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Effects of mothers' conversation style and receipt of misinformation on children's event reports[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Can memory sharing conversations with mothers lead to errors in children's event memory when mothers are exposed to misinformation about what their children experienced and does this effect vary as a function of maternal memory-sharing style? Mothers were exposed to a false suggestion about a non-shared event and then discussed that event with their children. When later interviewed, those children whose mothers were provided this misinformation were likely to wrongly report experiencing activities consistent with the maternal suggestion and embellish their reports of these activities with elaborative detail. Moreover, children whose mothers spoke in a highly elaborative manner were more likely to recall occurrences in line with the maternal suggestion and provided more fictitious narrative detail describing non-occurring-but-suggested information than did children whose mothers used a less elaborative style. These findings suggest that when mothers hold false beliefs about a non-shared event, an elaborative maternal style is associated with an increase in children's false reports reflecting maternal beliefs.

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Young children frequently share their memories with others. Research exploring the mnemonic consequences of such exchanges has produced two separate literatures. First, studies of mother–child memory sharing have documented how these interactions provide children a narrative structure for formulating and retrieving personal memories while teaching them to relate their experiences in socially-valued ways (Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 2006; Ornstein, Haden, & Hedrick, 2004). Much of this work has focused on the role of maternal conversational style in effecting developmental changes in children's autobiographical narrative skills. Second, investigations of suggestibility have shown that discussions about the past can change how children remember specific events, especially when conversational partners differ in their beliefs about what happened. For instance, talking with peers who experienced a different version of the same event (Candel, Memon, & Al-Harazi, 2007; Principe & Ceci, 2002), overheard false information about a shared experience (Principe, Kanaya, Ceci, & Singh, 2006; Principe, Cherson, DiPuppo, & Schindewolf, 2012), or generated errant inferences about the past (Principe, Guiliano, & Root, 2008) can lead children to mistakenly recall occurrences experienced only by their conversational partners. The purpose of the present study is to expand the scope of research on mother–child memory sharing by examining whether post-event discussions with mothers can be a source of report contamination when mothers' beliefs about the past differ from their children's experiences and whether these effects vary as a function of maternal style.

Prior research shows that mothers vary along a continuum of elaborativeness in conversational style when sharing memories with their children (Fivush et al., 2006; Ornstein et al., 2004). In contrast to low-elaborative mothers, high-elaborative mothers ask many open-ended *wh*- questions, closed-ended yes/no questions, and statements adding new information about the event, and they offer frequent confirmations and praise of children's contributions. These differences in mothers' approaches are associated, both concurrently and longitudinally, with preschool children's skills in reporting memories. Children whose mothers engage them in highly elaborative reminiscing report memories in a more elaborate and narratively coherent manner than those whose mothers use a low-elaborative style (McCabe & Peterson, 1991; Reese & Fivush, 1993). These tendencies persist when children are asked to recall to individuals other than their mothers (Conroy & Salmon, 2006; Haden, Haine, & Fivush, 1997) and for events that they have experienced independently (Hudson, 1993; Leichtman, Pillemer, Wang, Koreishi, & Han, 2000).

Given their focus on children's autobiographical narrative skills, researchers studying mother–child reminiscing generally have not been concerned with the consequences of such interactions on the accuracy of children's recollections of events. The events studied are usually undocumented occurrences reported by mothers (Reese & Newcombe, 2007) and therefore do not permit objective assessments of children's accuracy. The few investigations of mother–child reminiscing involving verifiable events link a high-elaborative maternal style with an increase in the amount of accurate information children later report (Cleveland, Reese, & Grolnick, 2007; Leichtman et al., 2000).

Although a high-elaborative style may support children's abilities to describe experienced details, there are indications that maternal elaborateness may also be associated with increased inaccuracies in children's reports. Research demonstrates that mothers who are more elaborative and evaluative when reminiscing most often discuss the past for social purposes, such as to entertain or interact with their children, rather than to elicit children's recall of specific aspects of experience (Kulkofsky, Wang, & Koh, 2009). This focus on the social functions of memory sharing may lead high elaborative mothers to place less emphasis on the accuracy of children's recollections than mothers who use a less elaborative style (Fivush & Reese, 1992). Through this de-emphasis of accuracy, children of high-elaborative mothers may learn that embellishing the past to tell a more entertaining story better fulfills the goals of conversational remembering than relaying events accurately. Further, studies examining children's recall of staged events show that narrative volume is associated with increased inaccuracy (Kulkofsky & Klemfuss, 2008; Kulkofsky, Wang, & Ceci, 2008), suggesting that more narratively adept children focus more on elaborating or even embellishing than on relaying experiences precisely. Related work demonstrates that children produce less accurate narratives when they relay memories for social or

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