

EYEWITNESS TESTIMONY (3) - THE EFFECTS OF AGE ON THE ACCURACY OF EYEWITNESS TESTIMONY

How does age affect the accuracy of EWT?

Research has looked at the accuracy of EWT in the 'elderly' (people over 60). In a study conducted by **Amina Memon**, volunteers from several age groups talked to a woman member of a research team for a few minutes. An hour later, the participants were asked to identify the woman in an identity parade. When the woman actually was in the identity parade, people aged over 60 identified her 48% of the time, compared with 47% in people aged between 20 and 60. This suggests no differences between 'old' and 'younger' people.

However, the research also found that witnesses aged over 60 will pick a person out of an identity parade 90% of the time when the line-up does **not** actually feature the person they saw. This is far less likely to happen when a witness is younger: adults aged between 20 and 60 make this mistake only 53% of the time. This suggests that identification evidence from elderly people needs strong **corroboration** if a case is to be tried fairly.

Memon also found that elderly people are even more likely to identify an innocent person in an identity parade if they had briefly encountered them in another setting. In Memon's study, participants were briefly shown a series of mugshots, and then a video of a simulated car theft. A few days later they were taken to an identity parade. The car thief was not actually in the identity parade, but a person whose mugshot had been seen was. Elderly people were much more likely than younger people to identify that person as the thief. This is called **source confusion** - a person remembers a face, but doesn't remember the context in which the face was seen, and it is much more likely to occur in people over 60.

Research has shown that, typically, children provide much less accurate information about an event they have witnessed than adults. However, they can be as accurate as adults if the thing they have witnessed is of particular interest to them.

Research has also found that children are much better at recalling what happened in an incident than older people, but that whilst they are also more likely than adults to make a positive identification in an identity

parade, they are much more likely to make a mistake. Thus, children are better at remembering what happened in an event than the people that were in the event, whereas the reverse is true for adults.

Flin et al (1982) found that children show less accuracy and detail in the recall over time compared with adults, which has implications for real trial proceedings. In Britain, at least, the time between a crime being committed and a person being put on trial can be very long.

This area of research can be evaluated in other ways as well:

- **Positive evaluation** (Strengths) can take many forms, including elements of PEECH + E. For example, the research is good because it is conducted under **highly controlled conditions** (i.e. in the laboratory) and has **high experimental validity**. The research findings are also very reliable (Memon's studies have been replicated many times). The research also uses 'ordinary' people (young and old adults, and children), so it is **high in population validity**.
- **Negative evaluation** (Limitations) can also take many forms, again including elements of PEECH + E. For example, laboratory studies can **lack ecological validity** and are subject to **demand characteristics**. The results of studies which use children need to be interpreted cautiously and there are ethical issues that this kind of research raises. For example, young children cannot give **informed consent**, adults cannot give *fully* informed consent, and field studies (e.g. staged crimes) raise concerns about deception, consent, and protection from harm).