

Eye-witness identification

Contributors in clip: Catriona Havard

Clip transcript:

Catriona Havard:

My name's Catriona Havard, I'm a Senior Lecturer in Psychology here at The Open University, and my area of research is eye-witness identification. So the research I've been talking about today is a study where we've looked at what happens when witnesses use Facebook to conduct their own investigations into crimes.

So, the idea for this research came from actually Thames Valley Police. They had a number of incidents where witnesses would basically appear at the police station after witnessing a crime, with a photograph of somebody that they'd found on Facebook, and they've decided that this is the person who's done the crime... this is his name... this is what he looks like, this is where he lives. And the police would have to follow the PACE [Police and Criminal Evidence Act] guidelines and then have to go and follow up the enquiry, take the person in, put them in a line-up – and then obviously that witness would be then asked to come and identify somebody that they've already really decided has committed the crime.

So we decided to construct an experiment where we'd actually look at the effect of using Facebook after you've witnessed a crime to try and conduct your own investigation. And we got our witnesses to come in, view the mock crime, and then a day later they would come in, and they would use a fake Facebook site that we created called "Facefriend", and they would try and find the perpetrator of this crime. And what we found was that if people had seen the 'culprit' in the social media, it had no difference whatsoever on whether they would identify that culprit later on. But if they saw the social media that contained a similar-looking person – that wasn't the culprit – and then they saw a line-up that contained that innocent suspect, they were much more likely to falsely identify that suspect.

Well, the outcome is that the police have to be very careful if a witness appears at a police station already having conducted their own investigation, because the chances are much greater that they will then later identify somebody from a line-up, because they've already kind of decided that is the person. There's another psychological term which we call 'unconscious transference', which is when you recognise a face, but you don't necessarily know where that face came from.