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WHOM DID YOU SEE?

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Imagine you are going back home from work. Just as you are about to turn right, a shrill cry reaches your ears. You turn and hurry in the direction of the sound. A little way off the road, you see a woman holding a gun and a bleeding man on the ground. Before you could do anything the woman shoots the man in the head twice. You catch sight of her face as she turns but before you are noticed, you run away. It's been one week since the incident and you are on your way to the police station to identify the suspect from a line-up. You had reported what you saw the day after it happened. You are certain you know what she looked like. So, when asked to point out the perpetrator, you confidently go for the woman standing on the far left. Later, you come to know that you picked an innocent woman. Why do you think this happened?

During trials, eyewitness accounts secure a vital role in criminal convictions. Police surveys show that eyewitness testimony is the main form of evidence in more than 20% of cases. But that doesn't mean the evidence is always reliable. Research shows that 75% of false convictions are caused by an inaccurate eyewitness statement.

Further research into this area has found that eyewitness testimony can be affected by many psychological factors like:

- Anxiety / Stress
- Reconstructive Memory
- Weapon Focus
- Leading Questions (Loftus and Palmer, 1974)

“Psychologist Elizabeth Loftus has been particularly concerned with how subsequent information can affect an eyewitness's account of an event.

Her findings indicate that memory for a witnessed event is highly flexible. If someone is exposed to new information during the interval between witnessing the event and recalling it, this new information may have marked effects on what they recall. The original memory can be modified, changed or supplemented.

Loftus and Palmer (1974) conducted a study - Reconstruction of Automobile Destruction aiming to show that leading questions could distort eyewitness testimony accounts and so have a confabulating effect.

In this study, Loftus and Palmer (1974) asked people to estimate the speed of motor vehicles using different forms of questions.

The estimated speed was affected by the verb used. The verb implied information about the speed, which systematically affected the participants' memory of the accident.”

Methodology:

Two different experiments were conducted and data were collected from both to then be compared and analysed. In both the experiments, the subjects were shown a video of a crime happening and were later shown a line-up of suspects and were questioned about what they saw in the video. However, the perpetrator in the video was never present in the line-up. This was done to see if the subjects would misidentify or give a correct response.

Experiment 1: The subjects were asked - “Can you point out the suspect that you saw in the video from the line-up?” implying that the suspect was already there in the line-up. Their answer and the age were noted down. The experiment was conducted on Indians and the videos shown had suspects who were Caucasian.

Experiment 2: There were two different types of questioning conducted on the subjects.

One set of subjects were asked – “Can you point out the suspect that you saw in the video from the line-up?” implying that the suspect was already

there in the line-up.

Another set of subjects were asked a polar question - "Can you tell if the suspect from the video is there in the line-up?" giving them a choice to answer yes or no.

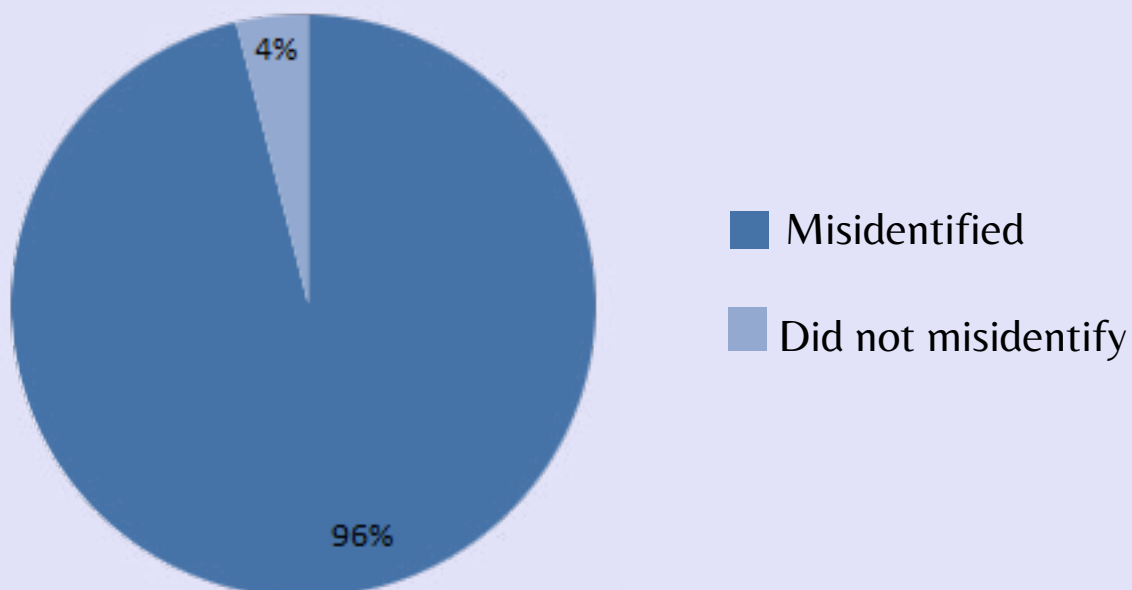
The answers from both sets of groups were noted down along with their age and what they focused on when seeing the video. The experiment was conducted on Indians and the video and photo shown had suspects who were also Indians.

From these two experiments the questions we hoped to answer were:

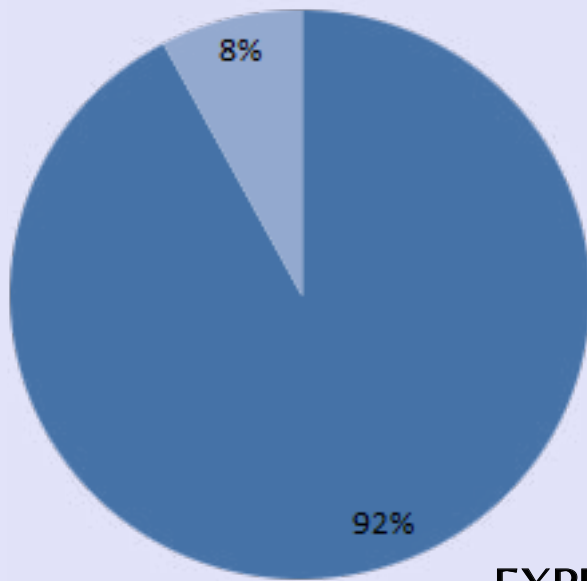
1. Does the method of questioning affect the rate of misidentification?
2. Does race play a role in misidentification?
3. Is eyewitness testimony reliable?

RESULTS

EXPERIMENT 1

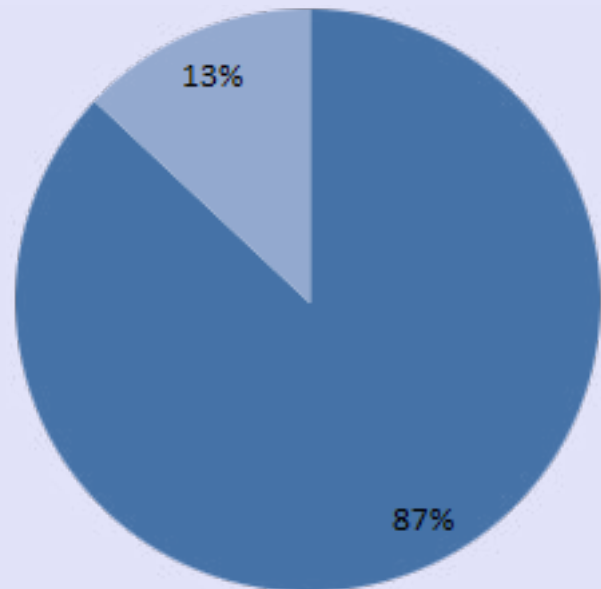


EXPERIMENT 2 - LEADING QUESTIONS



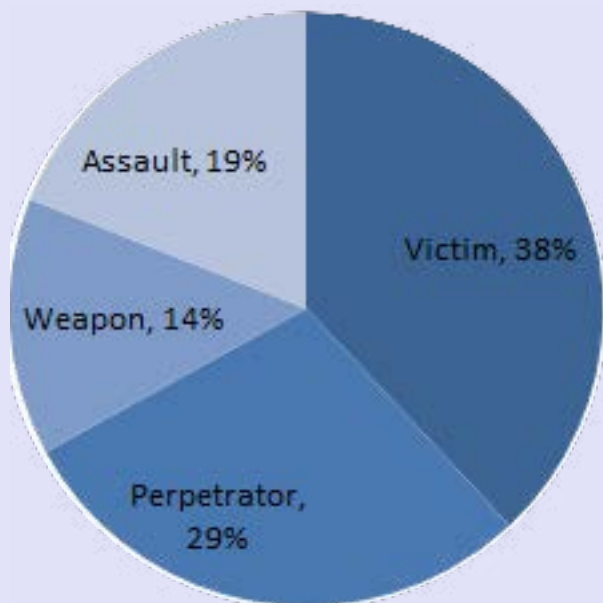
- Misidentified
- Did not misidentify

EXPERIMENT 2 - POLAR QUESTIONS



- Misidentified
- Did not misidentify

FOCUSED ON



Inference:

Does the method of questioning affect the rate of misidentification?

When we compare Figure B and Figure C, Figure C has a lower rate of misidentification by 5%.

Does race play a role in misidentification?

From the combined results of Figure B and Figure C of Experiment 2, the rate of misidentification is found to be 89.5% which is 6.5% lesser than the rate of misidentification found in Figure A of Experiment 1.

Is eyewitness testimony reliable?

The combined rate of misidentification from Experiment 1 and Experiment 2 is found to be 91.7%. Only 8.3% of people gave the correct response.

Conclusion:

Our research was conducted to test the accuracy of eyewitness testimony. We concluded that the polar method of questioning decreases the rate of misidentification and people are less likely to misidentify suspects if they are of their own race. However, in conclusion, we can reiterate that eyewitness testimony is not reliable.

Reference:

- McLeod, S. A. (2010). Loftus and Palmer. *Simply Psychology*, 23-34. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.54.101601.145028>

Myth - When an unknown fingerprint is uploaded to the computer, the match will be found in seconds.

Fact - The computer only contains data and fingerprints of people who were previously arrested or fingerprinted as part of a crime. Fingerprint matching using softwares like AFIS (Automated Fingerprint Identification System) usually takes anywhere between a few hours to a few days.