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This is Psychological Frontiers: Exploring Human Behavior. I’m Dawn Albertson.

Lead:
Are eyewitnesses the best witnesses?

Content:
Eyewitness testimony is used in many trials and can have a powerful effect on jurors. But how often do eyewitnesses make mistakes?

In 1981, 22-year-old Jerry Miller was arrested and charged with robbing, kidnapping, and raping a woman. Two witnesses identified Miller in a police lineup as the perpetrator; the victim identified him at a trial. Miller was convicted, served 24 years in prison, and was released on parole as a registered sex offender.

Recent DNA tests, however, tell a different story: DNA taken from the victim’s clothing—which could have come only from the perpetrator—did not come from Miller. In fact, another man was implicated in the crime. On April 23, 2007, Miller became the 200th person in the United States to be exonerated through DNA evidence.

One aspect of crimes that can lead to incorrect memories is whether a gun was used in the crime. We are very quick to notice guns used in crimes: but guns can completely swamp our attention. When witnesses focus on weapons, they are not focusing on the perpetrator’s face, clothing, getaway car, or other details that are important in making a correct identification.

In a 2004 study, students viewed several videos of crime scenarios that involved guns. Even in this laboratory study, where witnesses were at no risk of being injured by a weapon, the presence of a weapon impaired participants’ memory for other details. Virtually all participants correctly identified the weapon seen in the video and mentioned it in their memory reports. However, participants were less accurate in remembering things like the getaway car and features of the perpetrator. Obviously, this would make the participants in the study unreliable witnesses if they had been viewing real crimes.

The findings from research studies like this one have helped to educate lawyers, judges, and police about the factors that can contribute to errors in eyewitness testimony.

Content contributed by Dr. Emily Stark.

Psychological Frontiers is produced by the Psychology Department at Minnesota State University, Mankato. I’m Dr. Dawn Albertson.