ABSTRACT

THESIS: The Weapon Focus Effect on Memory for Black versus White Perpetrators

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PAGES: 42

This research examined the effects of weapon focus on memory for Black versus White perpetrators. Male and female participants watched one of six videos depicting a robbery. The videos differed with respect to the object being held (weapon versus neutral object) and the perpetrator’s appearance (White man in neutral attire, Black man in neutral attire, and Black man in stereotypical/hip-hop attire). After watching the video, the participants described the perpetrator’s features and attire by filling out a questionnaire that contained both multiple choice and free recall items. In addition, the participants viewed a target-present lineup and attempted to identify the perpetrator. The standard weapon focus was found. In addition, for correct and incorrect details, significant interactions between the object and the perpetrator’s appearance revealed a larger difference between the object conditions for the White perpetrator than for the Black perpetrator in neutral attire. Furthermore, in the condition in which the Black perpetrator wore stereotypical/hip-hop attire, there was no difference between the object conditions, meaning that the weapon focus effect disappeared. The results supported my hypothesis that, because Black men are stereotypically associated with crime and weapons (Devine & Elliot, 1995) participants would find it less unusual for the Black perpetrator to be holding a weapon than for the White perpetrator to hold one. The results also supported the hypothesis that the
weapon focus effect would be even weaker when the Black perpetrator is wearing clothing that is highly stereotypical for young Black men as opposed to neutral clothing.