*P*sychology *F*actsheets

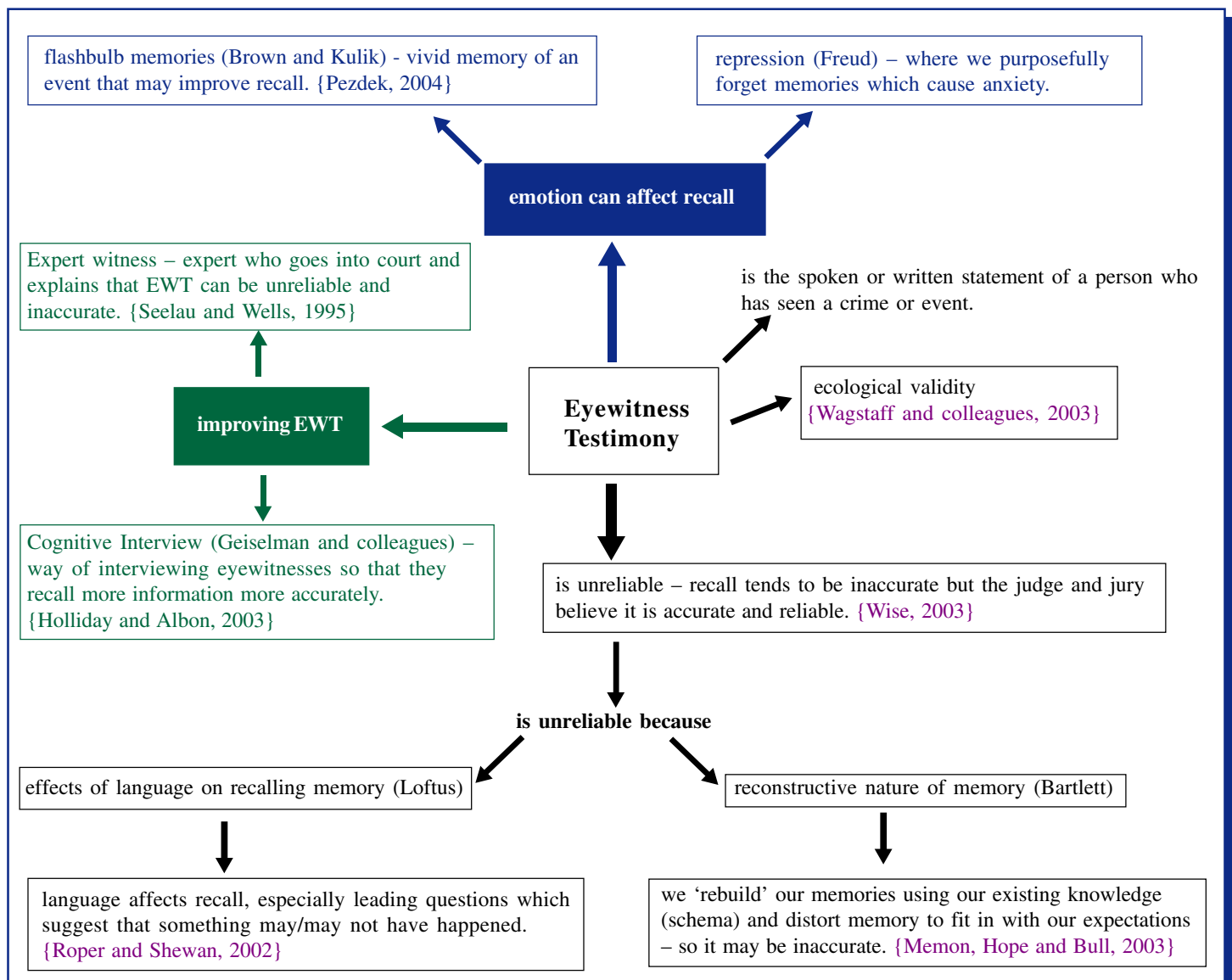# Eyewitness Testimony - New Research

This factsheet:
- should be read along with the **Eyewitness Testimony factsheet (number 12)**;
- goes over aspects of eyewitness testimony; and
- includes cutting-edge research into some aspects of eyewitness testimony (EWT).

Reviewing EWT

- EWT is a key issue in psychology.
- It shows how psychology applies to everyday life.
- Eyewitnesses are critical in solving crimes. Sometimes EWT is the only evidence available.
- EWT is often inaccurate and unreliable; Scheck and colleagues (2000) found that, of more than 100 people wrongly convicted, 75% were victims of mistaken eyewitness identification.

Fig 1: Mind map summarising issues in EWT

flashbulb memories (Brown and Kulik) - vivid memory of an event that may improve recall. {Pezdek, 2004}

repression (Freud) – where we purposefully forget memories which cause anxiety.

emotion can affect recall

Expert witness – expert who goes into court and explains that EWT can be unreliable and inaccurate. {Seelau and Wells, 1995}

improving EWT

Cognitive Interview (Geiselman and colleagues) – way of interviewing eyewitnesses so that they recall more information more accurately. {Holliday and Albon, 2003}

Eyewitness Testimony

is the spoken or written statement of a person who has seen a crime or event.

ecological validity {Wagstaff and colleagues, 2003}

is unreliable – recall tends to be inaccurate but the judge and jury believe it is accurate and reliable. {Wise, 2003}

is unreliable because

effects of language on recalling memory (Loftus)

reconstructive nature of memory (Bartlett)

language affects recall, especially leading questions which suggest that something may/may not have happened. {Roper and Shewan, 2002}

we 'rebuild' our memories using our existing knowledge (schema) and distort memory to fit in with our expectations – so it may be inaccurate. {Memon, Hope and Bull, 2003}

New research

* **Words underlined show how the research relates to the various aspects of EWT (see figure 1).**
  Words in bold are explained in the glossary.

> *Exam Hint: Use recent research as an addition to the studies mentioned in the EWT factsheet. You must still be able to describe and evaluate research by Bartlett and Loftus.*

Wise (2003)

Aims: to examine the American legal system's attitude to EWT.
Procedure: he questioned 160 judges in the US about using EWT over the internet.

Findings/conclusions: he found that judges were not aware that EWT was <u>unreliable</u>. Judges were unfamiliar with studies showing that over half of all wrongful convictions are due to eyewitness error. He did find that judges who knew more about EWT were more willing to use <u>expert witnesses</u>.

Plus…**Seelau and Wells (1995)** found that using an <u>expert witness</u> reduces juror's tendency to overestimate the accuracy of EWT.

Memon, Hope and Bull (2003)

Aims: to examine how eyewitnesses' accuracy and their confidence in their accuracy relates to the amount of time they view a criminal's face.

Procedure: 164 young and old participants watched two videos, both of a crime reconstruction. One video lasted 12 seconds and the other video lasted 45 seconds. Participants then tried to identify the criminal.

Findings/conclusions: unsurprisingly, they found that recall was more accurate for young and old participants after the 45 second video than after 12 second video. However, all participants were more confident in the accuracy of their memories after the long video, regardless of whether they were correct or not. So, the participants' EWT was not as <u>reliable</u> as they thought.

Roper and Shewan (2002)

Aims: to examine whether eyewitnesses change their answers to questions if they think that an authority figure sees them as unhelpful or unobservant.

Procedure: participants watched a short video clip. The experimenter then asked them questions about it. Next, they watched a second video and the experimenter labelled the participants as 'good' or 'poor' eyewitnesses. The experimenter then questioned them again.

Findings/conclusions: participants labelled as 'poor' eyewitnesses altered their original answers and were more **suggestible** to <u>leading questions</u> than those with the 'good' label (who improved their performance). The findings show that the opinion of an authority figure can cause eyewitnesses to change their testimony.

Example exam questions

1. Discuss whether psychological research supports the view that eyewitness testimony is unreliable.
2. Outline and evaluate what psychological research has told us about the accuracy of eyewitness testimony.
3. Discuss how memory research might improve the effectiveness of eyewitness testimony.

Pezdek (2004)

Aims: to investigate memory for traumatic events (<u>flashbulb memory</u>).

Procedure: Pezdek used the collapse of the twin towers in New York (September 11th, 2001) to investigate memory for the event. She questioned participants (American residents) about their memory of the day's events.

Findings/conclusions: she found distortions in the participant's memory for the day's events. For example, 73% of the participants incorrectly reported that they had seen a video of the first plane hitting the first tower on television that day. Flashbulb memories may not be as accurate and resistant to distortions as previously thought.

Wagstaff and colleagues (2003)

Aims: to examine EWT in real-life crime situations.

Procedure: they compared eyewitness descriptions of offenders recorded on police statements with the actual details of the offender's appearance on arrest.

Findings/conclusions: they found that the eyewitnesses recalled the offender's hairstyle and hair colour most accurately. However, they did not recall the presence of a weapon or the offender's age as accurately as found in laboratory experiments. They suggest that we must be careful about the **ecological validity** of laboratory studies of EWT as they may not generalise to actual crime situations.

Holliday and Albon (2003)

Aims: to examine how variations of a <u>Cognitive Interview</u> (CI) improve young children's recall and reduce their suggestibility to **misinformation**. (Ceci and Bruck (1995) found that a child's recall is often distorted by being questioned often and suggestibly by police, social workers, lawyers, etc).

Procedure: young children (4-5 years old) saw a 5 minute video of a birthday party. The next day an experimenter talked to each child and gave them misinformation. A second experimenter then interviewed the child using different versions of a CI. For example, one version contained '**free recall**', '**context reinstatement**' and '**change order**', but not '**change perspective**'.

Findings/conclusions: they found that a short CI was more efficient with young children. Recall was more accurate when using the free recall, context reinstatement and change order parts of the CI. Children were less suggestible to misinformation when the CI used free recall and context reinstatement.

Glossary

Change order: where a person recalls an event starting from the thing that happened last and working backwards to the beginning.
Change perspective: where a person recalls an event from another witness' point of view (putting themselves in someone else's place and imagining what they saw).
Context reinstatement: where a person imagines themselves back in the situation at the time of the event.
Ecological validity: the extent to which the findings of the research apply to everyday life.
Free recall: where a person recalls what they saw in their own words and time without interruptions from anyone else.
Misinformation: incorrect information.
Suggestible: being influenced by something (e.g., someone else's memory of an event).