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The Effect of Incorrect Feedback at Test on Eyewitness Suggestibility

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Abstract

Eyewitness testimony is never foolproof. Eyewitnesses can be given incorrect information by the media, police, and other witnesses. Sometimes this misinformation can be confused with what the eyewitness really encountered (a type of source misattribution). This study continued a line of research on reducing eyewitness suggestibility by studying the effect of feedback at retrieval. Previous research has shown that feedback at test reduces source misattributions. This study examined this claim by adding a condition with incorrect feedback. Our hypotheses were supported in part. Incorrect feedback increased source misattributions relative to correct feedback. This study did not, however, replicate the previous research in that correct feedback did not result in decreased source misattribution relative to control, and correct feedback did not result in increased accurate source attributions of suggested items.

THE EFFECT OF INCORRECT FEEDBACK ON EYEWITNESS SUGGESTIBILITY

Eyewitness Suggestibility

The testimony of eyewitnesses is often crucial in attempts to determine the guilt or innocence of defendants in a trial. In fact, many cases are founded on one piece of this evidence. Recent research, however, has shown that eyewitness testimony may not always be the most reliable method of deciding guilt or innocence, especially when it is the only evidence presented. This has become painfully clear in the past ten years, as new DNA technology has emerged. DNA technology has allowed old cases to be reopened, and hundreds of people have been set free with the help of this new tool. Many of these cases have involved people who were convicted solely on eyewitness accounts, sometimes even when the accounts were later refuted or recanted. A Department of Justice case study reviewed twenty-eight of such instances, in which the people studied served an average of seven years in prison before they were released. All of the defendants had been singled out by at least one eyewitness, and in all of the non-homicide cases, the victim was one of the identifying witnesses (Connors, E., Lundregan, T., Miller, N., & McEwen, T., 1996). Many of the defendants had an alibi, some corroborated by many people, yet the eyewitness testimony apparently had more influence with the juries. These examples of the dramatic effects of eyewitness misidentification have made the legal system reexamine the dependability of eyewitness testimony (e.g., Connors et al., 1996). This has resulted in an explosion of research on eyewitness reliability in psychology departments around the country.

Most of this psychological research has focused on the topic of eyewitness suggestibility. Eyewitnesses are never exposed to an event in a completely uncontaminated environment. They may hear different accounts of the events they witnessed from media, the police, or other witnesses. In addition, soon after an event occurs, it is common for witnesses to begin discussing what they saw and heard. This recounting of events can confuse the eyewitness, and soon he or she may not be able to distinguish between the events they saw and someone else's account. This tendency to incorporate extraneous information into one's own account of events is known as suggestibility. It is possible to recreate this effect in a lab, which has been done in an attempt to better understand suggestibility.

Eyewitness Suggestibility Research

In a typical eyewitness suggestibility study, participants first view a simulated criminal event, usually through a slide presentation or by watching a video. Later during a post-event phase, they answer questions or read a narrative about the events in the video or slides. Embedded within the questions or within the narrative are statements containing information that is incongruent with what happened in the simulation (for example, *the thief wore gloves*, when the thief was not wearing gloves). Finally, participants receive a memory test. The consistent finding of this research is that participants report seeing items in the event that were only suggested to them afterwards. This finding is known as *the misinformation effect*. Loftus, Miller, and Burns (1978) demonstrated the misinformation effect using this paradigm, with misleading information resulting in less accurate responding in both a yes-no and a forced-choice recognition

test. Recent research has expanded this paradigm by using a source test instead of a recognition test. The participants are presented with statements, and they must indicate whether they remember the statement as coming from the video or the questions (or both or neither). When the subjects believe that they remember seeing an item in the video or on the slides that was only suggested to them within the questionnaire, then they have confused the source of their memory for the item, which is referred to as the source misattribution effect (Zaragoza & Lane, 1994). Thus the misinformation effect (and source misattribution effect) demonstrate that eyewitnesses may claim they remember seeing something happen during the witnessed event when they actually learned the information secondhand.

According to the research, many factors can influence eyewitness suggestibility. For example, age can be a factor, as research has found that age is inversely related to suggestibility (Robinson & Briggs, 1997; Ackil & Zaragoza, 1995). The number of times the misleading items are presented also has an effect on suggestibility. Zaragoza and Mitchell (1996) showed that multiple exposures to misleading information increased suggestibility in eyewitnesses. In addition, the type of rehearsal of the information can also affect suggestibility, with a more detailed review resulting in higher suggestibility (Lane, S.M., Mather, M., Villa, D., & Morita, S.K., 2001).

Source Monitoring

Past research has found solid evidence that suggestibility exists, and has studied the mechanics of it. A logical next step for researchers is to find a way to reduce its effects, thus making eyewitnesses more reliable. Recent studies have looked at ways to do this, using as a background the Source Monitoring Framework (SMF), a theoretical

perspective on the mechanics of eyewitness suggestibility. This theory, developed by Johnson, Hashtroudi, and Lindsay (1993), describes source monitoring as a “set of processes involved in making attributions about the origin of memories, knowledge, and beliefs”. Thus, it is a process used to distinguish the source of memories. In the context of eyewitness suggestibility, the witness must use these processes to distinguish between memories of the actual event from memories which came from post-event sources. The source monitoring process relies on qualitative characteristics of the memories. For example, memories for perceived events carry with them more spatial, temporal, perceptual, semantic, and affective characteristics than imagined memories. Memories for imagined events (such as suggested events), in contrast, carry more information about cognitive processes. Therefore, if a person has a memory containing many visual and spatial details (where things were, what they looked like), and less information about cognitive processes, then the person could conclude that the memory came from an external source, such as a real, perceived event (Johnson, Hashtroudi, and Lindsay, 1993). This framework has a multitude of implications for research on eyewitness suggestibility. For example, it shows that eyewitnesses must make many small decisions on the way to making an overall decision about the source of a memory. Sometimes these processes are unconscious and quickly made, and sometimes they are much more deliberate and involve a long process of comparison, deliberation, and reasoning (Johnson, Hashtroudi, & Lindsay, 1993). Eyewitnesses sometimes must review the spatial, perceptual, and visual details of a memory and also must decide whether the memory makes sense within the context to decide if it the source is a correct match for the memory.

Using the Source Monitoring Framework

Instructions-discriminative characteristics

The research on eyewitness suggestibility has recently focused its attention on how to use specific memory characteristics to reduce the misinformation effect. Lane, S.M, Villa, D., and Roussel, C. (2003) examined the characteristics of accurate and inaccurate memories within the eyewitness suggestibility paradigm. After viewing an eyewitness event and answering post-event misleading questions, participants received a source memory test. For each item on the test, participants were asked to rate their memories on a variety of characteristics, and the results showed that accurately remembered event items were rated higher on the aspects of appearance and location than were items that were claimed to have been seen in the event but had only been suggested (Lane, S.M, Villa, D., and Roussel, C., 2003). The same results shown here also had earlier been used as the basis for another study that utilized instructions to lead participants to attend to these characteristics. Lane, S.M., Villa, D., Morita, S., Botwinik, A., Clark, A., Freehill, J., et al. (1999) demonstrated that explicit instructions given before the test reduced the effects of eyewitness suggestibility significantly. The instructions told participants to focus on “what the object looked like and where it was in the scene” and to “use these characteristics to more accurately distinguish items you actually saw in the slides, from items you may have only read about in the questions, or items that were never seen or read in the experiment” (Lane et al., 1999). Using these characteristics from Lane, S.M, Villa, D., and Roussel, C. (2003), the participants in Lane et al. (1999) in the Warning condition made significantly fewer source misattribution errors than those in the No Warning condition, but did not reduce accurate source

attributions of event items. Although these results are promising, the application of these results to real-life witnesses is potentially limited. Specifically, one would have to know beforehand the type of characteristics to ask witnesses to focus on.

Feedback

Another line of research has attempted to use feedback at test to reduce suggestibility. Morita (2000) divided the source test into two phases: a training phase and a test phase. During the training phase, participants in the feedback condition received information about the correct source of test items after they made each source judgment. Participants in a no feedback control condition received no feedback during this phase. During the subsequent test phase, neither condition received feedback. Morita found that feedback during the training phase reduced but did not eliminate source misattribution errors on the test phase. Further, feedback and control participants showed equivalent performance on event items. Morita hypothesized that feedback during the training phase caused participants to “focus on characteristics that are discriminative with respect to source, and to weight those characteristics more heavily in their source judgments” (Morita, 2000). This idea is consistent with the ideas of the Source Monitoring Framework.

Although Morita’s research is the first to use feedback in the eyewitness paradigm, other researchers have used feedback to study its effects on eyewitness identification. In Wells, Olson, and Chapman (2003), confirming feedback was given to eyewitnesses who were trying to identify the culprit of a crime in a lineup, no matter if they chose correctly or not. The confirming feedback given to those who had identified the wrong person as the culprit led to distortions of many memories of the eyewitness

experience. These inaccurate participants claimed afterward that they had higher confidence in their choice, a better view, and were generally better at making out facial details than other participants who were asked the same questions. Bradfield, Wells, and Olson (2002) also showed that confirming feedback after lineup identification leads to an inflation of retrospective certainty ratings for inaccurate eyewitnesses, reducing the relationship between confidence and accuracy. Perfect, Hollins, and Hunt (2000), however, used feedback along with practice to increase the relationship between these two factors. When participants were tested on memory for events and memory for faces, and given practice with feedback, both their confidence and accuracy improved.

Present Study

The present study used the same paradigm as Morita (2000) to study feedback at retrieval in the context of source misattribution and eyewitness suggestibility. The source test was split into two parts, with the first part having correct feedback in Condition One, incorrect feedback in Condition Two, and no feedback in Condition Three. For the second part of the test, no one received feedback. The study examined Morita's (2000) claim that feedback during the training phase of the test helped participants to better calibrate their source judgments (and hence reduced their source misattribution errors) on the second and final test. Morita's data suggested this interpretation because the feedback manipulation decreased source misattribution errors (claiming to have seen items that were only read in the questions), but had no effect on accurate memory for items that were actually in the video. Thus, the data suggested that feedback did not merely act as a kind of warning that simply made them more conservative on the test.

This experiment replicated Morita's (2000) in that the source test was broken into two parts, a training phase (part 1) and a test phase (part 2). There were three conditions: Correct Feedback, Incorrect Feedback, and No Feedback. The Correct Feedback condition received correct information about the source of each item during the training phase. The Incorrect Feedback condition received incorrect information about the source of 50% of the items (the other 50% will have correct information). The 50% incorrect rate was chosen to reduce the likelihood that participants would begin to ignore the feedback altogether. The No Feedback (control) condition received no information about the source of the items. None of the conditions received feedback during the test phase (part 2).

If feedback during the training phase of the experiment functions to help participants better calibrate their source judgments, then we would expect that participants in the Correct Feedback condition would have fewer source misattributions than participants in the No Feedback condition. In addition, we would expect that participants in the Incorrect Feedback condition would commit more source misattribution errors than the Correct Feedback condition, and perhaps more than the No Feedback condition. The latter prediction is weaker because it is possible that participants in the Incorrect Feedback condition would possibly ignore the feedback. In this case, performance in this condition would be similar to the No Feedback condition.

METHOD

Participants

The participants were two hundred and thirty-seven (237) undergraduate students from Louisiana State University. They were run in small groups of up to seven.

Altogether there were 79 of the participants to the Correct Feedback condition, 78 in the Incorrect Feedback Condition, and 80 in the No Feedback condition. They received extra credit points for their participation.

Materials

The eyewitness simulation was shown from a DVD disc on a 27-inch TV monitor. The videotape contains a simulation of a home burglary and car chase entitled “Catching the Fleeing Violator”. It is a training video from the Ohio State Police.

The questionnaire contained 37 questions about the video simulation, and was presented on a computer. The participants answered the yes/no questions by pressing a corresponding key on the keyboard. Some of the questions contained misleading information that was not present in the simulation. There were twelve misleading statements within the questions: *the police thought the driver was DUI, the thief took a ring, the thief pulled a window shade down, the neighbor's name was Mrs. Anderson, the driver jumped a curb with the car, the driver smoked a cigarette, there was a barking dog, the thief wore gloves, the police said they would shoot, one of the police officers was drinking coffee, the thief had a gun, and the thief put on his seatbelt*. There were two versions of the questionnaire randomly presented to the participants. In each version, there are eight control statements that are never presented in the questions, and eight statements that are presented thrice.

The source test consisted of 32 statements presented on the computer screen, and the participants were asked to indicate what the source of the statement is (Video Only, Questions Only, Both, or Neither) by pressing a key on the keyboard corresponding to their answer, and they rated their confidence in their answer in the same manner. The computer program presented six items that were suggested in the questionnaire, ten control items that were never suggested or seen, eight items that were only seen in the video, and eight items that were both seen in the video and suggested in the questionnaire. The test was split into two parts, Part One and Part Two. Each part contained sixteen of the test items. The order of the items was counterbalanced as was which items were from the questions, the video, both, or neither resulting in four different programs for each condition. For Part One of the Correct Feedback condition, the questions were followed by correct feedback about the source of the items. The correct answer was given immediately after answering the test question. For Part One of the Incorrect Feedback Condition, the questions were followed by *incorrect* feedback about half the items and correct feedback for the other half. Immediately after the participants answered the question, they were provided with the incorrect (or correct) source answer. The incorrect feedback was chosen based on past suggestibility research. In past research (e.g., Zaragoza & Lane, 1994), Video Only or Questions Only items were most likely to be incorrectly attributed to both (Video & Questions) sources, and Both and Control items were most likely to be incorrectly misattributed to the Video Only source. Therefore, in this study, if the correct answer was Video Only or Questions Only, the participants in the Incorrect Feedback condition were told that the correct answer was “Both the Video and the Questions.” If the correct answer was Both (in the Video and the

Questions) or Neither (the Video nor the Questions), the participants in the Incorrect Feedback Condition were told that the correct answer was “Video Only.” For all conditions, the second part of the test had no feedback: the test statement was presented and after the participant answered the question, the next item was presented. The questionnaires and tests were presented using the E-Prime computer program.

Procedure

Participants were run in groups of up to seven. Participants in both conditions viewed a short eyewitness simulation on the television. They were then presented with the post-event questionnaire on the scene they just watched, and the questionnaire contained the misleading statements. The participants were warned not to dwell on previous questions or answers, since there could possibly be more than one question on a certain detail. The participants then were given a 10-minute filler task, in this case a word-search puzzle. After the filler task, the source test was administered in the two parts. The participants were told beforehand that some of the items they would hear on the source test were from: i) only the video, ii) only in the questions they read and answered, iii) both the video and the questions, or iv) neither the video nor the questions. The participants were presented with the items on the computer screen, and then they indicated the source of that particular item by pressing the corresponding key on the keyboard. They also indicated their confidence in their answer in the same manner, by pressing a numeric key from one to seven. Participants in Part 1 of both Feedback conditions were told that, after they indicated their source answer for an item, the correct answer would be given. They were instructed to use this information about whether they were correct or incorrect to improve the accuracy of their judgments. Part Two of all

three conditions will be identical, with a new item being presented after the participant had indicated their source answer for the previous item. The participants in the No Feedback (control) condition were instructed that everything would be the same as Part One. The participants in the Feedback conditions were instructed that the procedure would be the same, with one exception: there would be no feedback about the correct answer. After they indicated their source answer, the next item was presented.

RESULTS

Performance on Source Test, Part I

Though the data of greatest interest is found in the second part of the test (“post-training”), it is useful to review the results of the first part of the test to examine differences between the conditions during “training”.

Accurate Source Attributions

The data on accurate source attributions for the first part of the source test for Video-Only items, Suggested items, and Control items are reported in Table 1. For the Video-Only items, no significant difference between conditions was found ($F(2, 234) = 1.195$, $MSE = .880$, $p > .05$). For Suggested items, however, the conditions did differ significantly in accurate source attributions ($F(2, 234) = 7.526$, $MSE = 1.560$, $p < .01$). Tukey HSD post-hoc tests revealed that the Incorrect Feedback condition resulted in significantly fewer accurate source attributions for Suggested items than did the No Feedback condition and the Correct Feedback condition. The No Feedback and Correct

Feedback conditions were not significantly different. For Control items, no significant difference between conditions was found ($F(2, 234) = 1.156$, $MSE = .659$, $p > .05$).

Source Misattribution Errors (Suggestibility)

The source misattributions of greatest interest occur when participants claim to have seen items in the video that were only suggested to them in the questions. This is expressed through the participants' attribution of an item only previously presented in the questionnaire to either "Video Only" or "Both the Video and the Questions". For the first part of the source test, the differences in source misattribution errors between the conditions (Incorrect Feedback, Control, and Correct Feedback; $M = .73$, $M = .42$, $M = .45$, respectively) were found to be statistically significant. ($F(2, 234) = 3.458$, $MSE = 1.521$, $p < .05$). Tukey HSD post-hoc tests revealed that only the Incorrect Feedback condition differed significantly from the Control condition ($p < .05$). Source misattributions of control items to either "Video Only" or "Both the Video and the Questions" were also analyzed, and the difference between conditions was found to be significant ($F(2, 234) = 5.914$, $MSE = .451$, $p < .01$). A Tukey HSD post-hoc revealed that Incorrect Feedback conditions resulted in significantly more control errors than the No Feedback condition.

Performance on Source Test, Part II

Accurate Source Attributions

The data on accurate source attributions for Video-Only items, Suggested items, and Control items are reported on Table 2. Analyses revealed were no significant

differences between the conditions. Participants in the three conditions were equally as likely to correctly attribute an item to its actual source (Video: $F < 1$; Questions: $F(2, 234) = 1.629$, $MSE = 1.9$; Control: $F < 1$, all $ps > .05$).

Source Misattribution Errors (Suggestibility)

Once again, the source misattributions that we focus on here are when participants claim to have seen items in the video that were only suggested to them in the questions. This is expressed through the participants' attribution of an item only previously presented in the questionnaire to either "Video Only" or "Both the Video and the Questions". The data for suggestibility for Part II of the source test are presented in Table 3. The differences in source misattribution errors between the three conditions (Incorrect Feedback, No Feedback, and Correct Feedback; $M = .51$, $M = .43$, $M = .32$ respectively) were found to be significant ($F(2, 234) = 6.846$, $MSE = 1.565$, $p < .01$). A Tukey HSD post-hoc test revealed that only the Correct Feedback and Incorrect Feedback conditions differed significantly from each other ($p < .05$); the Correct Feedback condition did not result in significantly fewer source misattributions than the Control condition. These data are compared in Table 3 to the data for control errors, that is, control items that were attributed to either "Video Only" or "Both the Video and the Questions". These differences between conditions for control errors was significant ($F(2, 234) = 3.102$, $MSE = .320$, $p < .05$). A Tukey HSD post-hoc revealed that only the Correct Feedback and Incorrect feedback conditions differed significantly from each other.

Confidence Measures

In the second part of the source test, participants indicated their confidence in their answer. For these confidence ratings, the differences between conditions were only significant in the case of video items attributed to the video ($F(2, 230) = 6.528$, $MSE = .878$, $p < .01$). A Tukey HSD post-hoc test revealed that Incorrect Feedback resulted in significantly lower confidence ratings than both the No Feedback condition ($p < .01$) and the Correct Feedback condition ($p < .05$). Thus, incorrect feedback reduced participant's confidence in their accurate attribution of items actually seen in the eyewitness event.

DISCUSSION

The details of a witnessed event can become confused and distorted by information received after the event. This post-event information can turn an eyewitness event into a difficult memory task, and it has been shown through eyewitness suggestibility studies that eyewitnesses will attribute later suggested information to the original witnessed event. This poses a major problem since many trials are decided mostly, if not solely, on eyewitness evidence. In previous research, Morita (2000) found that receiving feedback at test significantly reduced source misattributions. This study was designed to further explore this phenomenon and investigate whether feedback could possibly be a useful tool for the legal system to use to increase witness reliability.

The hypotheses of this study were supported in part. Incorrect Feedback did increase participants' claims of having seen post-event items in the eyewitness event, at least relative to the Correct Feedback condition. Thus, this study reveals that one potential problem with using feedback occurs when the feedback is in error. Incorrect

Feedback also led to higher levels of source misattributions to control (never-presented) items. Thus, it is clear that incorrect feedback can have damaging effects.

However, a number of findings from Morita (2000) were not supported.

Although the means were in the right direction, Correct Feedback did not significantly reduce source misattributions relative to the No Feedback condition. In addition, Morita (2000) found that Correct Feedback increased accurate attributions of the suggested items to the questions relative to the No Feedback condition, but this finding was not obtained in the present study.

There are a number of potential reasons why the results of the present study failed to replicate those of Morita (2000). First of all, the variability of participants' performance in the present study was much higher (i.e., standard errors as much 3 times higher) than in Morita (2000). This variability may come from differences in the procedures or in the characteristics of the participants. In terms of procedure the source test was presented auditorially in Morita (2000), while in this study, it was presented visually on a computer screen. Second, Morita (2000) gave participants a limited time to respond to test items (approximately seven seconds) before hearing the feedback. In this study, the participants responded on the computer program at their own pace, with the next test item appearing only after they had indicated their answer for the previous item. Furthermore, our study included a confidence measure for each item, while Morita's study did not. One final difference was that Morita's study varied the number of times the suggested items were suggested in the questionnaire: half of the items were suggested once, while the other half were suggested three times. Our study only contained thrice-suggested items. A final difference concerns the characteristics of the participants.

Although the students in Morita (2000) also attended a large state university (UNLV), they were all naïve participants from an Introductory Psychology course. In this study, participants were LSU students from a wide variety of classes, including both introductory psychology students and students from upper-division classes. It is possible that upper division students were more likely to have knowledge of the type of activities they would be asked to do during the experiment than those in the previous experiment, and this could have changed their behavior.

Although there are a number of differences between the studies, two of the factors are the most promising candidates for understanding our divergent results. First, requiring confidence judgments during the second half of the study may have led participants to focus on confidence as the criteria for saying “yes” to a given question, rather than specific characteristics of their memory. Second, giving participants unlimited time may have led them to adopt less than optimal strategies. Both of these potential factors will be explored in future research.

The most important finding from this study is that incorrect feedback can harm witness memory. Thus, although feedback about the accuracy of memory may be helpful in many circumstances, interviewers need to be aware of the ill effects of accidentally providing misleading feedback. Further research is clearly needed before eyewitness feedback can be applied successfully to real-world eyewitness interviewing. This way, maybe eventually eyewitnesses will be a more reliable source of information about a crime, and fewer innocent men and women will be sent to jail due to faulty eyewitness testimony.

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Table 1

Proportion of Accurate Responses on Part I of the Source Test

Item Type (Actual Source)	Incorrect FB	No FB	Correct FB
Video-Only	.73 (.12)	.79 (.09)	.77 (.11)
Suggested	.31 (.13)	.48 (.16)	.47 (.13)
Control	.81 (.08)	.85 (.09)	.85 (.09)

Table 2

Accurate Source Attributions in Part II of the Source Test

Item Type	Incorrect FB	No FB	Correct FB
Video	.81 (.11)	.82 (.09)	.79 (.11)
Suggested	.37 (.17)	.46 (.15)	.44 (.14)
Control	.84 (.09)	.88 (.08)	.85 (.10)

Table 3

Source Misattributions in Part II of the Source Test

Item Type	Incorrect FB	No FB	Correct FB
Suggested	.51 (.14)	.43 (.14)	.32 (.14)
Control	.11 (.06)	.07 (.05)	.05 (.06)