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ARTICLES

Does type of memory practice matter when interviewing children about a single or repeated event?

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‘when investigative interviewers use practice interviews, child victims/witnesses go on to report more information about the allegations of abuse than children who were interviewed without the use of a practice interview.’

In cases of child sexual abuse, the abuse has often occurred on repeated occasions. For example, in a representative sample of 98 children drawn from over 1000 interviews with child sexual abuse victims in Israel, 42% of the 98 cases involved three or more instances of abuse (Lamb, Sternberg, Esplin, Hershkowitz, Orbach & Hovav, 1997). Children’s reports of repeated events are qualitatively different from their reports of novel, single-experience events (see Roberts & Powell, 2001, for a review). While children who have experienced an event multiple times are highly accurate about details that are always the same, they are less accurate about details that change, and confuse these variable details across occurrences (Powell, Roberts, Ceci, & Hembrooke, 1999). Many techniques are currently being researched to help children

reduce these between-event confusions (e.g., source-monitoring training studies; Poole & Lindsay, 2001; Thierry & Spence, 2002) because when children testify about a repeated event, they may be required to describe one or two instances with a reasonable amount of precision, such as providing time, place, and the actions that occurred, and thus must be able to discriminate within reason among different occasions (Guadagno, Powell & Wright, 2006; *R. v B. (G.)*, 1990; Roberts, 2002; *S v. R.*, 1989).

Additionally, interviewing protocols designed to elicit the most accurate information from children are becoming increasingly more grounded in theoretical frameworks. The protocol developed by researchers at the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD; Orbach, Hershkowitz, Lamb, Sternberg, Esplin, & Horowitz, 2000) enforces the use of invitations and open-ended, non-suggestive questions, aimed at eliciting the most complete accounts from children while preserving accuracy.

Following a short rapport-building phase in which the child becomes comfortable with the interviewer, and prior to the substantive (target) phase, the NICHD protocol recommends a “pre-substantive” phase in which the child and interviewer engage in a discussion of a neutral past event. This phase allows the child to practice responding to

open-ended prompts, using episodic language, and to understand the type of communication that will be expected in the substantive phase (Orbach, et al., 2000).

Although it has been demonstrated that a practice phase in which the child responds to open-ended questioning, versus directed (closed-ended) questioning, is more beneficial in encouraging the child to provide more information during the substantive phase (Sternberg et al., 1997), the practice phase of the protocol has otherwise received little attention. Some recent field data collected by our lab, in conjunction with Heather Price (University of Regina), has demonstrated that an engaging in a practice phase - of any quality - is better than doing no practice at all, and well-conducted practice phases elicit more information from children, while preserving accuracy levels, than poorly conducted practice interviews.

The type of event suggested by the NICHD protocol for practice typically involves a recent past holiday or the child’s last birthday (e.g., Orbach et al., 2000). The aim of the practice phase is to encourage children to exercise episodic memory and language use. Holidays and birthdays, however, are highly scripted events, and leave open the possibility that children could be mixing episodic and scripted details in their narratives. One question that arises from this possibility is whether engaging in episodic or scripted practice in fact affects children’s later substantive narrative.

Recent work in our lab compared the quantity and quality of children’s accounts of a repeated event after the children had engaged in one of three types of practice conditions. In total, 240 children participated; half were 5- to 6-year olds and half were 7- to 8-year olds. Half of the children took part in one 20 minute session (**single-event** group), and the other half in four sessions over a 2-week period (**repeated-event** group), of a laboratory-created event which included activities such as warm-up exercises, listening to a story, doing a puzzle, relaxing and getting refreshed. These activities (‘The Laurier Activities’) were modeled on Powell and Thomson’s (2003) ‘Deakin Activities’. Across sessions of the activities, instantiations of each task (e.g., the *content* of the story) were presented at different frequencies.

Instantiations were *Fixed* (the same every time), *Variable* (changed every time), or ‘*Hi/Lo*’ (the Hi frequency instantiation presented at 3 sessions, the Lo frequency instantiation presented at 1 session).

Five to seven days after the last (or only) session, all children were interviewed using invitations and open-ended questions as per the guidelines of the NICHD protocol (Orbach et al., 2000). Following a short rapport-building phase in which the interviewer asked a few questions about the child (e.g., “tell me about your family”) and his/her interests (e.g., “tell me what you like to do”), children engaged in 5 to 7 minutes of ‘practice’. One-third of the children in the study practiced recalling two specific instances of a repeated event from their daily lives (**incident-specific practice**), and the language used by interviewers was, on average, 92% episodic (past-tense, referring to a specific time, e.g., “tell me what else *happened that day*”). Another third of the children practiced describing what “usually happens” when they engaged in a similar autobiographical repeated event (**script practice**). Open-ended prompts by the interviewer in that condition were, on average, 97% scripted language (timeless present-tense, e.g., “what else do you *do*?”) The final group of children served as a **control** group, and practiced describing a recent novel (i.e., single-experience) event. Interviewers were not given instructions about language use in this condition, but it was by nature quite episodic (94%), as the children were talking about a one-time event from the past. Children’s language use in the practice phase closely mirrored that of the interviewer’s questions; when the open-ended questions were episodic, so were the child’s answers, and when the questions used script language, the children responded in kind.

All children received the same ‘substantive phase’ (i.e., open-ended questioning about the Laurier Activities such as “tell me more” and “what else can you tell me about [detail previously mentioned by child]”). Any children who indicated that the Activities happened more than once were asked to describe a specific instance of the event (i.e., “the time you remember best”). Children were permitted to spontaneously identify the Laurier Activities

as a repeated event. If they did not do so, however, after approximately 5 minutes they were asked whether it happened “one time or more than one time”. As expected, no child with single-event experience disclosed multiple incidents and all were asked at the end of the interview if the Activities happened more than once.

Children were also encouraged to spontaneously generate their own label for the occurrence they described (e.g., the “first time,” the “time with the leaf badge”), however, many children required the help of the interviewer. Interviewers were blind to the particular instantiations that the child had experienced, but tried to choose labels that they thought were unique to an occurrence based on information provided by the child (e.g., the child may have said that they wore a different badge every time, and mentioned having worn a leaf badge). By ‘unique label’ we mean any word or phrase referring to one occurrence only, such as a temporal label (e.g., “the last time”), a variable instantiation (different every time), or a Lo instantiation (only present at one session). Approximately 81% of the labels generated were unique.

Interviews were transcribed and coded for overall amount of ‘forensically-relevant’ information provided (i.e., target details), accuracy, language-use (episodic versus scripted), and references to differences and similarities across sessions (e.g., “every day we had a *different* badge, but we always did the *same* puzzle”). For children with repeated-event experience, accuracy could be coded only for cases in which the label generated for the narrative was unique, by matching the occurrence of the label to the instantiations mentioned by the child.

Results

As mentioned, we gave children the opportunity to tell us whether the Activities they participated in had happened more than once. The NICHD protocol suggests not asking children about multiple incidents until after the child’s initial narrative is exhausted (Orbach, et al., 2000). However, if a child is not asked about multiple incidents, and begins the narrative with a script-like description of the abuse, the child is rehearsing and strengthening the generic

script. Interviewers must be sensitive to the fact that this type of language use *may* be indicative of a repeated event.

We found that children in the incident-specific practice condition were more likely to disclose immediately that there were multiple incidents than children in the script practice condition. For example, in response to the initial prompt “tell me everything you can remember about the Laurier Activities,” many of these children asked the interviewer “which time” they should talk about. Additionally, children in the control condition were more likely to require asking by the interviewer if the Laurier Activities happened more than once because they less often mentioned event frequency. Only one child in the incident-specific practice condition had to be asked. These effects were much stronger for the 5- to 6-year olds, because the older children often disclosed multiple incidents immediately, regardless of the type of practice they had previously engaged in.

When they did not immediately indicate that the Laurier Activities were a repeated event, children who had engaged in incident-specific practice also required fewer prompts from the interviewer than did children in the control condition before they did disclose multiple incidents.

We expected that children with repeated-event experience, in the incident-specific practice condition, would continue to use more episodic language in their substantive narratives than would children in the script practice condition. No effects of practice condition were expected for children with single-event experience (since they only had one experience with the Activities), which is exactly what we found.

For the children with repeated-event experience, on average 88% of the statements made by children in the incident-specific and control conditions, in their substantive accounts, were episodic, which was significantly higher than that of the script practice condition who averaged 66% episodic language. Note that the inverse of this proportion represents the proportion of statements that employed script language.

After examining children’s awareness of event frequency and the style of language used to

deliver their narrative accounts, we wanted to consider how much information children were reporting from the event(s). Overall, we found that 5- to 6-year olds in the incident-specific condition reported just over one-third of the target information which was proportionally more than 5- to 6-year olds in other practice conditions, who reported just under one-quarter. Older children reported more than younger children (about 40%) but did not differ as a function of practice condition. We also found that children with repeated-event experience reported on average 15% more target information than children with single-event experience. In general, this effect was larger for the 7- to 8-year olds. Note that these numbers represent ‘new’ information only, so they do not capture the full range of children’s reports, especially when they experienced the event four times.

In order to have a clearer picture of children’s representation of the entire series of events, we tallied the number of times children mentioned the same detail (which was not re-counted) but indicated that it differed from, or was the same as, other times. Children with single event experience were not coded for these references because it was impossible for them to mention similarities and differences across sessions. We predicted that children in the incident-specific condition would be more likely than children in other conditions to spontaneously make accurate references to differences across sessions of the Laurier Activities (e.g., “each day we wore a different badge”).

We found that older children referred to differences significantly more than did younger children. Analyses again revealed, however, that younger children in the incident-specific condition provided significantly more difference references than younger children in both the control and script practice conditions, while older children did not differ by condition. We also predicted that children in the script practice condition would mention more similarities across sessions, but we found no condition or age differences in the number of similarities reported.

Finally, we examined the overall accuracy of children’s reports. In order to determine whether children were accurate with respect to the instantiations they reported in their narrative,

they had to provide a label for the occurrence they elected to talk about (e.g., “the first time,” “the time I wore a jellybean badge”), and it had to uniquely identify that occurrence. In the script practice condition, younger children were not very successful in achieving a label that could be used to score accuracy. Less than half ($n = 9$) of the 5- to 6-year old children in the script practice condition met the criteria of providing a label and having it be unique to one occurrence.

Children with repeated-event experience, who did provide unique labels, could be assessed for their source-accuracy (i.e., whether they retrieved details from the occurrence referred to in the label). It was predicted that children in the incident-specific practice condition would make fewer source-monitoring errors across occurrences (i.e., intrude details from other occurrences into their reports) than children in the scripted and control practice conditions. In fact, we found little differences in accuracy. Older children correctly attributed 61% of the details they reported to the correct occurrence, while younger children correctly attributed half (51%). The control and incident-specific practice conditions had reports that were, on average, 59% accurate, while the script practice condition delivered reports that were 53% accurate on average, but these differences were not statistically significant. The inverse of these accuracy rates represent *misattributions* of details that actually occurred during one of the other sessions, into the children’s reports of a specific session. They do not represent confabulations, which will be discussed below.

Since the free narratives of children with single-event experience can be made up only of accurate details and confabulations, but not misattributions as above, we assessed the accuracy of children with single-event experience by using a set of Focused Questions at the very end of the interview, to ask about each detail in the session (e.g., “what colour was the cloak the time [child’s label]?”). In general, we found that older children were more accurate (55%) than younger children (44%) in response to these specific questions, and there were no effects of practice condition, as expected.

Confabulations were any details reported about the event(s) that did not occur. Younger

children reported an average of 0.90 (i.e., less than 1) confabulations, which was a significantly greater number than older children who reported an average of 0.47 confabulations. Confabulations per child ranged from 0 to 5. Fifty-eight children (25%) provided one confabulation and 138 (60%) of the children did not provide any. Thus, 15% of our sample made 2 to 5 confabulations. We were interested in knowing whether any of our variables predicted whether or not children would make something up (regardless of how *many* confabulations there were), as we expected that children who participated one time would be more likely to do so, owing to poorer memory for the event. Our analysis demonstrated that in fact, the only significant predictor of whether a child would make a commission error was frequency of participation. Of children who participated one time, 53 (47%) made up at least one detail, while only 39 (33%) children who participated four times did.

Conclusions

The goal of the current study was to determine whether a simple change to procedures already used by many investigators in the field might be useful in eliciting more precise narratives of repeated events from children. Specifically, we were interested in determining whether practice in describing specific instances of a repeated event from their daily lives would benefit children's overall narratives for a target event, regardless of the frequency of the target event (one time or multiple times).

We already know from previous lab-analogue *and* field research that engaging in any type of episodic practice is beneficial, and in fact critical, to enhancing the quality and quantity of information provided by children in interviews. If practice in describing *specific instances of a repeated event* from a child's daily life improves the quality and precision of that child's narrative for a target *repeated* event, and has no negative effects when the event was a single-experience, such a technique could be easily employed by investigators in the field. It does not require that investigators have knowledge of the target event, and rather than being an additional procedure to what an investigator might already do, it simply provides a complement to an interview practice already in place.

One finding of great practical importance to professionals who regularly interview children who have repeated experiences of abuse, is that younger children in the incident-specific practice condition mentioned multiple incidents earlier in the interview than younger children in other conditions, and children of both ages in the incident-specific condition required fewer prompts to disclose that the activities happened more than once. The results showed that roughly two-thirds of the older children in all conditions disclosed immediately, however, it is the younger age group whose testimonies of abuse are the most fragile, and who need more strategies to improve their narratives. These findings are consistent with the assumptions held by researchers who attempt to transfer source-monitoring skills acquired in training to reports of a target event (Poole & Lindsay, 2001; Thierry & Spence, 2002). Children in the incident-specific practice condition were likely able to recognize the commonalities between their autobiographical repeated event and the Laurier Activities, thus realizing that they should talk about both events in the same way.

Younger children in the script condition disclosed later in the interview than children in the incident-specific condition, and younger children in the control condition were more likely to require the interviewer to ask about multiple incidents. These findings suggest that practice in using scripts to describe repeated events encourages continued use of scripts in the substantive phase, and that describing a single-experience event lowers awareness that the interviewer needs to know that the substantive event was a repeated one (if it in fact was).

Children in the incident-specific and control practice conditions continued to use a greater ratio of episodic to scripted language in their substantive narratives than did children in the scripted condition, especially when they had repeated-event experience. Interviewers sensitive to language may potentially notice script-like dialogue when it arises, thereby sensing that the child might be describing a repeated event. However, because there were no differences in the language used by children in the specific and control condition, the previously reported finding is especially

concerning; children in the control condition used as much episodic language as children in the specific condition, which might lead an interviewer to think that they are talking about one time, and many of the control children in fact had to be asked if the Laurier Activities happened more than once. While it is possible that children in the control condition were only describing one occurrence, their source-accuracy score was not higher than other conditions. The alternate explanation is that the children provided a specific, but amalgamated, and therefore inaccurate, account of the Activities, and details provided in that account could be used in later interviews with the child.

As expected, older children reported overall more information than younger children. However, 5- to 6-year olds in the incident-specific condition reported more information than 5- to 6-year olds in the other conditions, even though the total number of words in their narratives did not differ. Thus, incident-specific practice did in fact encourage the younger children in our sample to report more 'forensically relevant' information. Investigators require techniques that are easy to use, and non-suggestive, that enhance the amount of information that young children report. Children's responses to open-ended questions tend to be quite accurate but investigators have the perception that these questions do not encourage enough forensically relevant details in comparison to specific questions (Guadagno, Powell & Wright, 2006), leading them to use more suggestive methods which can be damaging to children's reports (Sternberg, Lamb, Orbach, Esplin & Mitchell, 2001).

Even though younger children in the incident-specific condition provided overall more information than did other younger children, they were equally as accurate at attributing the information they reported to the correct occurrence. Although investigators may be looking for techniques that increase 'accuracy rates,' this finding is nevertheless quite encouraging. Other researchers who study techniques to enhance the amount of information that young children can provide have expressed the concern that acceptable levels of accuracy must be maintained in

balance with increased amounts of information (e.g., Elischberger & Roebbers, 2001). Also encouraging is the finding that there were no condition differences in the rate of confabulations. The only significant finding was that children who participated one time were more likely to make up at least one detail. This research is important in solidifying the finding that children with repeated experiences, although they can be confused about what happened on which occasion, rarely report things that never happened when questioned non-suggestively (Roberts & Powell, 2001).

In conclusion, incident-specific practice appears to benefit younger children more so than older children, although both age groups experienced some benefits over other conditions. Practice in describing two specific incidents of an autobiographical repeated event also had no negative effects on children whose target-event experience only happened one time. This finding is an important one because in practice, investigators sometimes do not have information about how often an abusive event may have occurred.

This type of practice encourages behaviours and recall that would be very relevant to field investigators working with young children who have multiple event experiences, such as; earlier disclosure of multiple incidents, greater recall and more episodic narratives that are also not less accurate, and greater recognition of differences across highly similar repeated events. It is likely that these narratives would appear more credible to blind observers than the narratives of children in the other conditions, because research has shown that children who testify in a confident manner receive higher credibility judgments from mock jurors (Schmidt & Brigham, 1996). Implementation of this procedure (versus standard practice currently in use) could be used in the field and comparisons could be made on most variables (except accuracy) between actual forensic interviews and this analogue study.

In fact, other research in our lab (with Heather Price, University of Regina) has found that when investigative interviewers use practice interviews, child victims/witnesses go on to report more information about the allegations

of abuse than children who were interviewed without the use of a practice interview. The bottom line is that conducting a practice interview is an easy technique for interviewers to use to elicit the most detailed reports from children about events that have happened to them.

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