

Verbal Overshadowing

It seems obvious that asking a witness to describe a face should help fix it in memory. The research points the other way. Verbal overshadowing is the finding that putting a visual memory into words, most importantly a memory for a face, can impair the witness's later ability to recognize that face. The act of describing, which the legal system treats as a neutral or helpful step, can in some conditions make a subsequent identification modestly worse. The effect is counterintuitive, it is real, and it is also smaller and more bounded than early reports suggested, so it must be stated with care.

This paper explains the phenomenon, what is known about its size and limits, the competing explanations for why it occurs, and its bearing on the order in which descriptions and identifications are obtained.

The Core Finding

Schooler and Engstler-Schooler (1990) showed participants a face or a filmed crime and then had some of them write a detailed description of the culprit while others did an unrelated task. On a later recognition test, the participants who had described the face were less accurate at picking it out than those who had not, an effect the authors named verbal overshadowing. The result is striking because the describers were doing exactly what an investigator would ask a cooperative witness to do.

How Strong, and When?

The effect is reliable but modest. A meta-analysis found a small but significant impairment from verbalization (Meissner & Brigham, 2001), and a large multi-laboratory Registered Replication Report confirmed a genuine effect of similar, modest magnitude (Alogna et al., 2014). Its size depends on conditions. Verbal overshadowing is strongest when the witness describes the face soon after seeing it and is tested shortly afterward, when the later test requires fine visual discrimination, and when the face was originally processed as a whole rather than feature by feature. Under other conditions the effect shrinks or disappears.

Why It Happens

Two explanations are prominent and not mutually exclusive. The recoding account holds that faces are normally processed holistically, as integrated wholes, whereas verbal description forces attention onto isolated, nameable features; the verbal, feature-based representation then competes with or overshadows the original holistic memory at the moment of recognition. A second, retrieval-based account holds that describing shifts the witness toward a feature-by-feature way of searching memory that is poorly suited to recognizing a face, a criterion or processing shift rather than a corruption of the underlying trace (Meissner, Brigham, & Kelley, 2001). On either view, the trouble lies in the mismatch between how faces are best remembered and how words capture them.

Relevance for Identification Procedures

Descriptions are indispensable to investigations, and the existence of verbal overshadowing is not a reason to stop taking them. What the research counsels is awareness of a modest cost and attention to procedure. Pressing a witness to produce an exhaustive verbal description, or to describe a face repeatedly, immediately before viewing a lineup may slightly impair the identification, and the building of a feature-based facial composite involves the same kind of verbal-analytic processing. The practical implications are incremental rather than dramatic: the effect bears on the weight of an identification obtained under those conditions, not on whether descriptions should be collected at all.

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, verbal overshadowing bears on identifications obtained after a witness has given a detailed description of the offender. The prosecution is well positioned to keep the effect in proportion: it is modest, depends on specific conditions of timing and task, and does not show that descriptions are harmful or that a particular identification is wrong (Meissner & Brigham, 2001; Alogna et al., 2014). The error to guard against is procedural, compelling exhaustive or repeated verbal description in the moments before a lineup, which can slightly impair the identification that follows. The constructive course is to document how and when the description and the identification were obtained, so the trier of fact can weigh the identification with its conditions clear.

Special Issues for Defense

For the defense, the research is relevant where the witness produced a detailed description, or built a composite, shortly before identifying the accused, conditions under which verbalization can modestly reduce identification accuracy. The defense is well positioned to develop the sequence and timing of the description and identification. The corresponding error to guard against is overstatement. Verbal overshadowing is a small, condition-dependent effect, not a general proof that a described-then-identified face is misremembered, and many studies find no effect at all once conditions change (Alogna et al., 2014). Responsible cross-examination and expert testimony should present it as one modest factor bearing on the weight of an identification, not as a basis for treating description-then-identification as inherently unreliable.

References

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