

Loftus and Palmer

Experiment 1

Background

In this study Loftus and Palmer are attempting to demonstrate that memory is not a factual recording of an event and that memories can become distorted by other information which occurs after the event.

Many of the early studies of memory (e.g. Bartlett 1932) demonstrated how memories are not accurate records of our experiences. It seems that we try to fit past events into our existing representations of the world, making the memory more coherent or make more sense for us.

Much research has documented how difficult it is for people to estimate numerical details such as time, speed and distance. Judgement of speed is especially difficult, with witnesses of traffic accidents varying in their estimations as to how fast a vehicle was actually travelling.

Elizabeth Loftus is a leading figure in the field of eyewitness testimony research. She has demonstrated through the use of leading questions how it is possible to distort a person's memory of an event.

Aim

The aim of this study was to investigate how information supplied after an event, influences a witness's memory for that event.

Method

The study actually consists of two laboratory experiments. They are both examples of an independent measures design. The independent variable in both of the experiments is the verb used. The dependent variable in the first experiment is the participant's speed estimate and the dependent variable in the second experiment is whether the participant believed they saw glass.

Procedure

The participants were 45 students of the University of Washington. They were each shown seven film-clips of traffic accidents. The clips were short excerpts from safety films made for driver education. The clips ranged from 5 to 30 seconds long.

Following each clip, the students were asked to write an account of the accident they had just seen. They were also asked to answer some specific questions but the critical question was to do with the speed of the vehicles involved in the collision.

There were five conditions in the experiment (each with nine participants) and the independent variable was manipulated by means of the wording of the questions.

For example: 'About how fast were the cars going when they contacted each other?'

The basic question was therefore 'About how fast were the cars going when they ***** each other?'. In each condition, a different word or phrase was used to fill in the blank. These words were; smashed, collided, bumped, hit, contacted.

The entire experiment lasted about an hour and a half and a different ordering of the films was presented to each group of participants.

The dependent variable was the speed estimates given by the participants.