Journal of Experimental Child Psychology 107 (2010) 407–422

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Experimental Child Psychology

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jecp

False rumors and true belief: Memory processes underlying children's errant reports of rumored events

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 17 November 2009
Revised 18 May 2010
Available online 13 July 2010

Keywords:
Memory
Suggestibility
Rumor
Children
Source monitoring
Eyewitness testimony

ABSTRACT

Previous research has shown that overhearing an errant rumor—either from an adult or from peers—about an earlier experience can lead children to make detailed false reports. This study investigates the extent to which such accounts are driven by changes in children's memory representations or merely social demands that encourage the reporting of rumored information. This was accomplished by (a) using a warning manipulation that eliminated social pressures to report an earlier heard rumor and (b) examining the qualitative characteristics of children's false narratives of a rumored-but-nonexperienced event. Findings indicated that overheard rumors can induce sensory and contextual characteristics in memory that can lead children to develop genuine false beliefs in seeing rumored-but-nonexperienced occurrences. Such constructive tendencies were especially likely among 3- and 4-year-olds (relative to 5- and 6-year-olds) and when rumors were picked up from peers during natural social interactions (relative to when they were planted by an adult).

Introduction

Several decades of research on memory and suggestibility have established that children's reports of their experiences can be contaminated by errant postevent information contained in a range of sources such as cowitness reports (e.g., Candel, Memon, & Al-Harazi, 2007; Principe & Ceci, 2002), storybooks (Poole & Lindsay, 2001, 2002), and interview questions (e.g., Bruck, Ceci, & Hembrooke, 2002; Roberts & Powell, 2006). A growing body of work shows that rumors also can taint children's accounts of the past, inducing high levels of false reports of rumored-but-nonexperienced events.

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doi:10.1016/j.jecp.2010.05.007

For instance, Principe, Kanaya, Ceci, and Singh (2006) had some preschoolers within the same classrooms overhear an adult allege a fictitious rumor that a certain event had occurred in their school. The remaining children in each classroom did not overhear the adult but instead interacted freely with their classmates who did. A third group of children, who had no contact with the first two groups, actually experienced the event suggested by the rumor. When questioned later, those children who were exposed to the rumor, either directly from the adult or second-hand from their classmates, were as likely to report experiencing the rumored occurrence as those who actually did. Furthermore, most reports of the rumored event were generated by open-ended prompts and embellished with rich elaborative detail. Related studies have demonstrated that rumors that conflict with the past (Principe, Tinguely, & Dobkowski, 2007) and rumors generated by children's own inferences (Principe, Guiliano, & Root, 2008) also can engender high levels of elaborate false accounts.

These findings of the potency of rumor notwithstanding, existing experiments have not explored the extent to which false claims following rumor are driven by a genuine belief that the rumored information was seen. In addition to its theoretical significance, this issue is relevant to discussions of children's testimony. If rumor can bring about errant beliefs about witnessing events that were only overheard, there is little that forensic interviewers can do to mitigate its effects. In contrast, if reports of rumored occurrences are driven merely by compliance to social pressures, such effects may be reduced by protocols that enhance the retrieval and reporting of information in memory such as the Revised Cognitive Interview and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Investigative Interview (see Larsson & Lamb, 2009). The primary aim of the current study, therefore, was to examine the degree to which reports of rumored-but-nonexperienced events occur because children have come to believe that they have seen the suggested occurrences or simply reflect social demands to relay overheard information. Given the marked improvements made in source monitoring (Lindsay, Johnson, & Kwon, 1991; Roberts, 2002) and resistance to postevent misinformation (Bruck & Ceci, 1999; Holliday, Reyna, & Hayes, 2002) during the preschool years, a second aim was to explore whether older children (5- and 6-year-olds) are more resistant than younger children (3- and 4-year-olds) to developing beliefs that they have seen occurrences that were only rumored.

The issue of whether postevent misinformation can bring about genuine memories of seeing nonexperienced events has been examined in varied suggestive contexts such as misleading statements posed by interviewers (Leichtman & Ceci, 1995), storybooks read by parents (Poole & Lindsay, 2001, 2002), and interactions with cowitnesses (Principe & Ceci, 2002). In general, this work has probed children for the source of their memories of suggested events. For instance, Principe and Ceci (2002) asked children who recalled events seen only by their classmates whether they themselves had *seen* these occurrences take place or merely had *heard* about them from someone else. When charged with this question, some children reported only hearing about the occurrences, but others claimed seeing them with their own eyes. Similarly, when Leichtman and Ceci (1995) asked children who reported events suggested in earlier interviews whether they had seen or heard about the events, some maintained they had seen them. Principe and colleagues (2006) found the same trend among children who reported rumored occurrences. In addition to these demonstrations that postevent suggestions can lead to claims of seeing nonexperienced events, there is also evidence that younger children are especially susceptible to making such false claims. Specifically, both Poole and Lindsay (2001) and Leichtman and Ceci (1995) found that 3- and 4-year-olds were more likely than older children to recall seeing suggested events.

Reports of seeing, however, do not establish conclusively that children have come to believe they witnessed events that were only suggested. Considering the tendency to assume that information exchanged during everyday interactions is accurate (see Grice, 1975), children may presume that most postevent suggestions are true. Consequently, even children who can correctly identify the source of the suggestions nonetheless may report seeing them merely to demonstrate their knowledge of everything they believed happened (for a similar account in the misinformation paradigm, see McCloskey & Zaragoza, 1985).

To preclude such demand characteristic interpretations, Lindsay (1990) developed a warning procedure that puts the tendency to report postevent suggestions in opposition to the ability to remember their source. Lindsay's participants heard a narrative that contained false suggestions about an earlier seen slide sequence. When later questioned about the slides, participants who were warned that any information in the narrative was wrong (i.e., "There is no question on this test for which