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Mother knows best? How children weigh their firsthand memories against their mothers' reports

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ABSTRACT

Twenty-five preschoolers and their mothers separately watched versions of a video that, unbeknownst to them, were discrepant in several details. Later, they discussed the events in the video with each other. Some of the discrepancies between the two versions were targeted by discussion questions; other discrepancies were not discussed, but served as control items. During discussion, most discrepant items were disputed, with mothers claiming to have seen one thing and children another. Despite the frequency of such disputes, discussion of discrepant items did not disrupt children's subsequent memory for those items, relative to non-discussed items. Nevertheless, those disputed items that were resolved in favor of the mother were less likely to be remembered accurately.

1. Introduction

Research on mother-child reminiscence has often shown that mothers can influence the content of children's memory for an event, sometimes augmenting and sometimes undermining children's accuracy. Nevertheless, children do sometimes resist maternal claims especially when they conflict with children's own observations. Below, we review evidence documenting mothers' positive and negative influence on children's memory before turning to studies that document children's resistance to maternal influence.

When talking about past events, mothers model how to retrieve memories and recount them (Miller, 1994; Nelson, 1993); they help to put children's experience into a coherent narrative framework (Fivush, Haden, & Adam, 1995; Haden, Haine, & Fivush, 1997), often introducing children to a perspective that differs from their own (Nelson, 1996; Reese & Cleveland, 2006). Especially consistent relationships have been found between the elaborativeness of mothers' talk and the complexity of children's memories with children of more elaborative mothers producing more detailed memories (Farrant & Reese, 2000; Fivush & Vasudeva, 2002; Reese & Cleveland, 2006; Reese, Hayne, & MacDonald, 2008). Experimental work has pinpointed ways in which mothers can have a positive influence on their children's event memory. Clarke-Stewart and Beck (1999) showed a short video to five-year-old children and their mothers and asked half of them to talk about it afterwards. Children given the opportunity to discuss the video with their mothers subsequently provided more accurate recounts to the experimenter than children in the control group. Children's accurate recall of objective actions in the video was related to mothers' having extended exchanges on critical topics, and correcting children's mistakes during discussion of the movie.

However, preschool children are also prone to incorporate misinformation from an adult thereby reducing the accuracy of their recall. Indeed, children sometimes recall misinformation as if they had actually observed the alleged event and even when it conflicts with what they have actually seen (Principe, Cherson, Dipuppo, & Schindelwolf, 2012; Principe, Kanaya, Ceci, & Singh, 2006; Principe, Tinguely, & Dobkowski, 2007). Such misinformation effects occur not just with adult strangers but also when children

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discuss an event with their mothers. Principe, Dipuppo, and Gammel (2013) exposed children aged three to five to a magic show in which the magician failed to conjure a rabbit from his hat. Mothers in the Suggestive Letter condition were subsequently given a letter, which suggested that the trick failed because the rabbit may have gotten loose in the school and asked them to discuss this possibility with their children. In fact, the trick had been failed on purpose and there was no loose rabbit in the school. Children of mothers in this Suggestive Letter condition were likely to report a loose rabbit, to embellish false details about the missing rabbit in line with mothers' suggestions, and even to indicate having seen the rabbit themselves. Moreover, children whose mothers spontaneously used a more elaborative reminiscing style were more acquiescent to their mothers' suggestions of a loose rabbit and provided more fictitious details about the loose rabbit compared to children of less elaborative mothers. Further analysis also indicated that some elaborative mothers were more controlling than others in that they provided more questions and statements consistent with the suggestive letter. Children of these mothers were especially likely to defer to their mothers' suggestions and to report a loose rabbit in a subsequent interview (Principe, 2014).

Some evidence suggests that misinformation effects may be especially likely when children discuss an event with their mother. Ricci, Beal, and Dekle (1996) showed five-year-old children a slide show depicting a theft and then had either the child's mother or an unfamiliar woman interview the child. In response to a misleading question about the identity of the thief, children were more easily misled when the questioner was their own mother. The researchers theorized that children might be especially vulnerable to conforming to mothers' suggestions because their mother is familiar and loved (Ceci & Bruck, 1993; Tate, Warren, & Hess, 1992) and thus children have a strong motivation to please her (Goodman, Ogle, McWilliams, Narr, & Paz-Alonso, 2014; Goodman, Sharma, Thomas, & Considine, 1995).

Taken together, these various studies indicate that mothers can have a substantial impact on children's memory, both increasing and reducing the accuracy of children's memory, depending on the nature of the information offered. However, other studies suggest that children are not especially susceptible to maternal influence. Fivush (1994) asked preschool-aged children (tested at 40, 46, 58 and 70 months) to recount events that they and their mothers had experienced, first to their mothers and later to a female experimenter. At each time point sampled, only 9% of the information that children told to experimenters was derived from what their mothers had told them about the events at earlier session. Furthermore, in contrast to the findings reported above by Ricci et al. (1996), two studies of four-year-old children found that children were more misled by an unfamiliar experimenter's misleading questions than by their mothers' (Goodman et al., 1995; Jackson & Crockenberg, 1998). Jackson and Crockenberg posited that children may be accustomed to contradicting their parents in the course of everyday conversation, which would give them confidence to do so during the interview.

Further evidence that children do not always defer to adult input has emerged from findings on children's selective trust (Sobel & Kushnir, 2013). In one study, 5-year-olds heard their mother and an unfamiliar adult categorize a series of hybrid entities differently (Corriveau et al., 2009). For example, their mother might say that a hybrid animal was a horse whereas the stranger might say that it was a cow. When the perceptual features of the hybrid were equally compatible with either categorization, children tended to endorse their mother's categorization rather than the stranger's. However, when the majority of the hybrid's perceptual features were compatible with the stranger's categorization but not the mother's, children were less likely to endorse their mother's categorization. Thus, children were prone to reject their mother's testimony when it was largely inconsistent with the available perceptual evidence (Harris, 2012).

The goal of the present study was to examine how preschool children respond to information reported by their mother when it conflicts with what they have observed for themselves – do they take up that information or do they stick with what they have observed? More specifically, in the context of discussion with their mothers, would children insist on what they had seen themselves or defer to mothers' suggestions? We also asked if such discussion would impact children's subsequent memory for the events in question. To assess the impact of discussion, we included discrepant items that children did not discuss with their mother – these served as control items.

In order to mimic the real-world circumstance in which two people view and remember an event differently, we adapted a method from a study of adults (French, Garry, & Mori, 2008). In that study, adult pairs were shown versions of the same event that were – unbeknownst to them – slightly discrepant from each other. The experimenters then asked participant pairs to answer questions about what they had seen, requesting, for each question, that they agree on one answer to submit jointly. Participants' subsequent memory for non-discussed items proved more accurate than for discussed items, evidence that discussion with an (unwittingly) misleading informant had the expected effect of reducing accuracy. This difference emerged for both stranger pairs and romantic couples although the effect of discussion was more marked for romantic couples. Interestingly, even members of couples who refused to agree with their partners during the discussion sometimes used their partner's answer on the independent recall test.

In the present study, mother and child dyads watched video versions of an event that, unbeknownst to them, were discrepant in several details. After an initial memory check conducted separately with mother and child, dyads collaboratively discussed and answered questions about the video event, echoing the procedure adopted by French et al. (2008). Most of these questions targeted similarities between the two versions but several questions targeted selected discrepancies. The ensuing discussions between mother and child were coded to determine whose version of the event was accepted. In particular, we asked how often children deferred to their mother when a dispute arose. Other discrepancies between the two versions were not targeted for mother-child discussion and served as control items. After this joint discussion of the video event, children's memories for the video event were independently assessed and this assessment was repeated several days later. We asked whether the accuracy of children's memory for discrepant items differed depending on whether they had been discussed with their mother or not, and also on whether, in the case of discussed items, children deferred to their mother.

In line with the findings reported by French et al. (2008) for couples in a close relationship, we anticipated that children would be