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Are Emotionally Aroused Witnesses Better Witnesses? A Comparison of Police Officer Beliefs and Veridical Witness Memory.

Abstract:

Intro:

Accurate eyewitness memory is an important part of the criminal justice process however memory is malleable. Memory is especially tenuous under certain conditions of arousal (i.e., fear, stress). Eyewitnesses misremember event information that can influence the direction of a police investigation. What is unknown is whether a crime is misremembered due to the arousing nature or the negative valence of the event. In current study we investigate both the impact of negative arousal and valence on memory for events—Study 1. In addition, the extent to which a police officer believes that an aroused witness's memory is accurate or inaccurate may influence the type of questions they ask a witness. In Study 2 police officers' belief about the stress-memory relationship was tested and whether this belief influenced the type of questioning they used. Police officers are trained to use open-ended questions (the Cognitive Interview). Although officers are trained to use the CI procedure, it is possible that their belief in the stress-memory relationship affect the type of questions they ask (open vs. closed). We predict that police officers who believe that arousal enhances memory would be less likely to adhere to the CI procedure and more likely to ask closed ended questions; while officers who believe arousal impairs memory would ask more open-ended questions.

Method:

For the first study, a Self Assessment Manikin was used to measure participant's arousal level. Participants were also shown videos (e.g. neutral, negative). The second study included questionnaires for police officers to assess how their beliefs in the stress-memory relationship influences the type of questions they ask witnesses, which can interfere with memory accuracy.

Results:

We found crime-aroused witnesses committed the most overall memory errors. Moreover, closed-ended questions produced the most errors regardless of arousal. Emotional witnesses were asked more closed questions by officers who believed stress facilitated memory. While police officers who believed stress was detrimental asked more open questions.

Discussion/Conclusion:

Results suggest negativity and heightened emotion which encompass a crime work together to impede memory and questioning should be open-ended regardless of officer beliefs. The open-ended question format that is recommended is in accordance with how officers are trained (CI).