both the encoding and retrieval of memories. Personality traits, such as high levels of suggestibility or a desire to please authority figures, can further compromise the accuracy of eyewitness accounts.

CONCLUSION

The legal system has begun to acknowledge these psychological findings, and some jurisdictions have implemented reforms aimed at improving the reliability of eyewitness evidence. These include revised jury instructions, expert testimony on memory, and standardized procedures for conducting line-ups and interviews. Nonetheless, there is still a pressing need for broader systemic changes and continued collaboration between psychologists, legal professionals, and policymakers.

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