

Eyewitness Testimony: Testing the Memory

Emily Joy Auvil and Dr. Jared Caughron

When first learning about eyewitness testimony in my cognitive psychology course, I was perplexed by how it was used as evidence despite it being unreliable. For my capstone, I wanted to find a way to demonstrate how memory can be altered, resulting in an inaccurate testimony. My ultimate goal was to bring awareness to the public and share how the practice of eyewitness testimony incriminates innocents. By looking at previous research centered on memory, I was able to form a hypothesis that outside sources would impact the memory to add or remove details from what the person witnessed. I am happy to report that this hypothesis was supported.

Current research provided me with the framework on how to ask questions when interrogating a witness. Open questions were highly suggestive, while leading questions were discouraged. By strictly using open questions with one group, leading questions with another, and a mixture of both open and leading questions with my final group; I was able to find a difference in responses by testing the memory. Because memory is well studied by cognitive psychologists and interrogations are often handled by the criminal justice system, I believe this study displays the importance of working sufficiently across disciplines.

The results support the notion that proper investigation tactics helped keep the original memory intact. By offering the eyewitness details during questioning, the eyewitness's memory would recount for events that did not occur. Innocents then become at risk due to a memory that research has suggested is easily manipulative.

My capstone project has opened my eyes to how impacting psychologists can be in a field outside of their own. The mind is present for all interactions, making the understanding of how one works essential in any discipline. Upon graduation, I hope to see how my psychology degree assists me in other fields. This project specifically has encouraged me to pursue a career within the justice system. My hope is to be an educated advocate for those who have been wrongly victimized by the justice system. This capstone demonstrated for me, (and I hope it will for others) how saving innocents is just as easy as convicting them.

I was honored to present my Capstone at both Wicked Festival and the VCHC this year. Sharing my solution to an existing problem is the goal of my project. I want to bring awareness to the public about how eyewitness testimony can be a strong supportive piece of evidence when used properly. Proper tactics include open questions, no feedback, and proper recall time. Through presenting my capstone, I have formulated a solution to have a third party set in on any conducted interviews and have it end immediately once the prompter disregards the guidelines.

While I originally looked at eyewitness being used by officers and detectives, with any future research I would also like to look at lawyers. The capstone was intended to test how memory can be manipulated and incriminate innocents. It can be argued that lawyers are also prompted into tricking those who testify by answering the questions in such a way they might incriminate themselves.

Proper investigation tactics have room a place in curriculum for criminal justice majors and psychology majors. They have a place in training for the police academy and even in law school. We need to give our future work force the best fighting chance, so that we might give innocents the best fighting chance and that is my greatest take away from my capstone.