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# Children's recantation of adult wrongdoing: An experimental investigation



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### ABSTRACT

Child maltreatment cases often hinge on a child's word versus a defendant's word, making children's disclosures crucially important. There is considerable debate concerning why children recant allegations, and it is imperative to examine recantation experimentally. The purpose of this laboratory analogue investigation was to test (a) how often children recant true allegations of an adult's wrongdoing after disclosing and (b) whether children's age and caregiver supportiveness predict recantation. During an interactive event, 6- to 9-year-olds witnessed an experimenter break a puppet and were asked to keep the transgression a secret. Children were then interviewed to elicit a disclosure of the transgression. Mothers were randomly assigned to react supportively or unsupportively to this disclosure, and children were interviewed again. We coded children's recantations (explicit denials of the broken puppet after disclosing) and changes in their forthcomingness (shifts from denial or claims of lack of knowledge/memory to disclosure and vice versa) in free recall and in response to focused questions about the transgression. Overall, 23.3% of the children recanted their prior disclosures (46% and 0% in the unsupportive and supportive conditions, respectively). No age differences in recantation rates emerged, but 8- and 9-year-olds were more likely than 6- and 7-year-olds to maintain their recantation throughout Interview 2. Children whose mothers reacted supportively to disclosure became more forthcoming in Interview 2, and those whose mothers reacted unsupportively became less forthcoming. Results

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advance theoretical understanding of how children disclose negative experiences, including sociomotivational influences on their reports, and have practical implications for the legal system.

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## Introduction

In September of 2011, protesters' signs claimed "Too much doubt!" as international attention focused on Troy Davis, a man facing execution for a murder conviction based solely on eyewitness testimony. Davis was executed despite the "doubt" cast by seven of the nine eyewitnesses recanting their earlier testimony against him. This case highlights the dilemma resulting from individuals changing their event accounts, especially recanting or "taking back" their prior statements in legal contexts. Recantations pose significant challenges for the criminal justice system, and their psychological explanation has implications for understanding the processes by which individuals report negative experiences. Given children's increased vulnerability to suggestion and external influences, their recantation of prior allegations, especially allegations of sexual abuse, is of great theoretical and practical interest and has been hotly debated during recent years (London, Bruck, Ceci, & Shuman, 2005).

Child maltreatment is a significant public health concern, and addressing it typically requires that children provide accurate and detailed accounts of their experiences (Lamb, Hershkowitz, Orbach, & Esplin, 2008). The nature of child maltreatment, especially child sexual abuse (CSA), means that children's disclosures may be all that exist to prosecute the crime or exonerate an innocent suspect, protect children, and make treatment decisions (e.g., Myers, 2005; Walsh, Jones, Cross, & Lippert, 2010). Children's disclosure patterns, including their ability to maintain consistent reports across multiple interviews, are used to assess their credibility and are frequently the subject of expert witness testimony (Leippe, Manion, & Romanczyk, 1992; Quas, Thompson, & Clarke-Stewart, 2005).

For decades, researchers have studied children's memory and how suggestive interview techniques can lead to false reports (Bruck, Ceci, & Principe, 2006). However, few researchers have elucidated factors associated with children's susceptibility to *deny* events that have occurred. Insight into both false allegations and false denials and the underlying reasons for inconsistencies in children's disclosures of traumatic experiences is imperative if we are to understand children's disclosure processes. Recantation is a noteworthy type of inconsistency because it typically represents a complete denial of wrongdoing post-disclosure. As discussed next, considerable controversy exists concerning why children recant sexual abuse allegations (London et al., 2005; London, Bruck, Wright, & Ceci, 2008). Extant research has largely consisted of field studies focused on prevalence rates rather than the potential causal mechanisms or correlates of recantation. The purpose of the current investigation was to conduct the first experimental study of children's recantation of adult wrongdoing to shed light on (a) how often children recant true allegations of adult wrongdoing after disclosing and (b) factors that predict recantation of true allegations. Two factors were of particular interest based on theory and prior literature: caregiver supportiveness and children's age.

### *Theoretical explanations of recantation of child sexual abuse*

In a review of the CSA disclosure literature, London and colleagues (2005) argued that recantation of true allegations is rare and that rates are highest when study samples are more likely to contain dubious allegations. Thus, recantations may represent the retraction of false allegations. Malloy, Lyon, and Quas (2007) proposed a filial dependency model, which posits that recantation is influenced by children's vulnerability to adult familial influences. They found support for the model in a sample of substantiated 2- to 17-year-old CSA victims: Younger children, those alleging abuse against a parent figure, and those whose non-offending caregivers (i.e., children's mothers in 91% of the cases) reacted unsupportively to disclosure (e.g., expressing disbelief of the allegations, encouraging the child to

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