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Natural conversations as a source of false memories in children: Implications for the testimony of young witnesses

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ABSTRACT

Research on factors that can affect the accuracy of children's autobiographical remembering has important implications for understanding the abilities of young witnesses to provide legal testimony. In this article, we review our own recent research on one factor that has much potential to induce errors in children's event recall, namely natural memory sharing conversations with peers and parents. Our studies provide compelling evidence that not only can the content of conversations about the past intrude into later memory but that such exchanges can prompt the generation of entirely false narratives that are more detailed than true accounts of experienced events. Further, our work show that deeper and more creative participation in memory sharing dialogues can boost the damaging effects of conversationally conveyed misinformation. Implications of this collection of findings for children's testimony are discussed.

Introduction

Perhaps only one simple and straightforward claim can be made about the accuracy of children's testimony: not all statements made by children are true. Admittedly, exact accuracy is not the usual goal of memory in everyday life. Most autobiographical remembering is carried out for social purposes, such as to build bonds and foster connectedness with friends and family (see e.g., Nelson, 1993), and can serve these functions even when recollections do not precisely represent the past. In

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fact, many everyday situations encourage some degree of unfaithfulness. Exaggerated, improvised, or even fabricated stories can be more engaging or more amusing to conversational partners than veridical reports. These tendencies to embellish personal experiences may be especially pronounced at young ages given children's proclivity for pretense and adults' willingness to play along. To illustrate, only young children can get away with fantastic stories of a fairy who gives prizes for baby teeth or a monster that lives under the bed (see e.g., Principe & Smith, 2007).

Against this backdrop of memory in everyday life, the courtroom is a rather unusual setting for children's remembering. In the real world, accounts of personal experiences are successful to the extent that they are relayed in a compelling or affecting manner. In the legal system, precise accuracy is the goal. Remembering is successful to the degree that witnesses "tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." Forensic settings, therefore, put unique demands on memory that are at odds with the way that recollections of the past typically are used. This contrast notwithstanding, because many criminal offenses that bring children to court, such as sexual abuse and other forms of molestation, lack other witnesses or corroborating evidence, children's testimony often serves as the sole piece of evidence against criminal defendants. Likewise, children's memories impact many civil and family court cases. For example, children's accounts of parental transgressions, such as domestic violence and substance abuse, as well as more mundane events, such as daily home routines, commonly play a role in custody, support, and visitation decisions. Considering the centrality of children's testimony in many legal situations, research on factors that can compromise children's abilities to provide accurate accounts of the past has considerable relevance to forensic professionals and fact finders.

Given that children's testimony is elicited in interviews, many investigators have focused on the mnemonic effects of various suggestive features of interviews. This voluminous literature has revealed that a range of factors, such as types of questions asked, the sorts of ancillary aids used, and the characteristics of interviewers, can seriously derail children's accuracy and even lead to entirely false accounts (see Bruck, Ceci, & Hembrooke, 2002, for a review). Despite the significance of this work for developing effective interviewing protocols, researchers have become increasingly concerned with examining suggestive factors outside of the formal interview context that also can contaminate memory. This move to exploring extra-interview factors has been prompted by findings that even when children are interviewed under optimally nonsuggestive conditions, some nonetheless relay fabricated stories in line with suggestions encountered from other sources, such as parents (Poole & Lindsay, 2002) and television (Principe, Ornstein, Baker-ward, & Gordon, 2000).

In everyday life, one common way to encounter suggestions is during memory sharing conversations with others. A compelling reason for focusing on conversational forms of suggestion concerns the social nature of autobiographical memory. Sharing memories through conversations with friends and family members is a typical and frequent part of children's everyday social interactions. During such exchanges, however, children constantly are encountering others' versions of the past. Different versions can arise unwittingly when conversational partners misremember what happened, but also can occur when they purposefully exaggerate or even fabricate details to tell, say, a more glamorous story than give a precisely accurate account. Given that memory is constructive (Bartlett, 1932), it is within this realm that bits and pieces of the suggestions and stories told by others may find their way into children's recollections of their experiences.

Emphasizing the social nature of remembering are theories of collective memory (e.g., Hirst & Manier, 2008; Reese & Fivush, 2008) that characterize memories of shared experiences as dynamic representations that are shaped by group conversational processes. In this framework, as memories of the past are reconstructed within a group, its members negotiate a collective version of experience. Consequently, individual representations are revised to become progressively alike among group members (see Harris, Paterson, & Kemp, 2008). However, when misinformation is introduced into group remembering, either deliberately by a confederate (Meade & Roediger, 2002) or unknowingly by a group member who experienced a slightly different version of the event (Gabbert, Memon, & Allan, 2003), individuals are prone to later recall occurrences that were nonexperienced but merely suggested by their conversational partners.

The practical importance of studies of conversational sharing for discussions of children's testimony comes from real world examples demonstrating that witnesses often talk with one another.