

MEMORY: LOFTUS ET AL (1978)
EYEWITNESS TESTIMONY

Loftus & Palmer (1974) had earlier demonstrated that participants' memories of a film of a car accident could be manipulated through questioning and that information given some days and weeks after watching the film, could interfere with memory.

Aim: To see whether participants would recall an event inaccurately if they were fed misleading questions

Procedures:

- ❑ Participants were divided into two groups
- ❑ Both groups were shown a set of slides depicting events leading up to a car accident
- ❑ The sets of slides were identical except for one slide: for one group, this slide depicted a red car stopping at a junction with a "Yield" (give way) sign; the other group saw the same car stopping at a junction with a "stop" sign
- ❑ After the slide presentation, both groups were given a set of 20 questions. For half the participants in each group, this set included the question. "Did another car pass the red one while it was stopped at the "Stop" sign? While for the other half, the critical question was "Did another car pass the red one while it was stopped at the "Yield" sign? (i.e. half the participants received a misleading question and half received a question that was consistent with what they had actually seen)
- ❑ After 20 minutes the participants were given 15 pairs of slides to look at and had to pick from each pair the slide that had been included in the original set (a recognition test). The critical pair consisted of one slide showing the car stopped at the "Yield" sign and the other slide showing the car stopped at the "Stop" sign.

Findings:

- ❑ 75% of participants who had received consistent questions picked the correct slide, as opposed to 41% who had been given the misleading question
- ❑ When the recognition test was delayed for a week accuracy in the misled group fell to 20%

Conclusions:

- ❑ Loftus and her colleagues concluded that the misleading question had served to delete the correct information from memory and replace it with false information
- ❑ The effect of misleading questions becomes more pronounced over time

Criticisms:

- ❑ The conclusions of this study have been supported by other studies. For example, Loftus and Loftus (1980) found that accuracy in the misled group did not increase even when they were offered money for picking the correct slide
- ❑ Although the results of this study are significant, it is important to note that by no means everyone in the misled group was inaccurate in the recognition task
- ❑ Participants were simply shown static slides. We cannot conclude that memory would be affected by misleading questions in a real-life situation.