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| **Learning Table 7 – Factors Affecting Eyewitness Testimony**  **MISLEADING INFORMATION** | |
| *Misleading information refers to incorrect information given to the eyewitness usually after the event. It can take many forms such as leading questions and post-event discussion between co-witnesses and/or other people.* | |
| **AO1 – Knowledge and Understanding** | **AO3 - Evaluation** |
| **Post Event Discussion**  *When co-witnesses to a crime discuss the event with each other their eyewitness testimonies may become contaminated. This is because they combine misinformation from other witnesses with their own memories.*  **Gabbert (2003)** studied participants in pairs. Each participant watched a video of the same crime, but filmed from different points of view. This meant that each participant could see elements in the event that the other could not. For example, only one of the participants could see the title of a book being carried by a young woman. Both participants then discussed what they had seen before individually completing a test of recall. The researchers found that **71%** of the participants mistakenly recalled aspects of the events that they did not see in the video but had picked up in the discussion. The corresponding figure in a control group where there was no discussion was **0%**. Gabbert et al concluded that witnesses often go along with each other either to win social approval or because they believe the other witness is right and they are wrong. This phenomenon is known as memory conformity. | **Demand Characteristics**  One issue with research into the effect of post event discussion on eye witness testimony is that it may be subject to demand characteristics.  For example, Zaragosa and McCloskey (1989) argue that participants do not want to let the researcher down and so may change their behaviour as a result.  Whilst Gabbert’s research used an independent groups design, it would still have been quite obvious that participants were expected to put details of their partner’s accounts in their own recollections.  As a consequence, this reduces the explanatory power of research into the effect of post event discussion on eye witness testimony. |
| **Leading Questions**  *A leading question refers to a question which, because of the way it is phrased, suggests a certain answer. For example, ‘was the knife in the accused left hand?’ This suggests the answer is ‘left hand’.*  **Loftus and Palmer (1974)** arranged for participants to watch film clips of car accidents and then gave them questions about the accident. Participants were asked to describe how fast the cars were travelling. There were 5 conditions and each group received a variation of the same question but with the verb changing. For example, *hit, contacted, bumped, collided* and *smashed*. The mean estimated speed was calculated for each group. The verb ***contacted*** results in an average estimated speed on **31.8mph**, the verb ***smashed*** results in an average estimated speed of **40.5mph**. Therefore it was concluded that leading questions can have a significant impact on the accuracy of eye witness testimony. | **Low Ecological Validity**  One weakness of research into the effect of leading questions on eye witness testimony is that it lacks ecological validity.  For example Loftus and Palmer’s (1974) research involved participants watching film clips of car accidents.  This is an issue because this is very different from witnessing a real accident. Such clips lack the stress, noise and atmosphere of a real accident. As a consequence, we cannot be sure that misleading information does in fact impact on eye witness testimony in real life as we cannot generalise the results to outside the lab setting.  As a consequence, this reduces the overall credibility of the research. |
| **Explanations for the Effect of Leading Questions**  **The Response-bias Explanation**  The **response-bias explanation** suggests that the wording of the question does not change the participant’s memories, just influences how they decide to answer.  **The Substitution Explanation**  However **Loftus and Palmer (1974)** conducted a second experiment that supported the **substitution explanation**. They suggest that the wording of a leading question actually changes the participant’s memories for the event. This was demonstrated because participants who originally heard ‘*smashed’* later were more likely to report seeing broken glass in the clip than those who heard ‘*hit’*. This suggests that the verb used actually changed the memory for the incident. | **Real Life Applications**  A strength of all research into misleading information is that it has important practical uses in the real world.  For example, Loftus (1975) believes that leading questions can have a distorting effect on the memory.  This is a strength because she has spent years advising that police officers need to be very careful about how they phrase questions when interviewing eyewitnesses. As the consequences of an inaccurate statement can have very serious consequences for real lives.  As a result this increases the credibility of the research into misleading information on eye witness testimony. |