

1. FROM FAMILIAR CONTEXTS TO NEW HORIZONS

Eyewitness memory is one of the most widely researched topics in legal psychology. Since the seminal work of icons like Elizabeth Loftus and Gary Wells in the seventies,² this research field has exploded with studies on how people remember events, how witnesses can be misled to remember things that did not happen, and how interviewers can facilitate witness remembering. However, nearly all of this research has been conducted with participants from Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic – or WEIRD – societies, which represent only 12% of the world population.³ Because culture has a profound influence on how people remember and report events,⁴ six years ago I started a research project entitled *Beyond WEIRD Witnesses: Eyewitness Memory in Cross-Cultural Contexts*, which was funded by a Starting Grant from the European Research Council.

The experience of being an eyewitness can be divided into different stages: observing the crime, reporting to the police, and testifying in court. In what follows, I will highlight how culture may shape eyewitness memory at each of these stages.

2 See, for example, the classic car crash experiment (Loftus & Palmer, 1974) and the influential distinction between system and estimator variables in eyewitness memory (Wells, 1978).

3 Henrich et al. (2010). See also more recently Apicella et al. (2020) and Thalmayer et al. (2021).

4 See Wang (2021) for a recent overview.

Before we delve into the research, it is helpful to consider what the word “culture” actually means. Clifford Geertz once said:

“The trouble is that no one is quite sure what culture is. Not only is it an essentially contested concept, like democracy, religion, simplicity, or social justice, it is a multiply defined one, multiply employed, ineradicably imprecise. It is fugitive, unsteady, encyclopedic, and normatively charged, and there are those, especially those for whom only the really real is really real, who think it vacuous altogether, or even dangerous, and would ban it from the serious discourse of serious persons.”⁵

Dylan Drenk’s review of the literature on culture and witness testimony revealed that only six out of 87 publications defined “culture”, and those definitions differed considerably.⁶ To facilitate a shared understanding, I define culture, in line with Marsella and Yamada, as:

“shared learned behavior and meanings that are socially transmitted for purposes of adjustment and adaptation … represented externally in artifacts (e.g. food, clothing, music), roles (e.g. the social formation), and institutions (e.g. family, government)”.⁷

WITNESSING A CRIME

Research in the field of cross-cultural psychology has highlighted cultural differences in how people describe events and tell stories.⁸ People from individualist cultures typically

⁵ Geertz (1999).

⁶ Drenk et al. (2024).

⁷ Marsella and Yamada (2010, p. 105).

⁸ Recent overviews are provided by Wang (2021) and De Bruïne et al. (2023).

provide more detailed, specific, and lengthy descriptions of events than people from collectivist cultures. Further, in a recent commentary, Gabi de Bruïne and I argued that the seven supposedly ‘universal’ sins of memory are not so universal at all.⁹ Culture profoundly shapes memory errors – what fades with time (*transience*), what is noticed or overlooked in the first place (*absentmindedness*), what external details are woven into recollection (*misattribution* and *suggestibility*), how stereotypes colour memories (*bias*), and the impact of trauma (*persistence*). The only memory sin that appears to be universal is *blocking*, or the experience that something is “on the tip of your tongue”. Remarkably, that metaphor – linking memory failure to the tongue or mouth – featured in 45 of the 51 languages examined in one study.¹⁰ My favourite version comes from Korean: “sparkling at the end of my tongue”.

Despite cultural differences in memory, only a few studies to date have looked at eyewitness memory in cross-cultural contexts. In his PhD research, Nkansah Anakwah found that Western European witnesses reported more details about a witnessed event than Sub-Saharan African witnesses.¹¹ Gabi de Bruïne found a similar pattern in her PhD research.¹² Interestingly, however, her African participants were using *more* words to provide *fewer* details. Wondering what they were using their words for, she conducted an exploratory qualitative analysis. She found that African participants spent more time contextualizing the event, for example, highlighting moral

9 Vredeveldt and de Bruïne (2022).

10 Schwartz (1999).

11 Anakwah (2021).

12 De Bruïne et al. (2025).

lessons to be learnt from the witnessing experience. These findings provide unique support for Hall's classic theory on low- and high-context communication cultures,¹³ which holds that people from collectivist cultures (such as most African societies) tend to focus on context and relationships between people. In contrast, people from individualist cultures (such as most Western European societies) tend to focus on the content and 'getting to the point'.

Witnessing a violent crime is likely to be a highly emotional event, but the emotional intensity of such an experience may also be influenced by culture.¹⁴ Events experienced as traumatic in one culture may be seen as an opportunity for growth and resilience in another culture. For instance, the Japanese cultural value of *gaman* refers to enduring hardship with patience and dignity,¹⁵ and Sudanese refugees in Australia tend to face trauma with a focus on moving forward.¹⁶ To examine the interaction between culture and trauma further, Gabi de Bruïne is currently analysing how people from Ghana and the Netherlands describe emotional memories.

In sum, we know that culture influences memory, yet eyewitness research beyond WEIRD societies remains limited. I therefore echo Hope and colleagues' urgent call for more cross-cultural research on eyewitness memory.¹⁷

13 Hall (1976).

14 Vredenveldt et al. (2023).

15 Mangali and David (2018).

16 Savic et al. (2016).

17 Hope et al. (2022).

REPORTING TO THE POLICE

Much research in legal psychology has focused on identifying effective ways to interview witnesses. A substantial evidence base now supports information-gathering methods, which were recently endorsed by the United Nations through the Méndez Principles.¹⁸ In a nutshell, these methods emphasise building rapport with witnesses, encouraging them to tell their own story, asking open-ended questions, and avoiding leading or suggestive questions. Such methods consistently yield more complete and more accurate eyewitness accounts. However, like other psychological research, most studies underpinning these findings have been conducted in WEIRD societies.

To move beyond WEIRD witnesses, Laura Weiss and I qualitatively analysed a field sample of South African police interviews that I collected during my postdoc at the University of Cape Town.¹⁹ This sample included over 100 video-recorded interviews with real eyewitnesses of serious crimes such as armed robbery, rape, and murder. South Africa is one of the most multicultural countries in the world, with 12 official languages, four official racial groups, and many more cultural groups.²⁰ Over 80% of the police interviews in my sample involved interactions between a police officer and a witness from different cultural backgrounds. When I first watched the interviews, it immediately struck me that I had a gold mine of data here to examine cultural differences and cross-cultural

18 Méndez et al. (2021).

19 Vredeveldt et al. (2015).

20 Statistics South Africa (2022).