Memory for Persons

This paper concerns the verbal descriptions witnesses give of the people they observe — the gender, age, height, build, clothing, hair, and other features a witness reports to police. Such descriptions are usually the first lead in an investigation, and they shape who is sought, who is stopped, and who is placed in a lineup. The research summarized here shows that person descriptions are typically brief and incomplete, that they concentrate on easily stated external features rather than the distinctive details of the face, and that several of the attributes witnesses do report must be estimated and are often inaccurate. The paper also explains a counterintuitive finding — that the act of describing a face can itself impair the witness's later ability to recognize it — and addresses what a description can, and cannot, tell us about the accuracy of a subsequent identification. This overview is offered to help the trier of fact weigh descriptive evidence with an understanding of its known limits.

What a Person Description Is

A person description is the witness's account, usually given to investigators after the event, of what the offender looked like. It is distinct from an identification: a description is produced from memory without any photograph or lineup in front of the witness, whereas an identification asks the witness to pick a face from those presented. Because the description ordinarily comes first and is used to generate or narrow the pool of suspects, its content and accuracy can influence the entire course of an investigation (Meissner, Sporer, & Schooler, 2007; Lane & Houston, 2021).

Researchers study person descriptions through two main approaches. Archival studies examine the descriptions real witnesses and victims actually gave in police files; laboratory studies stage an event and then ask participants to describe the person they saw. As discussed below, the two methods do not always agree, and the difference between them is itself informative about how much witnesses can be expected to report under real conditions.

How Much Witnesses Actually Report

Person descriptions are, as a rule, sparse. In one of the earliest and most frequently cited archival studies, Kuehn (1974) examined police reports and found that witnesses and victims reported, on average, about seven descriptors of the offender, with gender, age, height, and build among the most commonly mentioned; race, weight, complexion, and hair color appeared less often. A laboratory study by Ellis and colleagues (1980), in which participants described a target after a one-hour delay, produced a somewhat higher average — about 9.38 descriptors — than Kuehn's field data. That gap raises an important methodological caution: laboratory conditions may overstate how completely an ordinary witness can describe an unfamiliar person.

Lindsay and colleagues (1994) tested that concern directly by comparing descriptions from staged crimes with descriptions from real crimes reported in a local newspaper, the latter including fraud, sexual assault, kidnapping, assault, and armed robbery. Witnesses to the staged crime reported an average of 7.35 descriptors, while witnesses to the real crimes reported only 3.94 — roughly half as many. The pattern confirms that experimental settings tend to yield richer descriptions than can be expected from witnesses to genuine, often stressful, events. Van Koppen and Lochun (1997), analyzing more than two thousand descriptions from over a thousand actual robbery witnesses in the Netherlands, likewise found that witnesses generally provide little information — favoring general features such as sex, race, and build — though the limited information they did give was, on the whole, relatively accurate.

What Witnesses Describe — and What They Omit

Beyond sheer quantity, the content of descriptions follows a consistent pattern: witnesses describe the outside of a person far more readily than the inside of the face. In Lindsay and colleagues' (1994) staged crimes, 99% of those who gave descriptors mentioned clothing, 90% mentioned hair color, and 86% mentioned height, while fewer than half reported even gender, age, or race/ethnicity. Facial features were rarely described; when they were, the eyes led at 43%, and every other facial feature appeared less than a quarter of the time. The real-crime descriptions differed in their particulars — 95% reported gender, 60% clothing, 38% hair color, 25% race/ethnicity — but agreed on the central point: fewer than 10% reported any facial feature of the perpetrator at all.

This neglect of the face is striking because facial features are exactly what distinguishes one person from another. Van Koppen and Lochun (1997) found that fewer than 5% of descriptors concerned inner facial features such as the eyes, nose, and lips, as opposed to external features like the overall shape of the face. Clothing — among the most frequently reported attributes — is also among the least useful for identification, since it can be changed at will and is not a property of the person. The result is that the typical description is built from broad, changeable, or hard-to-verify characteristics and contains little of the distinctive facial detail that would reliably single out one individual.

Estimated Attributes and Their Pitfalls

A further problem is that many of the attributes witnesses do report are not observed so much as estimated. Height, weight, age, and even race are inferences the witness must draw, and Meissner and colleagues (2007) argue that these estimates are frequently inaccurate. People tend to anchor judgments of another's height and weight to their own, and to fall back on population norms — average height, average build — producing descriptions that fit a large share of the people in the area where the crime occurred. Because person descriptions serve as the first investigative lead, this means suspects may be sought and stopped on the basis of incomplete and estimated descriptions of external characteristics: gender, race, approximate height and weight, hair, and clothing. The danger is not that witnesses lie, but that an honest description composed largely of estimated, norm-driven attributes can point toward many innocent people who happen to fit a common profile.

Describing Can Harm Remembering: Verbal Overshadowing

A counterintuitive line of research shows that the very act of describing a face can impair the witness's later ability to recognize it — a phenomenon known as verbal overshadowing. In the original demonstration, Schooler and Engstler-Schooler (1990) had participants view a face and then either describe it in detail or perform an unrelated task; those who put the face into words were subsequently less accurate at picking it out of a recognition test than those who did not. The leading explanation is that translating a visual memory into language emphasizes verbalizable but non-distinctive features and can interfere with the holistic, hard-to-articulate visual representation on which accurate face recognition depends.

The effect is real but modest and bounded. A meta-analysis by Meissner and Brigham (2001), covering 29 comparisons and roughly two thousand participants, found a small but significant negative effect of verbalization on later identification, strongest when the identification followed soon after the description. The practical implication is not that witnesses should never be asked to describe an offender — descriptions are investigatively essential — but that the order and timing of describing and identifying can matter, and that a description taken just before a lineup is not a neutral act with respect to the identification that follows.

Do Descriptions Predict Identification Accuracy?

It is tempting to assume that a witness who gives a detailed, confident description must also be a more accurate identifier. The research does not support that assumption. In a foundational study, Wells (1985) found that the quality and length of a witness's verbal description of a face were not diagnostic of whether that witness would go on to make an accurate identification — good describers were not reliably good identifiers. The broader literature reaches the same conclusion in quantitative form: Meissner, Sporer, and Susa (2008), reviewing and meta-analyzing the description-identification relationship, found only a small association between descriptive measures and subsequent identification accuracy. Describing a face and recognizing a face appear to draw on partly different abilities.

For legal purposes the lesson is twofold. A sparse or partly inaccurate description does not by itself establish that a later identification is wrong, and a rich, fluent description does not establish that it is right. Description and identification are related but distinct forms of evidence, and the apparent completeness of a description is a weak guide to the reliability of the identification that follows it.

Factors That Further Degrade Descriptions

Even the limited descriptions witnesses typically give can be undermined further by the conditions of the encounter. Meissner and colleagues (2007) group the influences on a witness's memory for an offender's appearance into three categories. The first is opportunity to view — how long the witness saw the person, at what distance, in what lighting, and whether anything (a weapon, a disguise, a crowd) drew attention away from the face. The second is stress and anxiety, which at high levels can narrow attention and impair the encoding of detail. The third is alcohol and drugs, which can degrade both the original perception of the person and its later retrieval.

These factors are estimator variables — features of the witnessing situation that the justice system cannot control after the fact, but that bear directly on how much weight a description deserves. A confident-sounding description produced after a brief, frightening, poorly lit encounter, or while the witness was intoxicated, should be understood against those conditions rather than taken at face value. Each of these influences is addressed more fully in its own topic paper.

Person Descriptions and the Law

The accuracy of a witness's prior description has long been treated by courts as a marker of the reliability of an identification. In Neil v. Biggers (1972) and Manson v. Brathwaite (1977), the Supreme Court listed "the accuracy of the witness' prior description of the criminal" among the factors used to assess whether an identification is reliable enough to be admitted despite suggestive procedures. The eyewitness research complicates the straightforward use of that factor: because description quality is only weakly related to identification accuracy (Wells, 1985; Meissner et al., 2008), a description that matches the defendant does not confirm the identification as strongly as intuition suggests, and a poor description does not necessarily condemn it.

Person descriptions also drive lineup construction. A widely endorsed approach selects lineup fillers to match the witness's verbal description of the offender rather than to match the suspect's appearance. Lindsay and colleagues (1994) flagged a structural difficulty with that strategy: because descriptions so often omit basic attributes, the witness's "default" silence on a feature leaves unclear how fillers should be chosen on that dimension. The design of fair arrays therefore depends on the very descriptions this research shows to be sparse — a point developed in the companion paper on lineup construction.

How these limits reach the jury is governed by the general law of identification evidence and expert testimony. Perry v. New Hampshire (2012) confined mandatory judicial screening of

identification reliability to cases involving improper police suggestion, leaving most concerns about descriptive and identification accuracy to be tested through cross-examination, argument, and expert testimony. State v. Henderson (2011) reviewed the scientific literature at length and strengthened the framework and jury instructions for evaluating eyewitness evidence, recognizing the estimator variables — view, stress, intoxication, and others — that shape what a witness can describe and recognize. Whether an expert may explain person-description research to a jury is decided under the generally applicable standards: Daubert v. Merrell Dow Pharmaceuticals (1993), as extended by Kumho Tire Co. v. Carmichael (1999), or the Frye general-acceptance test still followed in some jurisdictions (Frye v. United States, 1923). The core findings rest on decades of archival and experimental research and several meta-analyses.

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, a person description is most valuable when its origins and content are fully documented. The issue most likely to surface is the relationship between the witness's initial description and the defendant: how completely the description was recorded, when it was taken, and how closely it actually matches the accused on attributes the witness genuinely reported rather than later inferred. The error best guarded against is overreading a matching description as independent proof of accuracy, when the research shows description quality to be only weakly diagnostic of identification accuracy. Preserving the first description verbatim, noting the conditions under which it was given, and resisting the temptation to treat broad, norm-typical features as distinctive matches all help the State present descriptive evidence whose weight can be honestly defended.

A second recurring point is procedural sequence. Because describing a face shortly before a lineup can modestly impair recognition, and because fillers are often chosen to match the description, careful documentation of the order of events allows the State to show that the identification was a fair test rather than a product of the description process itself. These are the same practices that make an identification more reliable, and adhering to them tends to strengthen the evidence ultimately offered.

Special Issues for Defense

For the defense, the recurring task is to compare the witness's original description against both the defendant and the conditions of the encounter. The issue most likely to surface is a description that is sparse, generic, or inconsistent with the accused on features the witness actually stated — or, conversely, a description so general that it would fit many people in the area. The error best guarded against is allowing a description's apparent detail or confidence to stand in for accuracy, when the research shows the two are only loosely connected. Examining what the witness estimated rather than observed, and how the viewing conditions, stress, or intoxication may have limited the description, can help the trier of fact weigh the evidence realistically.

The corresponding safeguard is to ensure the jury understands the documented limits of descriptive evidence: that witnesses typically report few and largely external features, rarely the distinctive

details of the face; that estimated attributes such as height and race are often anchored to the witness's own characteristics; and that a good description does not guarantee a good identification. Where admissible, expert explanation of these findings can help the factfinder distinguish a description that genuinely narrows the field from one that merely fits a common profile.

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Related topic papers: Lineup Construction · Face Recognition · Weapon-Focus Effect · Cross-Race Effect · Estimator vs. System Variables · Eyewitness Confidence