

SOCIO-ECONOMIC SCHEMATA CONVEYED THROUGH PHYSICAL APPEARANCE OF A CRIMINAL IN AN EYEWITNESS CONTEXT

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The prime factor of wrongful convictions in global criminal justice systems is mostly due to evidence provided by eyewitness misidentifications. Among a wide array of causes for this fallibility in memory, schema-driven false memory gains a crucial role. A host of applied cognitive psychology researches have uncovered that a series of characteristics of the defendant and the characteristics of the witness are causing erroneous reconstructive memory of the witness. Therein primarily schemata on physical appearance which convey socio-economic status (SES) of the criminal are assumed to lead into reconstructive memory in eyewitness testimony. The purpose of the present study therefore lied in an attempt to understand the prevailing physical and socio-economic status schemata of a typical criminal and their effects on visual memory of eyewitnesses. A qualitative research design was adopted in data collection and data analysis and six participants were given two schema-consistent and schema-inconsistent pictures that elaborated two different crime scenes of bank robberies. The data were gathered in two different circumstances as immediate recall and delayed recall. The collected data were analyzed in using thematic analysis. The results provided evidence for prevailing schemata on physical appearance that convey information on the criminal's SES. These schemata also conveyed evidence to prove that participants have selected and recalled information in accordance to their prevailing schemata on physical traits and apparent SES of the criminals. Thus it is concluded in the study that according to their inferences on the physical appearance and socio-economic status, eye witnesses make assumptions on their recalling details related to criminal's behaviour, his character, severity of crime committed, and background of the crime scene.