

Introduction

Eye witness testimonies are a statement given by an individual who offers their own recollection or interpretation of a specific event (Kassin, Ellsworth and Smith 1989). Our ability to recall past experiences has always been relied upon in criminal investigations, but since the introduction of CCTV and DNA testing it has become more apparent that eyewitness testimony is not always accurate. Loftus and Palmer (1974) carried out a study in which participants were shown a 30 second video of a car accident, then asked to estimate the speed at which the cars were travelling when they hit each other. Five groups of participants were asked the question using different verbs. The average estimated speed varied depending on the verb used, ranging from 40.8mph for those who heard the word 'smashed', to 31.8mph when the word 'contacted' was used. This study suggests that reconstructive errors in recall can occur when a witness is presented with leading questions or ambiguous information. This is an important factor when considering eyewitness testimony in criminal cases and has in fact led to incorrect criminal convictions. It has been suggested that the questions in the Loftus and Palmer (1974) study were not structured and that this can affect the accuracy of recall (Bekerian and Bowers, 1983). This could potentially be overcome with use of the cognitive interview, which has been researched by Geiselman et al (1985 *cited in* Eysenck and Keane, 200, p232). This involves reinstating the context of the event, reporting the event in detail, recalling the event in several orders and reporting the event from multiple perspectives. Fisher and Geiselman (1985) found that using open ended questions and fitting the order of questions to the order of events increases accurate reporting.

The theory of fitting the order of questions to the order of events in order to improve recall accuracy was tested by Morris and Morris (1985), who carried out a study in which participants were shown one of two short video clips which both ended in a chase. They were then asked questions which followed the order of events or were randomly ordered, or which began with questions about the main character of the clip or the main event in the clip. Results of this study showed that recall accuracy was significantly better when the order of the questions matched the order of events. This study and that of Loftus and Palmer (1974) indicate that eyewitness testimony is an important area of research since juries tend to pay close attention to eyewitness testimony and generally find it a reliable source of information. However, research continues to find that eyewitness testimony can be negatively affected by leading questions and order of questions. Therefore, it is important to continue researching this field to help increase the reliability of eyewitness testimonies in the real world.

The present study was a partial replication of the Morris and Morris study. Participants were presented with a video clip of a comedy sketch, as opposed to a potential criminal incident, with the aim of demonstrating improved eyewitness testimony when the order of questions matched the order of events. All participants were shown the same clip and then asked to answer the same questions ordered either

randomly or matching the order of events. The hypothesis was that recall accuracy would be better when questions were asked in the same order that events occurred.

Methodology:

Design: The study was an unrelated subject design. The independent variable was the order of questions, being either the chronological order (condition 1), or in random order (condition 2). The dependent variable was the total of correct answers achieved by each participant, for either question order. The test was conducted in silence. Consent was presumptive as being part of a class. The experiments were conducted on campus in two different rooms, and at different times. Anonymity was maintained with no identification name or number being recorded.

Participants: The present study consisted of N undergraduates, from a West Wales University, and was an opportunity sample that was in attendance. Some of the participants had previously seen the film, although more than ten years ago. Ages of participants ranged from 18 to 55 and consisted of N females and N males.

Materials: Participants viewed an episode of Fawlty Towers (The Kipper and the Corpse), which was viewed in a computer laboratory that was projected onto a large screen and took approximately 30 minutes. Two series of 20 questions of either the chronological series (condition 1; see appendix 2a) or random series (condition 2; see appendix 2b) was made available, and participants used their own pen to answer the questions.

Procedure

The sample was of opportunity attending a lecture in a West Wales University. Consent was presumptive, though not compulsory. Anonymity was achieved by not data captured to identify participant.

All participants took part in one trial. A video of an episode of Fawlty Towers (The Kipper and the Corpse) was shown to all participants once. Immediately after viewing the video, participants were presented with a list of 20 questions about the video and asked to answer as many as they could within the 4 minute timescale. Half were given the questions listed in order of events (Group A) and half were given the same questions but in random order (Group B). After a period of 4 minutes, the question papers were returned to the researcher, whether or not all questions had been answered. Once the test had concluded the participants were debriefed, questions were checked for accuracy against the answer sheet and participants were presented with their results. Results from all participants were collated and analysed using a Mann-Whitney U test.