

Finally, several isolated oddities are worth mentioning. One male and one female subject described *T* as wearing spectacles, although he does not do so and never has. Both of them mentioned the spectacles in their spontaneous reports, and the female subject was willing to swear to their existence. In addition, one subject mentioned a non-existent cap, and another a brown overcoat.

These points are enough to show how remarkably inaccurate and uncritical the memory of a person's appearance can be. Sometimes the errors of testimony cumulate into a complete confabulation. The description given by subject *K*. (see Table 9-1) is one example of this. For another, consider this description give by *X*.: "round black hat; dark or black shoes; reversed collar." In fact the hat was brown, the shoes red, and the collar completely concealed by the closed jacket.

Descriptions of individuals play an extremely important part in the testimony of witnesses. With respect to such testimony, the outcome of the present experiment leads to a clear conclusion. *Retrospective accounts of people's appearance, especially about hair color, beardedness, and color of clothing, should be given no credit whatsoever unless special attention was directed to these features during observation itself.*

10 Reconstruction of Automobile Destruction

Elizabeth F. Loftus and John C. Palmer

Elizabeth Loftus is well known for her extensive work on witness memory. The study reprinted here demonstrates the prejudicial effect of leading questions, or—to put it another way—illustrates the human tendency to combine information from all available sources in reconstructing the past. The elegance of Loftus and Palmer's experiment contrasts sharply with the primitive methods available to Stern seventy years earlier (Selection 9); the difference reflects the methodological progress of psychology since 1904.

How accurately do we remember the details of a complex event, like a traffic accident, that has happened in our presence? More specifically, how well do we do when asked to estimate some numerical quantity such as how long the accident took, how fast the cars were traveling, or how much time elapsed between the sounding of a horn and the moment of collision?

It is well documented that most people are markedly inaccurate in reporting such numerical details as time, speed, and distance (Bird,

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