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Research article

The effects of implicit encouragement and the putative confession on children's memory reports

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ABSTRACT

The current study tested the effects of two interview techniques on children's report productivity and accuracy following exposure to suggestion: implicit encouragement (backchanneling, use of children's names) and the putative confession (telling children that a suspect "told me everything that happened and wants you to tell the truth"). One hundred and forty-three, 3–8-year-old children participated in a classroom event. One week later, they took part in a highly suggestive conversation about the event and then a mock forensic interview in which the two techniques were experimentally manipulated. Greater use of implicit encouragement led to increases, with age, in children's narrative productivity. Neither technique improved or reduced children's accuracy. No increases in errors about previously suggested information were evident when children received either technique. Implications for the use of these techniques in child forensic interviews are discussed.

1. Introduction

Children are routinely called upon in a range of environments—at home, in school, in their communities, and even in legal settings—to talk about events that they experienced or witnessed. In legal contexts, these events may be emotionally charged, as in instances of maltreatment or witnessing violence, and the information children report may have significant consequences for children, families, and the pursuit of justice. It is therefore imperative that children are questioned in a manner that maximizes the completeness and accuracy of their reports.

During the past several decades, a large and highly influential body of work has emerged testing the effects of different question forms on children's response tendencies (Brubacher, Powell, & Roberts, 2014; Poole, 2016). Results have demonstrated the harmful effects of closed-ended and suggestive questions and the superiority of free-recall prompts in minimizing commission errors and encouraging accurate responding. A recurring challenge with free-recall prompts, however, is that children's responses are often insufficient, and fewer studies have addressed how children's recall reports can be enhanced without compromising accuracy, particularly in situations in which children have already been exposed to suggestion. In the present study, we systematically tested the effects of two techniques—implicit encouragement (back-channel utterances such as "uh-huh" and "oh ok" and children's names) and the putative confession (telling children that a suspect "told me everything that happened and wants you to tell the truth")—on children's report completeness and accuracy. Specifically, we examined whether the two techniques directly and interactively, and in

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conjunction with age, influenced children's memory reports of a prior school event, particularly under conditions that involved previous exposure to high levels of suggestion about positive and negative details of the event.

2. Implicit encouragement

We use the phrase implicit encouragement to refer to linguistic and paralinguistic behaviors used by interactional partners in dyadic exchanges that implicitly communicate interest in the partner's contribution. Implicit encouragement is distinguished from explicit encouragement, in which interest is communicated directly (e.g., "you are telling very well"). Behaviors of primary interest here include back-channel utterances and vocatives. Back-channel utterances are brief, often non-lexical expressions (e.g., uh-huh, mm-hmm) that implicitly communicate to a conversational partner that a listener is paying attention, interested, and would like the speaker to continue (Duncan, 1975; Peterson, Jesso, & McCabe, 1999). Also referred to as "response tokens" (Gardner, 2001; McCarthy, 2003) or "facilitators" (Hershkowitz, 2002), back-channel utterances are prevalent in everyday conversations and have been found to be beneficial in a range of contexts, including interpersonal communication, education, and linguistics (Duncan, 1975; Krauss, Garlock, Bricker, & McMahon, 1977; Myers & Macnaghten, 1999; Roger & Schumacher, 1983; Tolins & Tree, 2014; Wannaruk, 1997). For instance, in classrooms, children produce longer responses when teachers include back-channel utterances that acknowledge what children said (e.g., oh really, uh-huh) than when teachers ask follow-up, yes/no or wh-questions to request further details (Dillon, 1985). Also, children provide more elaborate narratives in conversations with parents who include a higher number of back-channel utterances (Peterson et al., 1999). Finally, the use of back-channel utterances with high-risk populations (e.g., learning disabled, low-income) improves basic language and narrative competence (Miller, Lechner, & Rugs, 1985; Peterson et al., 1999).

Vocatives, another linguistic technique explored in the present study, refer to words or phrases that are "recognized as having a social function of expressing participant relationships along with that of summoning or attention-getting" (McCarthy & O'Keeffe, 2003). One of the most common vocatives in dyadic interactions is the use of a conversational partner's name. Theoretically, vocatives, especially name use, may enhance children's productivity and accuracy by increasing children's feelings of familiarity with an interviewer, thereby providing elements of support (Poole, Brubacher, & Dickinson, 2015), and by eliciting children's attention, thereby keeping children engaged and on task.

Observational research of children questioned about sexual and physical abuse provides some evidence that implicit encouragement increases children's productivity. Back-channel utterances have been associated with children providing a greater amount of abuse-relevant details in forensic interviews, particularly when paired with recall questions (Hershkowitz, 2002; Lamb, Hershkowitz, Sternberg, Boat, & Everson, 1996). Hershkowitz (2009) coded a host of interviewer behaviors in forensic interviews with suspected victims as being indicative of interviewer-provided support. Included in these behaviors was an interviewer's use of the child's name. Greater support was associated with increases in the amount of information that 7–9-year-olds produced in their recall reports about abuse. Of interest, similar benefits were not found among younger (e.g., 4–6-year-old) children.

Although these results are promising, several important questions remain about the precise effects of implicit encouragement on children's reporting. First, one should be careful in distinguishing between implicit and explicit encouragement. Hershkowitz's (2009) definition of interviewer-provided support included not only name use but also "neutral reinforcements" (e.g., "You are doing just fine/you are telling very well/you really help me understand"). Although Hershkowitz (2009) was careful to exclude reinforcement of specific content (e.g., "Good that you ran away in time"), neutral reinforcements also might be construed as suggestive, and in any event should be separately analyzed.

A second question concerns whether age differences exist in the effects of implicit encouragement. As mentioned, Hershkowitz found that support was more beneficial to older than younger children. This perhaps resulted from older children's more developed linguistic abilities, meta-awareness, and theory-of-mind capacity, which may have helped them recognize that interviewers were implicitly asking for further details (Ardila & Rosselli, 1994; Elbro, 1996; Fowler, 1991; Rochat, 2003; See Flavell, 2004). On the other hand, implicit encouragement might actually be of greater benefit to younger children (e.g., 3–5-year-olds), who need more support in staying focused and engaging in memory and reporting tasks (Fivush & Hamond, 1990; Hudson, 1990; Mandler, 1990). Developmental differences in the potential effects of implicit encouragement need to be tested directly.

A third question concerns that of causality. Specifically, in correlational and field research, which has at times directly coded for implicit encouragement, it is often unclear whether back-channel utterances or other encouragements increase children's productivity or whether productive children elicit more encouragements from conversational partners. Hints relevant to the former interpretation stem from experimental investigations of the effects of interviewer-provided social support on children's memory and suggestibility. In these studies, implicit encouragement was neither coded nor mentioned, although high support behaviors may well have included greater provision of back-channeling, for instance, in the form of nods of encouragement while children were speaking. The provision of support did not consistently increase productivity, but it did consistently enhance accuracy, most often by decreasing errors and suggestibility (see Bottoms, Quas, & Davis, 2007; Saywitz, Goodman, & Lyon, 2002, for reviews). By systematically varying implicit encouragement specifically, the question of directionality can be addressed directly.

A fourth and related question concerns whether implicit encouragement affects the accuracy of the information children provide. In field investigations, within which positive associations between implicit encouragement and productivity have been noted, accuracy is unknown. Thus, the increase in productivity could be coming at a cost. Perhaps, for instance, back-channeling encourages children to produce more information even when they cannot remember additional details, leading to increased errors, especially when children have been exposed to suggested details. On the other hand, back-channeling may increase accuracy by helping children to focus on an interviewer's questions. Back-channeling and the use of children's names also may act as general support, which as mentioned, reduces children's errors (Davis & Bottoms, 2002; Milojevich & Quas, 2017; Saywitz et al., 2002). Overall, the