

Were We Watching The Same Thing?



Topic

Limitations of eyewitness testimony

Introduction

Crimes often take place in front of other people, who are known as witnesses. During the investigation of a crime, witnesses are asked to recall the events in detail. Investigators record such statements either as a written record or on an audio tape. It is important to realize that people can see things differently, and that deductions made using statements taken from more than one witness to an event can be very different. In this experiment, you will observe people performing a task, but without taking any notes during the event. After the event, you will write down what you remember seeing and then compare notes with others and then, if possible, watch a video of the event. You will observe how your version of events differs both from that of others and from the video record. This experiment shows how reliable are our powers of visual observation.

Time required

45 minutes

Materials

group of three students to act out a small scene in front of the class
 copy of the data table on the next page for each student to be given out after the scene has been acted out
 pen for each student
 video camera and television (optional)

Safety note



Please read the general safety precautions at the beginning of the book.

Procedure

This is a whole class activity.

The observing students should not look at the data table before or during the acting out of the "crime scene." Warn them to observe the scene carefully, but do not allow them to take notes.

Suggested "crime scene" for small group of students to act out

Ask three students to help move a heavy box from the back of the room to the front; two should carry the box while the third ensures that the path is clear.

1. Ask the actors to perform the suggested “crime scene.” If possible, use a video camera to film the “scene.”
2. Give each observing student a pen and a copy of the data table below.
3. Ask everyone to answer the questions in the data table.
4. Exchange your copy of the data table (your “witness statement”) with another student.
5. If a video was made, watch it now.

DATA TABLE

How many people took part in the scene you watched? (number them 1, 2, 3 etc.)				
What clothes were the actors wearing? (use a column for each actor)				
What kind of shoes were they wearing?				
What color was their hair?				
Were they tall or short?				
Were they wearing jewelry?				
Did the actors make any noises?				
What size was the box?				
Did the box look heavy?				

Analysis

1. Were you able to answer all the questions in the data table (your “witness statement”)?
2. Were your answers to the questions the same as those of other students?
3. Did students further away from the “crime scene” tend to make different observations from those closer?
4. If you watched a video of the event, did you spot details you had missed before?

Want to know more?

See Section 10: Our Findings