The Testimony of eyewitnesses

Mrs. Sinclair’s jewelry shop was broken into and a few priceless items were stolen? After taking Mrs. Sinclair’s account, the police then canvassed the neighborhood looking for witnesses. Eyewitness testimony is a vital factor in finding the culprits in most criminal cases. Witnesses rely on their memory when they are called upon to testify in court but we now know that memory is very malleable.

It is very easy to manipulate and plant false memories I people’s minds. A study in Psychological Science done with sixty university students proved that it is quite easy to change someone’s memories. Researchers questioned the students for a few sessions and included a false event from the student’s past. This event was a crime that they had committed and even after they were told that it had been made up many refused and felt very guilty about something they had never done.

Many factors such as mood, fatigue and general perception can affect eyewitness testimony. In fact, it is clear that how police question a witness and even present pictures of possible suspects can affect the witness’s memory. Professor Gary Wells, a psychologist, demonstrates how easy it is to fool the eye by presenting suspects in a line up but not including the actual criminal. We are predisposed to choose one person whether the real perpetrator is present in the line up or not.

Now that we know how unreliable memory can be it is clear we need to take this into account when criminal acts are in question. Memory is very easily manipulated and is affected by many aspects but this does not mean that we should overlook eyewitness accounts as they are the first step in identifying suspects. What needs to be done is perhaps address how eyewitnesses are questioned and how the police handle the crimes. Once that happens, the justice system will be more reliable.