



Parental reminiscing style and children's suggestibility about an alleged transgression



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ABSTRACT

We examined the links between parental elaborativeness and children's suggestibility about a salient event, testing the hypothesis that, in an accuracy-focused context, children of elaborative parents are more resistant to false suggestions than children of less elaborative parents. Our hypothesis was supported: in a sample of 68 4–7 year-old children and caregivers, parent elaborativeness, along with children's working memory, additively predicted resistance to false suggestions from an unfamiliar interviewer about peripheral details of an alleged transgression. Children were forthcoming about the transgression when it actually occurred and highly resistant to suggestions that the transgression took place when it did not. Results have implications for understanding how parents socialize children to resist suggestions in accuracy-focused contexts through everyday reminiscing practices. Implications for theories of narrative and memory development, and for applied contexts such as the legal system, are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Caregivers play a critical role in shaping children's emerging mnemonic abilities. They teach children what is important to remember, rehearse memories with their children, and help their children structure memory reports in coherent and logical manners. How caregivers engage in these practices has been well-studied within a literature focused on parent-child reminiscing about past experiences (Fivush & Fromhoff, 1988; see Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 2006, for a review).

Findings have revealed consistent patterns in the ways that parents engage children in conversations about the past, patterns that, in turn, influence children's memory and reporting of prior experiences. Most notably, parents who use an elaborative conversation style, in which they ask high frequencies of novel WH- questions, follow up on their child's responses with requests for further details, provide feedback, particularly positive feedback, and fill in information when their child is unable to provide it, have children who provide greater detail about past events relative to parents who do not engage children using an elaborative style (e.g. Boland, Haden, & Ornstein, 2003; Harley & Reese, 1999; Hudson, 1990; McCabe & Peterson, 1991; Peterson, Jesso, & McCabe, 1999; Reese, Haden, & Fivush, 1993; Reese & Newcombe, 2007; see Fivush et al., 2006, for a review). Children who engage in more elaborative conversations with their caregivers about events also have more elaborate, and more cohesive memories of the events discussed (Clarke-Stewart & Beck, 1999; Leichtman,

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Pillemer, Wang, Koreishi, & Han, 2000; McGuigan & Salmon, 2004). Additionally, maternal conversation style has been linked to children's memory abilities even when children are asked about events that they have never discussed with their mother, suggesting that elaborative conversation style impacts overall memory ability rather than just strengthening the memory for the event discussed (e.g. Leichtman et al., 2000). In other words, children of elaborative mothers have general autobiographical memory benefits. What is noticeably understudied, however, is how parent-child reminiscing socializes children to respond in the face of *false* information about a past experience.

There has been some research examining the relations between parental reminiscing style and children's memory accuracy, though this research has almost exclusively focused on children's spontaneous provision of correct and/or incorrect information. Leichtman et al. (2000), for instance, interviewed preschoolers about a jointly experienced event in their classroom. Immediately afterward, children discussed the event with their mothers, who were not present during the event. Three weeks later, children were questioned by an interviewer who was ignorant to the event's details. While the researchers did not specifically examine inaccuracies, they did discount inaccurate responses so that the memory score only reflected accurate responding. Results revealed that, when mothers discussed the preschool event in a more elaborative style, their children later remembered a greater number of accurate details.

McGuigan and Salmon (2004) engaged children in a staged event individually. Experimenters elaboratively discussed the event with children before, during, or after the event, or not at all. Elaborative style was therefore indexed dichotomously (present or absent) rather than on a continuum (high to low). Discussing a non-shared past event elaboratively at any time point (before, during, or after the event) decreased the number of inaccurate statements children provided relative to the number provided by children who did not discuss the event.

Our goal, in the present study, was to expand this body of research by focusing on the links between parent-child reminiscing and children's inaccuracies resulting from suggestive questioning, specifically about a personally experienced, salient event involving a potential transgression. From a theoretical standpoint, understanding how parents influence children's ability to resist suggestive questions will give a more complete picture of children's developing memory skills. This knowledge will also be important for applied audiences, such as parents, educators, clinicians, and legal practitioners, all of whom have long been interested in encouraging children to report accurately and fully without falling prey to false information.

1.1. Reminiscing style, suggestiveness, and suggestibility

While little research to date has explored the relations between parental reminiscing style and children's memory accuracy, particularly in response to suggestive questions, there are several reasons to suspect such relations exist, though the direction of the relations is unclear. More elaborative parental reminiscing certainly encourages children to provide a greater amount of information about past experiences. However, this encouragement may not help children resist suggestion, and there are theoretical reasons to predict that parental elaborativeness could *increase* children's resistance to suggestive questions or the opposite, that parental elaborativeness could *decrease* children's resistance to suggestive questions.

Regarding elaborativeness increasing children's resistance to suggestions, for one, early work on "trace strength" interpretations of suggestibility effects posited that stronger memories for true events reduce suggestibility because the original representation can be directly compared to false suggestions (e.g. Brainerd & Reyna, 1988). Indeed, at least part of young children's heightened suggestibility is believed to be due to their generally weaker memory traces relative to older children's and adults' traces (Brainerd & Reyna, 1988; Ceci, Toglia, & Ross, 1988; Howe, 1991). When children are given opportunities to rehearse event details and enhance their original memory trace, suggestibility decreases (Howe, 1995; Pezdek & Roe, 1995; Warren, Hulse-Trotter, & Tubbs, 1991). Insofar as elaborative parents are rehearsing events more with their children, assuming these rehearsals are accurate, and are teaching their children more generally to rehearse experiences when recounting them, children of elaborative parents may have stronger memory traces that they can use to refute false suggestions. Further, by giving children the opportunity to rehearse their memories, elaborative parents may be enhancing children's confidence in their accurate memories, which may in turn help them better discriminate between true and false information (Ghetti, Lyons, Lazzarin, & Cornoldi, 2008; Ghetti, Qin, & Goodman, 2002; Roebbers, 2002; Roebbers & Howie, 2003; Roebbers, von der Linden, & Howie, 2007).

Related, elaborative style may decrease suggestibility by modeling and encouraging cohesion in children's reports. That is, elaborative parents not only encourage children to talk more about past events, but also create a conversational flow that builds on the information children provide by jointly filling in additional details rather than changing topics at each conversational turn (Haden, Haine, & Fivush, 1997; Fivush et al., 2006). Such conversational flow leads to greater cohesion in children's memory reports, which itself has been shown to predict greater accuracy and reduced suggestibility, at least when children are being questioned about neutral or positive prior experiences (Kulkofsky & Klemfuss, 2008; Kulkofsky, Wang, & Ceci, 2008). Thus, insofar as elaborative parents teach children to rehearse memories of the past and to organize these memories in a cohesive structure, children of elaborative parents should be *more* resistant to suggestibility.

However, as mentioned, it is also possible that parental elaborativeness makes children *less* resistant to suggestive influences. Such reasons stem more from the social function of reminiscing rather than its potential cognitive effects on memory encoding, storage, and retrieval. Specifically, when discussing past events with children, parents convey information about the purpose, or function, of memory sharing, which is often to engage a social partner and build interpersonal relationships (e.g. Kulkofsky & Koh, 2009; Kulkofsky, Wang, & Koh, 2009; Nelson, 1993; Reese & Brown, 2000). When trying to engage a social partner, conveying accurate information may not be as crucial as telling a good story. In this context "good" sto-

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