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Intoxicated Eyewitnesses: The Effects of Alcohol on Eyewitness Recall across Repeated Interviews

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Author(s)

David La Rooy, Annabelle Nicol, Philip Terry

ABSTRACT

The study evaluated the usefulness of repeat-interviewing of witnesses to crimes who were intoxicated by alcohol at the time of the incident and their first interview, and then re-interviewed when not intoxicated the following day. Sixty young, social drinkers were divided into three groups. One group was given a "placebo" (alcohol-like) beverage, a second was given a "low dose" of alcohol (0.2 g/kg men; 0.17 g/kg women), and a third was given a "high dose" of alcohol (0.6 g/kg men; 0.52 g/kg women) over a 15 minute period. Twenty minutes later they viewed a 4-minute video of a crime, and afterwards they were given two opportunities to recall everything that they could remember from the incident; the first opportunity was immediately after the event, and the second was 24 hours later. Analyses of the quantity and accuracy of the details recalled revealed no overall increase in the total amount of information recalled between the first and second recall opportunities. However, on average, 18% of the details recalled by participants in the second test were new and accurate. The incidence of contradictions between the first and second recall opportunities was less than 1%. Surprisingly, none of the effects were influenced by alcohol, even at the highest dose. The results imply that 1) memory for at least some incidents observed under the influence of alcohol is resilient even up to relatively high blood-alcohol levels; and 2) the repeated interviewing of witnesses who were intoxicated at the time of the crime can reveal additional, reliable information that is not present at the initial interview, just as is the case for non-intoxicated witnesses.

KEYWORDS

Alcohol; Eyewitness Memory; Repeated Interviews; Reminiscence

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