Describe and evaluate the cognitive interview as a way of improving the accuracy of eyewitnesses testimony?

Eyewitness testimony is evidence given by witness to a significant event such as a crime or a serious accident.Problems in accuracy of eyewitness testimony can occur at any point of the memory process in acquisition and in storage. Factors decreasing the accuracy of recall in eyewitnesses include anxiety, leading questions and post event discussion. These factors can be minimised using the cognitive interview.

The cognitive interview was discovered by  Fisher and Geiselman in 1992. It is based on the idea that there are several memory retrieval paths to each memory and that the information is not available through one technique but it may be accessible thorough other techniques. The four techniques are based on the psychological insight of how memory works. They are: to recreate the context the original incident; to report every detail; to recall the event in different orders and to change perspectives. Fisher in 1987 created the enhanced cognitive interview in which he created some different elements to the original cognitive interview which focused on the social dynamics of the interaction between the interviewer and the eyewitness. For example, eye contact. Also strategies to reduce anxiety and minimise distractions are used in the enhanced cognitive interview.

Geiselman in 1988 carried out an experiment to show the improvement the cognitive interview makes on eyewitness testimony. He showed 89 students videos of violent crimes. 48 hours later they were interviewed using two different interview techniques. Each was taped and analysed for accuracy. Errors were recorded in two groups: incorrect items and confabulated items. The results showed that people remembered a lot more correct information and less incorrect information  in the cognitive interview. This was a controlled lab study so has high internal validity but has low external validity.

An advantage of the cognitive interview is that there is a lot of evidence to support that it improves eyewitness testimony. Bekerian and Dennett in 1993 carried out a meta-analysis and reviewed 27 studies involving the cognitive interview all studies show it provides more accurate information than other interview techniques. Furthermore, Kohnken in 1999 revised 50 studies and found the enhanced cognitive interview gave the most accurate recall in eyewitnesses. It also has good practical applications such as when interviewing children.

However, the cognitive interview is more time consuming and requires more training which many local police authorities do not have time and resources to use on it. Moreover, Milne and Bull in 2002 found that recalling every detail and context reinstatement produce more accurate recall than other aspects of the cognitive interview. This shows that some aspects are more useful than others. Furthermore, Kohnken in 1999 found an 81% increase of correct information but also a 61% increase of incorrect information showing that the cognitive interview increases the amount of incorrect information recalled as well as correct information. Police forces often evolve their own methods of the cognitive interview so it is difficult to make comparisons between studies. Some studies for example the Geiselman study lack population validity as only American undergraduates were used so sample is biased.

Overall, the cognitive interview is a useful technique used to improve eyewitness testimony however, we still need to be cautious about the accuracy of the eyewitnesses because there evidence still may be fallibly even when the cognitive interview is used.