

Eyewitness Testimony of Paranormal Events

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Contrary to popular conviction, perceiving only partly involves seeing, the information one gleanes from the eye does not record onto the brain like a camera on film. Rather, memory of an event is considered to be a reconstructive process that involves not only our external sensory input but includes our contextual, past, and present experiences, and beliefs derived from such experiences. Therefore memory is seen as an integrative process, easily subject to change and distortion (Yuille, 1980). Furthermore, additional factors such as attention, emotional state and nature of the witnessed event all play a role in the accurate recall of an incident. This article explores some of the factors paranormal investigators should be aware of when interviewing eyewitnesses of paranormal phenomena. Research pertaining to eyewitness testimony involving crime will be extrapolated to eyewitness testimony in the paranormal field, this is because most eyewitness testimony research revolves around the crime scene. However, there are also many parallels between eyewitness testimony for criminal events and paranormal events. For example, both usually involve a certain level of arousal, can be over relatively quickly and involve ambiguity.

In this field, hard, objective evidence seems to be at a premium and usually eyewitness testimony is one of the few sources of evidence investigators can extract from a case. Therefore, it seems of utmost importance that this source of evidence is obtained containing as little distortion and inaccuracy as possible to provide a stronger, more reliable evidence base. Furthermore, with objective evidence such as photographs or video recordings coming under great scrutiny and analysis, it seems only appropriate to apply the same stringent criteria to eyewitness evidence given the fallibility of memory. Lastly, whilst this article is by no means exhaustive, it is designed to give a general overview of some of the misconceptions about eyewitness accounts and improper techniques to adopt when conducting interviews.

Beliefs and expectations

Witnesses to paranormal phenomena clearly vary with respect to beliefs and expectations. The perceptual system organizes information into a logical whole with beliefs and expectancies being able to greatly influence the means by which the information is organized. Whereas the skeptic may always expect some rational explanation to be part of any supposed paranormal experience the believer may be more inclined to expect genuine paranormal activity. One's belief in the paranormal and the expectancy of a ghostly presence, brought on by being in an old house late at night, might cause a door slamming due to a draught to be interpreted as poltergeist activity.

Wiseman and Morris (1995) tested this theory in two studies which investigated how belief in the paranormal effected the observation of a magic trick. On separating the participants into believers and skeptics based on a questionnaire concerning paranormal

belief, individuals were required to watch a fake psychic demonstration of someone bending a key with their mind. Participants were then required to complete a set of recall questions, some of which concerned elements that were fundamental to the performance of the trick. As an example, to perform the trick, the key had been switched and for a brief period of time was out of sight. This was obviously essential to performing the trick successfully and one of the questions asked whether the key had always remained in sight. The results revealed that, overall, believers perceived the trick as more paranormal than skeptics, and believers did recall significantly less information regarding events that were crucial to the tricks' method.

In summary, evidence suggests that prior beliefs and expectations can lead to inaccurate eyewitness testimony of paranormal occurrences. It should also be made clear that the eyewitness testimony of those with a strong inclination to not believe in the paranormal may be just as biased as those with a strong proclivity to believe. Therefore, paranormal investigators need to be aware of the role of these factors in producing inaccurate accounts and carefully consider eyewitness testimony independent of whether it confirms or differs from their own beliefs.

Temporal stability of eyewitness accounts

The time elapsed between an eyewitness experience and the point in which the paranormal investigator has an opportunity to interview the witness can be weeks, months or even years after it has occurred. Unfortunately, research has shown eyewitnesses to be less accurate in their recall of an event after longer periods of time than shorter intervals (Bartlett, 1932). This is thought to occur due to two primary processes: the natural decay of a memory trace and the misinformation effect. The decay of memory refers to the fact that a person is more likely to forget the original event over time. The misinformation effect concerns the reconstructive nature of memory, and contends that, over time, new information is more likely to be integrated into the original memory or make it harder for the original memory to be recalled (Tversky & Tuchin, 1989).

Moreover, paranormal events that are viewed for longer periods of time are quite clearly going to be more accurate in perception and recall than events viewed for shorter periods of time. Loftus (1972) found that when participants were exposed to picture stimuli for three seconds as oppose to two, the time the participant had to fixate on the stimulus clearly increased too. This in turn increased the probability of recalling details correctly with accurate recall of the pictures rising from approximately 60% after 2 seconds to 70% after 3 seconds. However, when assessing the length of time over which an event took place, it is important to note that the duration of a criminal incident is generally overestimated. In general, people have a distorted perception of time when a stressful, unpleasant event takes place, believing it took longer than it actually did. It is sometimes the case that paranormal events can be frightening and unpleasant for the observer so it is important to take into account the potential overestimation of such occurrences. Loftus Schooler, Boones, and Kline (1987) conducted an experiment where participants were required to view a video tape of a staged robbery. Estimates were approximately five

times greater than the thirty second event actually took to occur. It is therefore important to consider that an event taking no more than a few seconds can be overestimated to taking up to five times longer than was actually the case.

Lastly, Loftus (1972) also found that when participants were required to undergo the distracting task of counting backwards whilst observing pictures, accuracy of recall decreased. This demonstrates how complex activity, simulated by counting backwards, can tend to bewilder due to limited human processing capacity. Therefore, it is important to take into account the amount of extra activity going on at the time of the incident as that too can decrease testimony accuracy.

Eyewitness confidence

Research reveals that if an eyewitness has good deal of confidence in their testimony the jury is inclined to view this as a marker of truth and accuracy (Deffenbacher, 1980). This makes logical sense, if someone were genuinely confident in what was observed it would imply that the room for error in such an account were minimal. However, paranormal investigators must be aware of making such inferences as it has been shown to be a fallacy. Level of witness confidence is largely unrelated to accuracy of testimony. Wells, Lindsay, and Ferguson (1979) found witness accuracy in identifying a thief from a six person picture line-up was unrelated to their subjective confidence ratings or the ratings of confidence levels made by jurors. This has also been supported in similar studies (Lindsay, Wells & Rumpel, 1981., Clifford and Hollin, 1981).

Trivial details

In addition to witness confidence, the amount of trivial detail an eyewitness includes in their account can influence perceived accuracy of their statement. This means, if an eyewitness were to give an account of the incident full of trivial details, jurors perceive their account to be more accurate. However, research reveals that the ability to divide attention is limited. Backman and Nilson (1991) conducted an experiment to observe the effects of divided attention upon remembering subject-performed tasks and verbal sentences. The results showed both free and cued recall of events deteriorated under conditions of divided attention. Therefore, it is unlikely that an eyewitness could focus attention on the surroundings and paranormal activities occurring at the same time without giving some margin for inaccuracy. Also, eyewitnesses who may accurately recall more unimportant details of the event may not be able to recall accurate details of more important information. It is important for paranormal investigators to be aware that very detailed accounts do not indicate accurate accounts due to the limits of attention.

Witness arousal

When a paranormal incident is observed it is usually accompanied by a certain amount of emotional arousal. Research has shown that emotional arousal can both facilitate and impede the accurate perception of an event. The relationship between arousal and

accurate perception is thought to be represented by a U-shaped curve, with very low and very high arousal interfering with accurate perception and moderate arousal facilitating perception. To test this theory, Leippe, Wells, and Ostrom (1978) conducted an experiment where participants observed the theft of either cigarettes or electronic equipment. More accurate descriptions of the electrical equipment theft were given which was thought to be due to the moderate arousal produced by the more serious nature of the crime when compared to cigarette theft. To support the deleterious effects of high arousal on memory, Loftus, Loftus and Messo (1987) conducted an experiment with slides showing a man holding a gun to a shop assistant to one half of the participants while the other half saw the same man handing the shop assistant a check. The results revealed greater inaccuracy in recall for the participants in the weapon condition than the participants who viewed the man handing over the check. This difference was explained by the high level of arousal caused by the presence of the weapon interfering with accurate perception and recall of the event. Therefore, it seems that it is important to note the emotional state of the eyewitness when considering their account of an event. If the event caused a considerable amount of stress and hysteria, as unexplained paranormal occurrences can and often do, it may be advisable to approach any evidence given with a certain amount of caution.

Leading questions

A leading question is a question that suggests a particular answer. When interviewing a witness it is important to ask questions which are unlikely to bias the response of the eyewitness. In one study, Loftus and Palmer (1974) asked witnesses who had viewed a short film whereby two cars had an accident “How fast were the cars going when they *smashed* into each other?” Another group of participants who had viewed the same film were asked “How fast were the cars going when they hit each other?” The participants who had been questioned with the verb “smashed” were more likely to report higher speeds than those in the “hit” condition. Furthermore, a week later the participants in the “smashed” group were more likely to remember the accident as being more violent than the “hit” group. This highlights how important the wording of questions can be in obtaining unbiased eyewitness reports.

Lastly, research also shows if something is mentioned during questioning (e.g. a screwdriver) that was not present, eyewitnesses tend to recall this object as being present (Ryan and Geiselman, 1991). This suggests that the phrasing of a question can permanently influence the accuracy of recall for an event. When interviewing a witness it is therefore essential not to allude to a response, for example, instead of saying “where were you when you saw the apparition?” it would be far more appropriate to say “where were you when you had your experience?” The former suggests that the witness did see an apparition and may cause the witness to recall the story with more details that are consistent with the stereotype of an apparition whereas the latter does not imply the experience was paranormal or otherwise.

Second hand evidence

Second hand evidence known as hearsay refers to information given by an individual who provides an account on behalf of the original eyewitness. Whilst it is a common sense notion that obtaining information from its original source provides a more reliable and accurate account of that information, sometimes this is not always possible. So how accurate is hearsay evidence? Firstly, if the individual does not attend to every detail of the witnesses account, storage and subsequent retrieval of the information will be compromised. Secondly, the information that is encoded can be influenced and misinterpreted by the persons own beliefs and expectations. Lastly, the questions one asked when obtaining information of the event from the eyewitness may have been leading or loaded with assumptions which can distort the information and lead to false recall of aspects of the event.

To test the accuracy of hearsay, Bartlett (1932) conducted an experiment whereby one person was told a ghost story and this person then had to relay the information to the next person as best they could, who in turn had to tell it to someone else and so on. The results showed that the detail, duration and meaning of the story deteriorated after each telling until the story was barely recognizable as the same original tale. This illustrates how fraught with inaccuracies hearsay evidence can be, so much so that it is inadmissible in the American legal system unless under certain circumstance (McCough, 1999). Therefore, hearsay evidence should not be admissible in paranormal investigation and investigators should rely solely on original eyewitness accounts.

Conclusion

This article reveals that eyewitness testimony is not entirely reliable with perception, memory and recall capable of being distorted by a range of variables. However, it is important to note that although eyewitness testimony is prone to inaccuracy this does not mean it is worthless. By becoming aware of some of the factors that contribute to testimony inaccuracy one is merely able to roughly gage the likelihood of embellishment, bias and error inherent in the eyewitness account. For example, an eyewitness who holds no strong beliefs in the paranormal and reports being relatively unshaken at the time of the event is more likely to give a more accurate version of events than an eyewitness who strongly believes in paranormal occurrences and was highly aroused when the event took place. Even if the conditions dictate that the eyewitness account is likely fraught with inaccuracy, the information is still useful as the essence of the account may still be accurate but only the details may not be so.

Furthermore, it highlights the level of caution paranormal investigators need to approach such eyewitness interviews and some of the ways paranormal investigators can provide more reliable accounts of eyewitness information. For example, by avoiding leading questions it is possible to avoid further distortion of the memory and more accurate recall. Again, this article is by no means extensive but in pointing out some of the factors that can reduce the precision of eyewitness accounts, it aims to prepare those

interviewing eyewitnesses to obtain an idea on the accuracy of such accounts and methods on improving that accuracy.

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