

Memory for Persons and Faces

A witness does two related but distinct things with a face: describes it from memory and, later, tries to recognize it in a photograph or lineup. This paper examines both, and the relationship between them. Drawing on archival studies of real cases and on cognitive research, it shows that person descriptions are typically vague and concentrate on changeable external features rather than the inner face that actually distinguishes one person from another; that the accuracy and the completeness of a description can pull in opposite directions; and — most importantly — that describing a face and recognizing a face appear to draw on fundamentally different mental processes. That last finding explains a series of otherwise puzzling results, including the fact that detailed describers are not reliably good identifiers and that, under some conditions, the very act of describing a face can impair the ability to recognize it. This overview is offered to help the trier of fact understand what descriptive evidence can establish, and where its limits lie. It is a companion to the topic papers on Memory for Persons and on Face Recognition, and assumes no background in psychology.

Two Different Tasks: Describing and Recognizing

It is natural to assume that a witness who can describe an offender in detail must also be able to recognize that offender, and that the richness of the description measures the strength of the underlying memory. A substantial body of research indicates that this assumption is largely mistaken. Describing a face and recognizing a face are related but partly separate abilities, and evidence about one is only a weak guide to the other (Meissner, Sporer, & Schooler, 2007).

Several converging findings support this conclusion. The quality of a person's face description bears only a low and inconsistent relationship to how accurately that person later identifies the face. Face recognition shows a robust own-race advantage — people are better at recognizing faces of their own racial group — yet face description generally shows no comparable difference. And describing a face can, under some conditions, actively interfere with recognizing it. Taken together, these results suggest that the two tasks rely on different underlying processes: recognition draws on the holistic, configural perception of a face as an integrated whole, while description draws more on isolating and naming individual features (Meissner et al., 2007). Much of what follows is an elaboration of this single, consequential point.

What Witnesses Actually Describe: Evidence From Real Cases

Archival studies — analyses of the descriptions real witnesses gave in police files — paint a consistent picture. In one of the best-known, Kuehn (1974) analyzed 100 police reports of assault, rape, and robbery in Seattle, with statements taken immediately after the incident from witnesses to stranger crimes. Descriptions were meager: about 7.2 descriptors on average, out of a maximum of nine, with gender, age, height, build, race, weight, complexion, and hair color the features most often named. Kuehn concluded that witnesses could convey a general impression of the offender but little specific detail.

Not every case fits that pattern. Yuille and Cutshall (1986) studied a single, dramatic shooting with multiple witnesses and found their accounts remarkably full and accurate even five months later — roughly three-quarters of the person-description details were correct. The authors themselves cautioned, however, that such a spectacular event likely prompted repeated interviews, extensive conversation, and press coverage, giving witnesses unusual opportunity to rehearse what they had seen; the case is better read as an instructive exception than as the norm. Tellingly, even there the errors clustered where the research predicts — in estimated quantities such as height, weight, and age, and in the style and color of hair and clothing.

Larger samples return to the familiar theme. An archival analysis by Sporer of 139 descriptions of capital-crime perpetrators found descriptions generally poor, with nearly a quarter of all details consisting of general estimates such as height, age, and race — height often given only against an unspoken norm ("average height," "normal build") — about a third devoted to clothing, and about a third to the face, concentrated in the upper portion and especially the hair (Meissner et al., 2007). Lindsay, Martin, and Webber (1994), comparing newspaper descriptions of 105 real criminals with laboratory descriptions, found laboratory witnesses more complete than real witnesses (7.35 versus 3.94 features) but concluded broadly that "eyewitness descriptions are frequently vague." And Van Koppen and Lochun (1997), in a large archival study of 2,299 descriptions from 1,313 robbery witnesses, found a median of just eight descriptors per witness, dominated by obvious permanent features (gender, build, skin color) and by changeable temporary ones (hats, jackets, their colors).

The Accuracy–Completeness Tradeoff, and the Neglected Inner Face

Van Koppen and Lochun (1997) went beyond counting descriptors to test their accuracy against police records, and uncovered two findings of particular legal importance. First, the descriptors most useful for identifying a person — the inner features of the face — were both rare and unreliable: fewer than 5% of all descriptors concerned inner features at all, and among those given, the majority were wrong (eye color correct 36% of the time, nose 35%, mouth 39%, chin 38%). Second, and counterintuitively, accuracy and completeness were negatively correlated: when witnesses gave longer descriptions, the proportion that was accurate tended to fall. More talk did not mean more truth.

The neglect of the inner face recurs across studies. Descriptions gravitate to the upper face and especially the hair, while the cheek, chin, and forehead are seldom mentioned (Meissner et al., 2007). This is doubly problematic. Hair is the single most commonly described facial feature, yet it is among the least useful for catching an offender, because hairstyle and color can be altered far more easily than the stable inner features of a face. Clothing — another favorite of witnesses — shares the same weakness: it is not a property of the person and can be changed at will. The features witnesses most readily report are, in short, often the features least able to identify anyone in particular.

Describing Can Impair Recognizing: Verbal Overshadowing

If description and recognition were simply two windows onto the same memory, putting a face into words could only help. Instead, a well-documented phenomenon called verbal overshadowing shows that describing a face can impair the witness's later ability to recognize it. Schooler and Engstler-Schooler (1990) first demonstrated the effect: participants who described a previously seen face performed worse on a subsequent recognition test than those who did not. A meta-analysis by Meissner and Brigham (2001), spanning 29 comparisons and roughly two thousand participants, confirmed a small but reliable negative effect, strongest when recognition followed soon after the description.

Two further findings clarify the mechanism and show it is not a matter of the description erasing the memory. Finger and Pezdek (1999) found that inserting a delay, or an intervening task, between describing and identifying can release witnesses from verbal overshadowing and restore recognition performance — implying that the visual memory is not overwritten but temporarily made less accessible. Macrae and Lewis (2002) showed that the effect tracks a shift in processing style: nudging participants toward local, feature-by-feature processing impaired face recognition, while nudging them toward global, holistic processing improved it. Describing a face appears to pull the witness toward the featural mode that serves description but hinders the holistic recognition of faces.

Different Processes: Featural Versus Configural, and the Own-Race Asymmetry

The verbal overshadowing results fit a broader account of why describing and recognizing diverge. Face recognition benefits from configural processing — perceiving the face as an integrated whole, attending to the spatial relationships among features — whereas description benefits from isolating and articulating individual features (Meissner et al., 2007). The two tasks emphasize different modes of perception, and a manipulation that helps one can hurt the other.

The clearest signature of this dissociation is the own-race advantage. People recognize faces of their own racial group more accurately than faces of other groups, an effect understood to rest on the configural processing that supports recognition; this cross-race effect is among the most replicated findings in the eyewitness literature. Yet face description generally does not show an own-race advantage (Meissner et al., 2007). If describing and recognizing drew on the same underlying representation, the own-race advantage should appear in both; that it appears reliably in recognition but not in description is strong evidence that the two are, at least in part, separate processes. The practical upshot is that a witness's facility in describing a face of any group tells us little about whether that witness will accurately recognize it.

How Much Should a Witness Be Asked to Say?

These findings create a genuine tension for investigators. In most domains of eyewitness memory, the more complete an account the better, and good interviewing aims to elicit as much accurate detail as possible. For person description the calculus is different. Pressing a witness to generate an extensive description can both impair subsequent face recognition (Finger & Pezdek, 1999) and yield a greater proportion of inaccurate details (Meissner, Brigham, & Kelley, 2001). More is not always better, and over-elicitation can degrade the very identification the description is meant to support.

How to strike the balance remains an open applied question. Researchers have not yet established exactly how much description maximizes useful information without inviting error, whether un-offered details should be probed for and which ones, or whether the details a witness gives first are more accurate than those volunteered later. Until those questions are answered, the safest reading of the evidence is that descriptions should be taken with care and not exhaustively pushed, and that a long, detailed description is not automatically a more reliable one.

Persons, Faces, and the Law

Person descriptions sit at the head of a long evidentiary chain. They are used to locate a suspect immediately after a crime, to search mug books, to build sketches and composites, to select the fillers placed alongside a suspect in a lineup, and to assess whether that lineup was fair. They are then introduced at trial to show congruence between the witness's memory and the accused. Because each later step inherits the qualities of the description that fed it, the documented limits of descriptive evidence ripple through the whole process.

The law has long treated a prior description as a marker of reliability. In *Neil v. Biggers* (1972), and again in *Manson v. Brathwaite* (1977), the Supreme Court listed the accuracy of the witness's prior description of the criminal among the factors for judging whether an identification is reliable enough to admit despite suggestive procedures. The research complicates the intuitive use of that factor. Because description quality is only weakly and inconsistently related to identification accuracy, and because completeness can trade off against accuracy, a description that matches the defendant corroborates the identification less strongly than it appears to, and a sparse or partly mistaken description does not necessarily discredit one. The factor remains relevant, but its weight should be calibrated to what the science shows it can and cannot establish.

Two further legal implications follow from the description-recognition dissociation. First, because describing a face can impair recognizing it, the sequence and timing of taking a description and conducting an identification are not neutral, and a record of that sequence helps the factfinder evaluate the identification. Second, because fillers are often chosen to match the witness's description, the vagueness of typical descriptions bears directly on whether a lineup was a fair test of memory — a matter developed in the companion paper on lineup construction. How these limits reach the jury is governed by the general law of identification and expert evidence: *Perry v. New Hampshire* (2012) confined mandatory judicial screening to cases of improper police suggestion, leaving most reliability concerns to cross-examination and expert testimony; *State v. Henderson* (2011) reviewed the science at length and strengthened the framework and jury instructions for eyewitness evidence; and the admissibility of expert testimony on these matters is decided under *Daubert v. Merrell Dow Pharmaceuticals* (1993), as extended by *Kumho Tire Co. v. Carmichael* (1999), or the *Frye* general-acceptance standard still used in some jurisdictions (*Frye v. United States*, 1923).

Special Issues in Legal Practice

The principles described above apply with equal force to every party in a legal proceeding. Memory operates the same way regardless of who is asking the questions, and the science summarized here favors no side. What differs between the parties is not the science but the vantage point — the particular places where memory issues tend to surface, and the particular errors each party is best positioned to guard against. The two summaries below identify those recurring issues. They are offered for orientation, not as litigation strategy; in every case the controlling question is what the evidence in that case will, and will not, support, and the expert's role is to inform the trier of fact rather than to advocate for either side.

Special Issues for Prosecutors

For the State, descriptive evidence is most persuasive when its content and origins are documented and its weight is claimed accurately. The issue most likely to surface is the fit between the witness's first description and the defendant — how completely it was recorded, when, and how closely it matches the accused on features the witness genuinely reported rather than later inferred. The error best guarded against is treating a matching description as strong independent proof of accuracy, when the research shows description quality to be only weakly diagnostic of identification accuracy and longer descriptions to be no more accurate, sometimes less. Preserving the original description verbatim, noting the conditions under which it was given, and not recasting broad or estimated features as distinctive matches all help the State present descriptive evidence whose weight can be honestly defended.

A second recurring point concerns sequence. Because describing a face shortly before an identification can impair recognition, and because fillers are commonly drawn from the description, a clear record of the order and timing of describing and identifying allows the State to show that the identification was a fair test of memory rather than a byproduct of the description process. These are the same practices that make an identification more reliable, and following them tends to strengthen the evidence ultimately offered.

Special Issues for Defense

For the defense, the recurring task is to compare the original description against the defendant, against the conditions of the encounter, and against what the science says a description can establish. The issue most likely to surface is a description that is vague, generic, or inconsistent with the accused on stated features — or one detailed enough to seem compelling yet, under the research, no more likely to be accurate for its length. The error best guarded against is letting the apparent richness or confidence of a description stand in for accuracy, given the weak and sometimes negative link between completeness and correctness. Examining which attributes were estimated rather than observed, whether the inner-face details were both rare and often wrong, and how viewing conditions limited the account can help the factfinder weigh the evidence realistically.

The corresponding safeguard is to ensure the jury understands the documented gap between describing and recognizing: that witnesses typically report few, largely external, and often changeable features; that the inner facial details most useful for identification are seldom given and frequently inaccurate; that describing a face can impair recognizing it; and that a fluent description does not guarantee a correct identification. Where admissible, expert explanation of these findings can help the trier of fact distinguish a description that genuinely narrows the field from one that merely fits a common profile.

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