

LEADING QUESTIONS AND THE EYEWITNESS REPORT OF A LIVE AND A DESCRIBED INCIDENT¹

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Summary.—Loftus found that false presuppositions included in questions given after a film increase the likelihood that those presuppositions will be remembered as part of the film itself. This finding has been extended to two conditions chosen to simulate more closely nonlaboratory situations. In one condition 27 undergraduates unexpectedly witnessed a live incident and in another condition 27 different undergraduates heard a description of that incident.

In a series of experiments Loftus (Loftus, 1975; Loftus & Palmer, 1974; Loftus & Zanni, 1975) has demonstrated that the form of questions asked immediately after an incident can affect later recall of that incident. In particular, questions containing false presuppositions increase the likelihood that subjects will later report those false presuppositions as part of the original incident. For instance, asking subjects "How fast was the car going when it passed the stop sign?" when in fact no stop sign was present increases the likelihood that they will report having seen a stop sign.

Loftus' research has been restricted to films and slides, but generalizations to real world, three-dimensional events and other modes of input are necessary for validity in courtroom applications. The present study therefore provides an extension to an actual incident in one condition and a verbal description of that incident in another. The rest of the experiment was intended to follow Loftus' procedures except that the subjects were not explicitly warned that there would be a recall task. This change was made in order to more closely simulate the conditions of most eyewitness testimony situations.

Each of two groups of 27 undergraduate volunteers was asked to take a pencil-and-paper form of a Locus of Control test (James, 1973). During this task two male confederates, who were not known by the subjects, entered the test room and performed a rehearsed 45-sec. sequence that included several disruptions such as slamming a door and bumping into an ashtray. The confederates also removed a slide projector, an action that could have been considered a crime. One minute after the confederates left the room, the experimenter interrupted the subjects and asked them to fill out a questionnaire of 10 questions concerning the incident. Two forms of the questionnaire were given. On one form false presuppositions were inserted into the odd questions and on the other form false presuppositions were inserted into the even questions.

One week after the first session all subjects received a questionnaire consisting of 10 filler questions made from the 10 prior questions with the false presuppositions removed and 10 new questions based on the false presuppositions themselves. As any one subject had only seen five of the 10 false presuppositions in the first session, the five remaining false presuppositions served as controls.

A second group of subjects had a nearly identical procedure. Instead of witnessing

¹Reprints are available from David C. Rubin, Psychology Department, Lawrence University, Appleton, Wisconsin 54911. Support for this research was provided by Lawrence University.

the incident, however, the subjects in the second group were individually asked to listen carefully to a neutral, 72-sec. tape recorded description of the incident.

The effect of the false presupposition was significant ($F_{1,22} = 4.30, p < .05, MS_{error} = .95$); subjects agreed with an average of 2.93 of the 5 false presuppositions they heard compared to 2.54 of the 5 they did not. There was no significant effect of the actual versus the auditory presentation ($F_{1,22} = .009, p > .50, MS_{error} = 1.07$) and no significant interaction ($F_{1,22} = .010, p > .50, MS_{error} = .95$).

Loftus' finding that questions containing false presuppositions can affect later eyewitness reports does not appear to be dependent on filmed presentation or warnings that recall will be tested. Thus, two possible criticisms to applying her work to actual situations have been weakened. The limited scope of this study, however, prohibits speculation on the role these factors have in the magnitude of the effect.

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Accepted April 13, 1977.