

Responding to leading questions in eyewitness memory: The role of a preceding memory test

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Abstract

When responding to memory questions posed in a forensic context, the accuracy of the resulting memory report is paramount. However, not all forensically-relevant questions are neutral with respect to the accuracy of the elicited responses. The questions that suggest an incorrect response, pointing to either details that were not present in the course of the event the witness testifies about, or that describe existing details in an incorrect way, seem to pose a risk to the veracity of the eyewitness' reports. These so called *leading questions* have been considered so effective in eliciting incorrect responses that they are commonly used in research on eyewitness memory to introduce misinformation about witnessed events. Against this common description of the negative role of leading questions, a recent study by Wade and Spearing (2022) provides an exception. In this study, the authors documented a surprising pattern by which responses to leading questions suggesting an incorrect answer were actually more often correct than responses to questions that did not suggest any incorrect answers. The authors account for these surprising findings by pointing out to a particular feature of their procedure by which the final memory test containing leading and non-leading questions was preceded by an earlier, initial test that assessed participants' memory for critical details in a yes/no format. The argument was that this initial test served to strengthen memory for the details encoded from the original event, and this strengthened memory helped people to successfully monitor and edit out incorrect responses when later faced with questions presented in a leading format. Here we propose to test this hypothesis directly by repeating the procedure used by Wade and Spearing (2022) and manipulating the presence of the initial memory test. We expect to replicate the pattern of benefits of leading questions when the initial memory test is administered, but we also expect to document the more usual pattern of impairment due to asking leading rather than non-leading questions when the initial memory test is not administered.

References

Wade, K. A., & Spearing, E. R. (2022). The effect of cross-examination style questions on adult eyewitness accuracy depends on question type and eyewitness confidence. *Memory*, 31, 163-178.