



Introduction

Eyewitnesses at crime scenes may be necessary for helping to identify possible suspects. It is important to understand the influences on eyewitnesses' abilities to recognize faces, and their ability to correctly reject a suspect rather than falsely identify an innocent person. Studying the factors that influence an eyewitness's ability to accurately identify or correctly reject a suspect in a lineup will help law enforcement better understand the role an eyewitness plays in an investigation.

Previous research has shown that eyewitnesses tend to be better at identifying faces of their own race as opposed to those from a different race; the Own-Race Bias Effect ("ORB"; Brigham & Barkowitz, 1978). Previous research has also shown that verbally describing a previously viewed face may actually impair the eyewitness's ability to later identify that face in a suspect-present lineup. This result is known as the Verbal Overshadowing Effect (Schooler and Engstler-Schooler 1990). It is important to include a suspect-absent condition to measure false identifications. The effect of verbalization in suspect-absent conditions is inconsistent, with some results showing that verbalization inhibits suspect-absent identification (Sauerland, Holub, & Sporer 2008) and some showing it benefits it (Clare and Lewandowsky 2004).

The present study looked at the effect of the robber's race and the effect of a verbal description task on a participant's ability to correctly reject the presence of the robber in a suspect-absent lineup. We assessed how verbally describing the robber for both cross-race and same-race identification would affect the participant's ability to later realize the robber is not present in the lineup. In addition, we analyzed the level of confidence each participant had for their identification and paired that to their correct rejection accuracy.

Method

Participants

A total of 147 students from The College at Brockport were participants in the present study. To have a sufficient number of participants per condition to compare same and other-race responses, we restricted analyses to responses from the 108 participants who identified themselves as White on a demographic questionnaire.

Materials and Procedure

After consent forms were signed, participants viewed a video of a staged bank robbery with either a Black or White male robber. After the video, participants were asked to complete a 15-minute crossword puzzle to serve as a time delay, followed by a 5-minute writing task. The writing task was either listing the states and capitols (control) or describing the previously viewed robber (verbalization). Then they viewed a photo lineup that included 6 "foil" faces that were selected for having similar features to the robber in the video, the robber was never present in the lineup. Participants were asked to identify the "robber" and to rate their confidence on a scale of 1- guess to 7- certain. They also had the option to say the "robber" was not present in any of the pictures (the correct response). The entire sequence was repeated with a second video including the robber of the opposite race as originally viewed, but results from that portion of the study are not reported here. At the end of the study, participants completed a demographic questionnaire that included questions on their age, race, gender, and vision. Following debriefing, participants had the option to ask any questions about the study.

Results & Discussion

Accuracy rates (correctly stating the robber was not present in the lineup) for the Black and White robbers in both the verbal and control conditions are shown in Figure 1. A binary logistic regression was run to test for an effect of verbalization, race, and their interaction. There was no significant main effect found for the effect of verbalization $\chi^2(1, N = 108) = 2.024, p = .155$, the effect of race $\chi^2(1, N = 108) = .329, p = .566$, or their interaction $\chi^2(1, N = 108) = 1.214, p = .270$. For the Black "robber," the mean accuracy in the verbal condition was 19% greater than the control condition. Although this finding was not significant, the pattern shows that the participants were more accurate when correctly rejecting the Black "robber" after verbally describing the "robber." However, there was a 2% reduction in the verbal condition when compared to the control condition for the White "robber." The mean confidence ratings in all four conditions were relatively similar. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed that the test of verbalization, race, and their interaction were not significant for the confidence scores, all F 's < 1.

The pattern of results showed that, although not significant, participants who viewed the White "robber" made more accurate identifications in the control condition and participants who viewed the Black "robber" made more accurate identifications in the verbal description condition. Although there were no significant findings, the pattern suggests there could be significant effects with a larger sample size. It appears as though the White participants are more accurate when they do not describe the White "robber's" face, but more accurate when they do describe the Black "robber's" face. The current data do not support that verbalization increases the number of correct rejections and decreases the number of false identifications in suspect-absent lineups. Future research would benefit from collecting suspect-absent data from both Black and White participants as well as a larger sample size.

References

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Figure 1

