Eyewitness Identification by Elderly and Young Adults*

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Elderly men and women and young males and females observed a simulated assault and theft of a wallet by a male assailant on a male victim. Two other people also were present in the criminal scenario, a female friend of the victim, and a female witness bystander. Young subject-witnesses were significantly superior to the elderly in verbal recall of details of the criminal episode. However, no reliable differences were found between the two age categories in recognition of the assailant, the victim, or friend. Women were superior to men and young people were superior to the elderly in identifying the bystander. Identification of the assailant was influenced by complex interactions of guilty or innocent facial appearances of the assailant and the victim, as well as the sex and age of the witnesses.

INTRODUCTION

Eyewitnesses play a key role in the criminal justice process both in the apprehension and in the conviction of criminal suspects. The ordinary person on the street has a primary responsibility in this process. He or she must offer assistance to the police and to the courts by giving information which identifies the suspect. Two separate questions of importance regarding witness assistance must be addressed. First, how accurate is the information? And second, how credible is the witness?

Witnesses never enter the courtroom as equals. Credibility is tied to such factors as professional status, power, education, and personal characteristics such as physical attractiveness, race, sex, and age, among other factors. Lavrakas and Bickman (Note 1) found that prosecuting attorneys asked to rank order attributes of "good
witnesses," selected accuracy of memory for faces as second in importance after witness availability, and ranked accuracy of memory for details of the criminal incident as fourth in importance in a list of 32 characteristics. Further down the list attorneys ranked age as moderately important (15/32). Lavrakas and Bickman did not specify what ages prosecutors favor but we can assume that attorneys prefer young or middle-aged adults over children and the elderly.

The primary purpose of this paper is to focus on the accuracy of the elderly relative to young adults as witnesses to a simulated crime. However, as mentioned above, accuracy of testimony of witnesses is not independent from witness credibility to officers of the court.

In a recently completed study Yarmey and Johnson (Note 2) found that young adults (20-29) perceive the older person as ineffective, highly dependent, and personally unacceptable. In particular, young defendant-subjects, more so than juror-subjects, perceive the very old (70-79) as highly dependent. In a courtroom situation it is likely that young defendants perceive the elderly as highly suggestible, disorganized in their perceptions and decision-making, and unable to be personally responsible for their actions. Furthermore, it is probable that the elderly are regarded by defendants as easy targets of victimization, unable to defend themselves, and unlikely to be believed by the police and the courts in their identification of an attacker. These observations imply that the elderly would not be credible witnesses in the criminal justice system, at least to young adults and probably to most adults.

It is commonly believed that the effect of aging on perceptual and memorial faculties hinders rather than assists the police in the investigation and apprehension of a suspect (Groth, 1979). Scientific evidence supports this generalization. By age 70, loss in visual acuity for both distant and near objects is common (Wallace, 1956). The ability to discriminate colors is poorer for the elderly, particularly the discrimination of blues, greens, and violets. Attention to peripheral stimuli, such as road signs when driving, is reduced among persons over 50 (Manstead and Lee, 1979). Similarly, differences exist between the elderly and the young in memory performance, especially short-term retention (Craik, 1977). In addition, the older person has greater deficits in recall tasks than in recognition, although age decrements are apparent also in recognition memory (Craik, 1977).

The above research suggests that the elderly are likely to be very poor witnesses. However, Hoyer (1979) points out that

... many of the intellectual abilities that show a decline with advancing age—the ability to think abstractly, deal competently with numbers, and certain types of reasoning abilities—are relatively unrelated to the reporting of a crime. The victim or witness need not solve the crime! It has been reported that verbal expressive abilities useful to crime reporting show no decline and may even improve throughout life, although the speed with which details can be recounted may decrease with age. An officer who is aware of this can slow things down somewhat for this purpose of effective investigation.

Unfortunately, very few studies have been completed to support Hoyer's belief that the elderly could be adequate witnesses. Face recognition studies confirm other memorial studies in showing the elderly inferior to the young in recognition performance (Brigham and Williamson, 1979; Smith and Winograd, 1978). And, in addition, Smith and Winograd found that older subjects (50 to 80 years) yielded a higher false alarm rate. That is, they operated with a looser criterion or were willing to