

ABSTRACT

IDENTIFICATION AND PROCESSING OF FEATURES IN SIMULATED DYNAMIC CRIME SCENES

Research in visual scene perception has become increasingly relevant to an understanding of eyewitness inaccuracy. From the factors influencing eyewitness memory accuracy, the presence of a weapon is among the most powerful. A perpetrator brandishing a weapon adversely affects eyewitnesses' ability to recall precisely crime scene information. Yet whether the "weapon focus effect" is contingent of whether the weapon presents danger, or that the weapon is an atypical object in the scene, is uncertain. The present study examined the ability of observers to recall details specific to a perpetrator who is brandishing a "weapon" in a simulated dynamic crime scene. A total of 70 participants observed a video clip in which the perpetrator either brandished a .38 revolver or a handheld power screwdriver. Statistical analysis of the effect of the presence or absence of a weapon revealed that eyewitnesses were poor at recalling vital information attributed to the perpetrator in a simulated crime scene. In addition, eyewitnesses were excellent in recognizing the presence of a weapon, when brandished by the perpetrator. However, when eyewitnesses found a perpetrator brandishing an innocuous object (e.g., power screwdriver), they overwhelmingly reported that it was a handgun. Additional research is required to explore why or how eyewitnesses perceptually transform a domestic article into a potentially hazardous weapon.

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December 2009