Factors affecting the accuracy of eyewitness testimony

This Factsheet summarises some research evidence about various factors which can affect the accuracy of people’s eyewitness testimony.

Eyewitness testimony is covered in Curriculum Press Factsheets 12 and 18.

A. The age of the witness
There is some evidence that the eyewitness testimony (EWT) of young children and elderly people is affected by certain factors. These factors may also affect adults’ EWT, but to a different extent.

Young children produce less reliable and less accurate EWT than adults. For example, Brigham et al. (1986) found that young children’s recall of a person’s appearance was worse than that of older children.

Children forget at a different rate to adults. Flin et al. (1992) found no difference in children and adults’ recall for an event one day later, but children forgot more than adults after five months.

Young children’s EWT can be affected by the language used during interviews and in the court room. Carter et al. (1996) found that 5- to 7-year-old children were less accurate in reporting an event when the questions were complex and age-inappropriate.

Older adults’ eyewitness recall can be less complete and less accurate than younger adults. Wright and Holliday (2007) found that the recall of old–old adults (75- to 95-years-old) was less complete and less accurate than that of young–old adults (60- to 74-years-old), which was also less complete and accurate than that of young adults (17- to 31-years-old).

Elderly adults can be more susceptible to suggestion and misleading information than younger adults (Cohen and Faulkner, 1989).
B. Stress and anxiety
There is some evidence that stress, emotion, arousal and anxiety can affect EWT.

- It is proposed that the more stressed an eyewitness feels, the less accurate their EWT becomes.
- Ginet and Verkampt (2007) found that eyewitnesses who experienced high arousal when viewing an event produced more accurate EWT about minor details than those who experienced a low level of arousal.

The ‘weapon focus’ effect: people focus their attention on a weapon at the expense of other details of the event, leading to less accurate EWT.

- In a laboratory study, Loftus et al. (1987) found that memory for details of an event involving a gun was worse than when it involved a non-threatening object.
- When interviewing eyewitnesses of a highly-emotional real-life crime involving a fatal shooting, Yuille and Cutshall (1986) found that the eyewitnesses had very accurate recall and misleading questions had no effect.

C. Other factors

- The consequence of EWT: people tend to have more accurate EWT if they believe that it will affect a conviction (Foster et al., 1994).
- Individual differences: some people are more susceptible to misleading information than others, such as those who score highly on vividness of imagery and empathy (Tomes and Katz, 1997).

Exam Hint:- When asked to discuss factors affecting EWT, you can focus on one or two factors in depth or on several factors but in less depth.

D. Evaluating the research
When evaluating any research, consider these points:

- Is there other research evidence which supports (agrees with) the findings of this research study?
- Is there other research evidence which does not agree with the findings of this research study?
  o For example: Some evidence suggests that children are more suggestible than adults (e.g., Poole and Lindsay, 2001). However, evidence from Duncan, Whitney and Kunen (1982) does not completely support this. They found that younger children were less susceptible to misleading post-event information than the older children.
- Has the study been conducted according to the British Psychological Society’s code of ethics? Are there any ethical issues?
- What limitations and/or strengths does the research method have? Do these influence the findings?
  o For example: Laboratory studies tend to find that stress and anxiety negatively affect EWT. However, studies outside of the laboratory have found that people who had been in high-anxiety, real-life situations produce more accurate and detailed EWT (e.g., Christianson and Hubinette, 1993).
- How representative is the sample of participants?
- Are there any other issues?

Exam Hint:- For a high exam grade, you must be able to effectively evaluate research and theories. Examiners comment that the ability to evaluate is the main differentiator among all candidates.
1. Describe in detail one research study which has investigated a factor which can affect the accuracy of eyewitness testimony.

2. Complete the table below to evaluate that research study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Is there other research evidence which supports the findings? (Outline the study).</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is there other research evidence which does not support the findings? (Outline the study).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are there any limitations of the sampling or sample used? How representative is the sample?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What research method was used? State one advantage and one disadvantage of the method.</td>
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<tr>
<td>What ethical issues arise (if any)?</td>
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