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Child Abuse & Neglect

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

Research article

Suggestibility in neglected children: The influence of intelligence, language, and social skills



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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Suggestibility
Children
Child neglect
Maltreatment
Memory

ABSTRACT

We administered the GSS-2, a standardised measure of suggestibility, to 5- to 12-year-old children to ascertain whether neglected children's responses to leading questions distinguish them from those of their non-neglected counterparts. Neglected children ($n = 75$) were more likely than an age-matched sample of non-neglected children ($n = 75$) to yield to leading questions, despite no difference in their ability to recall the test stimuli. Subsequent collection of individual difference data from the neglected sample revealed that this effect could not be attributed to intelligence, language ability, problem behaviours, age at onset of neglect, or time spent in out-of-home care. With respect to social skill, however, suggestibility was positively correlated with communicative skill, and marginally positively correlated with assertion and engagement. While on the surface our social skills findings seem counter-intuitive, it is possible that maltreated children with relative strengths in these areas have learned to comply with adults in their environment as a way to protect themselves or even foster belonging. Our data, while preliminary, raise interesting questions about whether targeted interventions could help these children to more actively participate in decisions about their lives.

1. Introduction

Child maltreatment refers to acts that result in actual or potential harm to a child's survival, health, development, or dignity within the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust, or power (World Health Organization, 1999). Child maltreatment can involve acts of commission (e.g., sexual, physical, or emotional abuse) or omission (e.g., neglect; Horwath, 2007), and these various forms of child maltreatment often co-occur (Claussen & Crittenden, 1991). Children who have been maltreated are predisposed to a number of negative outcomes, including deficits in general intellectual functioning (Crozier & Barth, 2005), compromised language development (Law & Conway, 1992; Lum, Powell, Timms, & Snow, 2015), low social skills (Holosko, 2015) and a range of high and low-prevalence mental health problems across the life-span (Geoffroy, Pinto Pereira, Li, & Power, 2016; Greger, Myhre, Lydersen, & Jozefiak, 2015; Spataro, Mullen, Burgess, Wells, & Moss, 2004).

Maltreated children come into contact with a wide assortment of service providers, ranging from health professionals to child

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2018.01.005>

Received 28 June 2017; Accepted 5 January 2018

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protection agencies to the courts (Goldman, Salus, Wolcott, & Kennedy, 2003). In these contexts, children's accounts are likely to inform high-stakes decisions—about care and custody, about protection, or about justice administration. Maltreated children are likely to have unique perspectives that can make a fundamental contribution to decision-making; they might even be the only source of information about alleged events under consideration. For this reason, it is vital that these children are supported to give information that accurately reflects their experiences and viewpoints. Without that support, children could be disadvantaged by the very systems that are designed to act in their best interests.

Decades of research have established that the quality of information that children provide in an interview setting depends largely on the types of questions they are asked (Blandon-Gitlin & Pezdek, 2009; Feltis, Powell, Snow, & Hughes-Scholes, 2010; Gagnon & Cyr, 2017; Powell & Guadagno, 2008). In particular, any interview question that could direct the child towards a particular response (e.g., “is it true that he had a gun?”) has the potential to contaminate that child's report. The more strongly the interviewer's questions suggest a particular response, the more likely children are to provide details that are consistent with that expectation (e.g. Garven, Wood, Malpass, & Shaw, 1998). This suggestibility can occur either because the child believes that the interviewer must be correct, or because the child agrees with the interviewer despite having a belief or knowledge to the contrary (Bruck & Melnyk, 2004).

Although the effect of suggestion on children's reports is a robust one, there is nonetheless some variation in the way that children respond to the same types of questions (Bruck, Ceci, & Melnyk, 1997)—a finding that has led researchers to seek out the individual correlates of suggestibility. Age appears to be the most important of these correlates (for a review, see Ceci & Bruck, 1993), however there are considerable individual differences in suggestibility even among children of the same age (Chae & Ceci, 2005). That is, other characteristics are likely to play a significant role in children's capability to remember events in detail, to understand the questions posed to them, and to provide coherent and reliable narratives. Certainly, individual difference characteristics other than age may affect the degree to which children succumb to suggestive influences during an interview (see Bruck & Melnyk, 2004, for a review)—these characteristics include language ability (e.g., Clarke-Stewart, Malloy, & Allhusen, 2004; Kulkofsky, 2010; Uhl, Camilletti, Scullin, & Wood, 2016), creativity (e.g., Frost et al., 2013), self-concept (e.g., Chae & Ceci, 2005; Howie & Dowd, 1996; Vrij & Bush, 2000; Zajac, Jury, & O'Neill, 2009), assertiveness (e.g., Muir-Broaddus, King, Downey, & Petersen, 1998; Zajac, Jury, & O'Neill, 2009) and intellectual functioning (e.g., Gignac & Powell, 2006; Gudjonsson & Henry, 2003; Young, Powell, & Dudgeon, 2003; but see Caprin et al., 2016; Chae & Ceci, 2005; Roebbers & Schneider, 2001).

Unfortunately, however, much of what we know about children's suggestibility comes from studies of children with no known history of maltreatment. In fact, the overwhelming majority of studies recruit typically developing children with no known child protection concerns from mainstream schools. Given that adverse experiences leading to post-traumatic stress disorder have been linked to reduced volume of the hippocampus (Carrión, Weems, & Reiss, 2007, Carrión, Haas, Garrett, Song, & Reiss, 2010)—an area crucial to memory—it is important to know how children who are disproportionately likely to appear in care, protection, and justice settings fare relative to their normal counterparts. Concerns about the extent to which maltreated children may be vulnerable to suggestibility during interviews also stem from evidence that their receptive and expressive oral language skills are fragile compared to age-matched peers (Lum et al., 2015). This may compromise the extent to which maltreated children can be assertive communicators—considering listener prior knowledge, identifying and responding to misapprehensions on the part of the listener, and holding fast to a narrative line in the face of leading questions.

What can the small number of existing studies tell practitioners about interviewing maltreated children? Unfortunately, conflicting findings in the literature mean that the answer is very little. Although basic memory processes do not appear to differ markedly as a function of maltreatment status (e.g., Eisen, Qin, Goodman, & Davis, 2002; Goodman, Bottoms, Rudy, Davis, & Schwartz-kenney, 2001; Howe, Cicchetti, & Toth, 2006, Howe, Cicchetti, Toth, & Cerrito, 2004; McWilliams, Harris, & Goodman, 2014; but see Goodman, Quas, & Ogle, 2010), the research findings pertaining to suggestibility are inconsistent. Some researchers have found similar levels of suggestibility in maltreated and non-maltreated children (Chae, Goodman, Eisen, & Qin, 2011; Eisen, Qin, Goodman, & Davis, 2002, Eisen, Goodman, Qin, Davis, & Crayton, 2007; Goodman, Bottoms, Rudy, Davis, & Schwartz-kenney, 2001; McWilliams, Harris, & Goodman, 2014), some have found that maltreated children are more suggestible than non-maltreated children (e.g., Curci, Bianco, & Gudjonsson, 2017; Vagni, Maiorano, Pajardi, & Gudjonsson, 2015), and one study has even observed an advantage for maltreated over non-maltreated children in this domain (Otgaar, Howe, & Muris, 2017).

Two primary factors might contribute to conflicting findings in the maltreatment literature. The first is considerable disparity in the way in which researchers have selected their samples. Substantiation of maltreatment, for example, is not consistently present in the literature. In fact, children merely *suspected* of having been maltreated have been studied as a maltreatment sample in some studies (e.g., Eisen et al., 2007, Eisen et al., 2002; Vagni et al., 2015), and as a control group in others (e.g., Chae et al., 2011; Katz, Schonefeld, Carter, Leventhal, & Cicchetti, 1995). Substantial heterogeneity within maltreated samples is also widespread, despite the fact that different life adversities could impact on children in different ways (Trickett & McBride-Chang, 1995). The use of the term maltreatment as a ‘catch-all’ in the suggestibility literature means that children who have suffered neglect—an enduring highly dysfunctional family environment—are often considered alongside children who have experienced a single occurrence of sexual abuse committed outside a stable family environment (e.g. Otgaar et al., 2017).

The second potential reason for conflicting findings relates to variation in the methods and dependent measures that researchers have employed to study suggestibility. Many studies addressing the eyewitness abilities of maltreated children have used procedures such the Deese–Roediger–McDermott paradigm (DRM; Deese, 1959; Roediger & McDermott, 1995) to assess children's vulnerability to false memory (Howe et al., 2004, Howe, Toth, & Cicchetti, 2011; Otgaar et al., 2017). These procedures, however, do not consider the social dimension underlying children's responses during formal interviewing. In fact, they may even produce data that are unrelated to children's performance on other measures of suggestibility (Otgaar & Candel, 2011; Otgaar et al., 2017). Taken together,

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