Does Cognitive Aging Affect Eyewitness Recall and Testimony?

THE psychological science of aging has a long history of serving as the foundation for developing ways to combat or compensate for the effects of cognitive aging, especially for memory changes with aging (Reuter-Lorenz & Park, 2010). There are briefer but established efforts to bring our science to bear on devising age-friendly technologies (Rogers & Fisk, 2010), and accurate assessment of driving ability in older adults (Scialfa, Ference, Boone, Tay, & Hudson, 2010).

In this issue we bring together three articles that focus on a newer and relatively understudied area for the psychological science of aging: older adults interacting with the legal system. In these articles the focus is on how aging affects what is known about cognition and eyewitness testimony (Frenda, Nichols, & Loftus, 2011).

The first article by West suggests that, based on cognitive aging alone, age differences do not contribute to worsened eyewitness accounts. In fact, older adults may be less likely than young adults to interpolate details based on memory enhancement strategies. The second article by Henkel, however, provides evidence that when negative feedback about memory is provided and also with misleading questions, changes in eyewitness accounts are more likely for both age groups. Among older adults, older ages were associated with lower accuracy and more changing of responses. The third article by Dukala and Polczyk adds the effects of an abrupt interviewing style, misleading questions, and negative feedback as factors associated with age differences in inaccurate eyewitness descriptions of what occurred, with older adults more vulnerable to changes rooted in suggestibility. These effects were related to poorer memory rather than advanced age alone.

Clearly, more work is needed in this area. Among other things, the articles call attention to the variety of factors affecting older adults’ eyewitness memory and individual differences among older adults, with a particular focus on problems being related to memory ability rather than chronological age per se. These articles highlight the need to further clarify these effects. They also call attention to the importance of this work being translated into action in the police and court systems so that older eyewitnesses can be interviewed in a manner that increases the probability of obtaining accurate eyewitness accounts and discovering the truth regarding the crime under investigation. Care should be taken to make legal system interviewers aware of potential distortions in eyewitness accounts due to memory changes that are more common in later life while also discouraging the stereotyping of all older adults as less reliable witnesses. There is also the potential to train these interviewers in communication styles that would maximize accuracy.

Bob Knight, PhD
University of Southern California, Davis School of Gerontology, Los Angeles, California

REFERENCES