The Benefits of a Self-Generated Cue Mnemonic for Timeline Interviewing

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Introduction

Memory is fallible and vulnerable to forgetting, error and omission. To address this challenge in intelligence-gathering contexts, researchers have focused on developing evidence-based techniques to support the retrieval and reporting of accurate and detailed information.

One such technique is the Timeline Technique which facilitates, in particular, the reporting of connections between perpetrators and their actions. Activation Theory posits that memories are part of an associative network and thus remembering a detail triggers remembering related memories.

On the basis of Activation Theory, we tested whether the addition of Self-Generated Cues (SGC) to the Timeline Technique would facilitate memory retrieval under both optimal (full attention) and sub-optimal (divided attention) encoding conditions.

SGC – compared to generic instructions (Mental Reinstatement of Context, MRC) – are distinctive and should thus prompt unique related memories to the exclusion of others.

In this experimental research, we predicted that:

- Interviewees would report more correct information under full than under divided attention at encoding.

- Interviewees using SGC would report more correct information than those using Other-Generated Cues (i.e., MRC) or No Cues.

Experimental design

- 132 participants watched a film of a multi-perpetrator theft and assault under full or divided attention and provided an account.

Self-Generated Cues (SGC) Condition	Other-Generated Cues (MRC) Condition	No Cues (Control) condition
• Write down the first six things that come to mind when you think about the event.	• Think back to when the event took place: • Think about the room. • How were you feeling at the time… (etc.)	• Start reporting directly using the Timeline Technique.

Fig 1. Reporting an event using the timeline with Descriptions (lined cards) and Actions (post-its) across conditions.
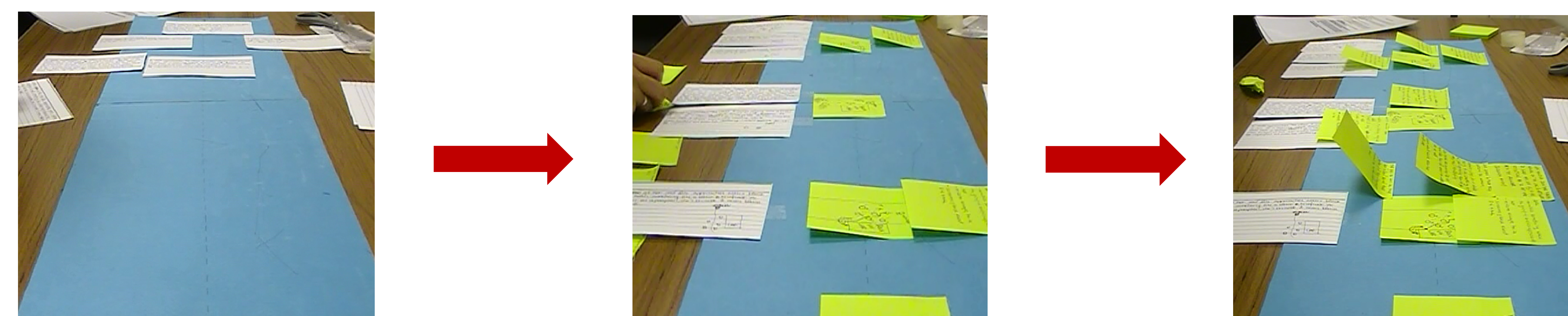
Results

- Mock witnesses in the SGC condition reported significantly more correct details compared to witnesses in MRC and NC conditions, at no cost to accuracy, under optimal encoding conditions only.

Fig 2. Mean number of correct details and errors reported by cues under full attention (FA).

- Regardless of cues, witnesses reported similar amounts of person-action specific details, which show 'who did what' in an event. Thus, the timeline format is useful for the reporting of events involving multiple perpetrators.
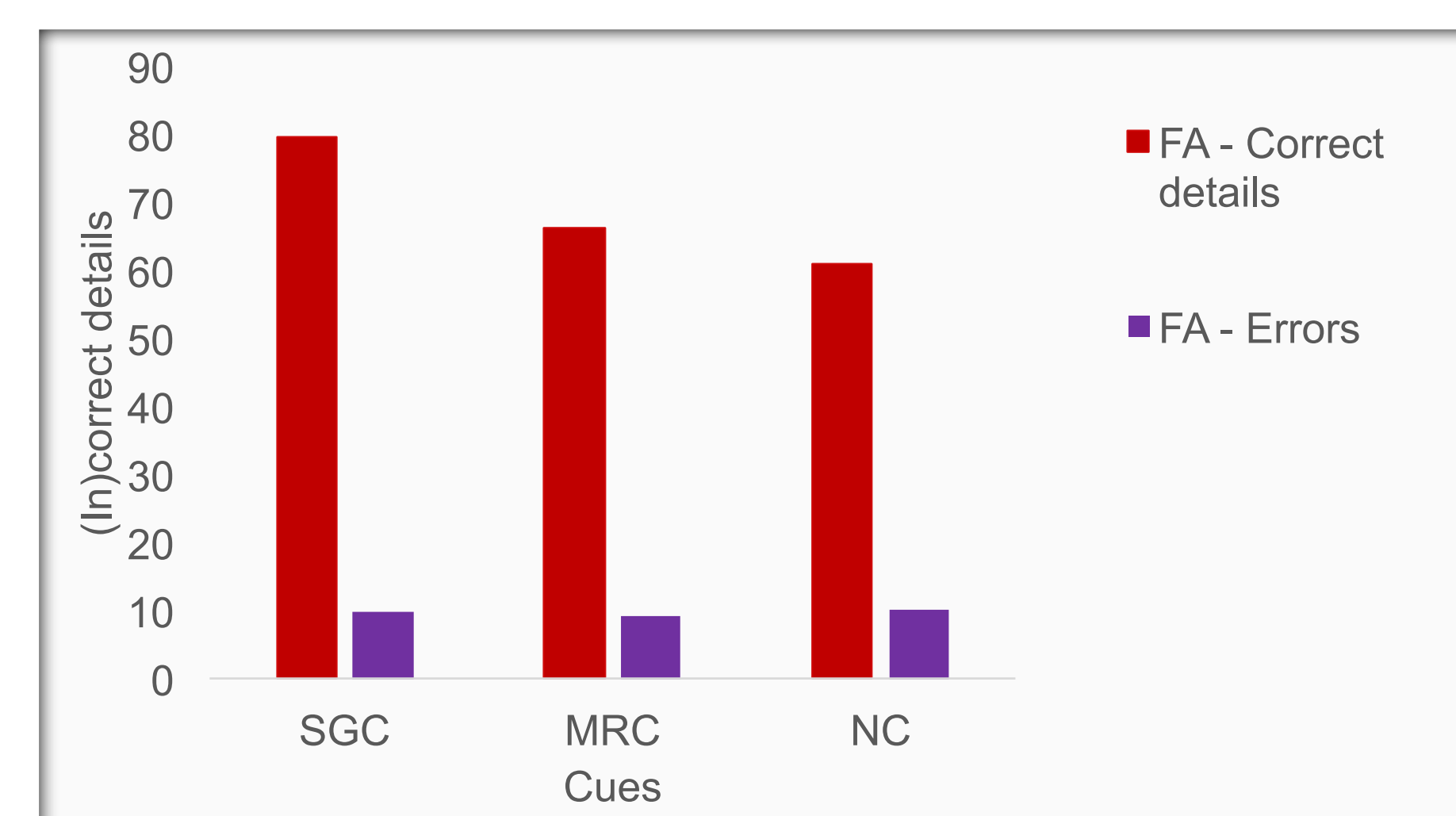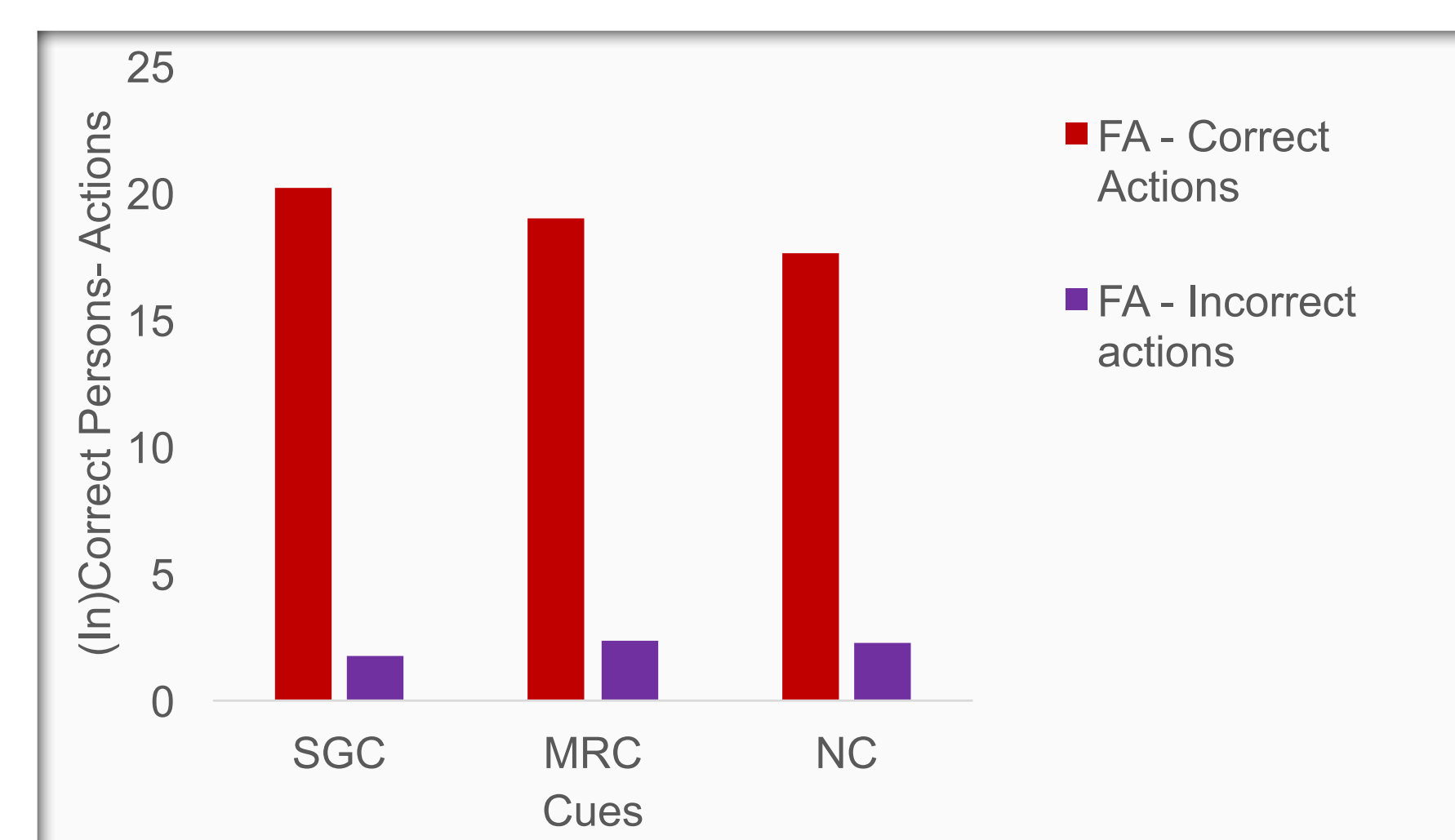

Fig 3. Mean number of correct person-action specific details reported by cues under full attention (FA).

How this research informs techniques for intelligence gathering[1]:

- Administration of SGC is quick and allows for an open-ended interview led by the source instead of the interviewer.

- Combined with the Timeline Technique, Self-Generated Cues elicit more correct details than other cues.

- The Timeline Technique, bolstered by the use of SGC, facilitates the reporting of actions of multiple perpetrators. Thus, this approach can be particularly useful when seeking to obtain information about networks or groups of people.

[1]A manuscript reporting the results of this experiment has been submitted for publication (under review)