Journal of Experimental Child Psychology 113 (2012) 383–400

Contents lists available at SciVerse ScienceDirect

Journal of Experimental Child Psychology

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

Children's natural conversations following exposure to a rumor: Linkages to later false reports

Gabrielle F. Principe *, Mollie Cherson, Julie DiPuppo, Erica Schindewolf

Department of Psychology, Ursinus College, Collegeville, PA 19426, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 23 December 2011
Revised 6 June 2012
Available online 28 July 2012

Keywords:
Memory
Suggestibility
Rumor
Children
Source monitoring
Eyewitness testimony

ABSTRACT

Previous research has shown that children naturally propagate overheard false rumors and that the circulation of such information can induce children and their peers to wrongly recall actually experiencing rumored-but-nonexperienced events. The current study extends this work by recording 3- to 6-year-olds' naturally occurring conversations following exposure to an erroneous rumor. Results indicate that, compared with children who overhear rumors spread by adults, those who pick up rumors from peers during natural interactions engage in deeper and more inventive rumor mongering. Moreover, the degree and originality of rumor propagation was linked with various qualities of children's subsequent recollections at both 1-week and 4-week delayed interviews. Furthermore, compared with 3- and 4-year-olds, 5- and 6-year-olds naturally transmitted more novel and coherent embellishments of the rumor to their peers, and more of their false narrative reports during the interviews overlapped with their own and their peers' utterances transmitted soon after the rumor was planted.

Introduction

Discussing shared experiences with others is a typical and frequent part of children's everyday social activity. Research focusing on children's autobiographical memory demonstrates that such exchanges can change the way in which experienced events are represented and remembered, particularly when conversational partners differ in their renderings of the event. For instance, talking with co-witnesses who experienced a slightly different version of the same event (e.g., Candel, Memon, & Al-Harazi, 2007; Principe & Ceci, 2002), who overheard errant information about a shared

* Corresponding author. Fax: +1 610 409 3633.
E-mail address: gprincipe@ursinus.edu (G.F. Principe).

0022-0965/$ - see front matter © 2012 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jecp.2012.06.006

event (e.g., Principe, Haines, Adkins, & Guiliano, 2010; Principe, Kanaya, Ceci, & Singh, 2006), or who generated erroneous inferences about the past (Principe, Guiliano, & Root, 2008) can distort children's recollections in ways consistent with their conversational partner's experiences. Despite the growing number of demonstrations of the mnemonic effects of memory exchanges on children's event recall, little is known about the content of such conversations and which specific qualities of these discussions are linked to later errors in remembering. In the current study, we made use of a paradigm known to promote high levels of false reports following discussion of a shared event (e.g., Principe et al., 2006) to examine, in a fine-grained manner, the sorts of co-witness conversational activities that are linked to later errors in children's remembering.

Studies of the mnemonic effects of co-witness talk have their theoretical roots in contemporary formulations of collective memory (see Harris, Paterson, & Kemp, 2008; Reese & Fivush, 2008) that characterize memories of shared experiences as dynamic and collaborative representations that are shaped during group conversational processes. In this framework, as memories of shared events are recollected within a group, its members negotiate a collective version of the experience. As a consequence of such conversational sharing, individuals' memories of the past are revised to become increasingly similar among group members.

Most of the experimental evidence in support of theories of collective memory comes from laboratory studies in which groups of adults collaboratively remember a shared event and then recall it individually. In general, when conditions are free from suggestive influences, group remembering increases the amount of information individuals later recollect (e.g., Basden, Basden, & Henry, 2000). Nearly all of the new information reported can be traced back to details shared earlier by other group members (Rajaram & Pereira-Pasarin, 2007), supporting the notion that conversational exchanges about the past bring individuals' memories more in line with the group.

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 to-be-remembered event (Gabbert, Memon, & Allan, 2003), individuals are prone to subsequently recall nonexperienced-but-suggested details. Several studies have demonstrated that such conversationally conveyed misinformation is more detrimental to memory than misleading information encountered through other means, such as accounts written by other witnesses (Gabbert, Memon, Allan, & Wright, 2004; Shaw, Garven, & Wood, 1997) and leading questions or media reports (Paterson & Kemp, 2006). Furthermore, co-witness discussions can boost confidence in errant recollections (Paterson & Kemp, 2006; Stephenson & Wagner, 1989).

The ease of contamination brought about by socially conveyed misinformation to adults' recall has prompted developmental researchers to examine group processes in children's suggestibility. One line of work demonstrating the power of social exchanges to induce errors centers on rumor mongering. In their seminal study on rumor and memory, Principe and colleagues (e.g., Principe et al., 2006) exposed some children within preschool classrooms to an errant rumor about a shared experience and then had them interact naturally with their peers. When later asked for their memory, those children who heard the rumor directly or picked it up from their peers were as likely to report experiencing the rumored-but-nonexperienced event as other children who actually experienced the event suggested by the rumor. Moreover, the rumor was more mnemonically damaging than a suggestive interview. Compared with children for whom the false information was suggested in a highly coercive interview, those exposed to the rumor gave more errant reports, were more likely to wrongly recall actually seeing (as opposed to merely hearing about) the suggested event, and embellished their accounts with a generous degree of fictitious detail in line with the suggestions. Furthermore, cross-study comparisons show that various forms of rumor (e.g., Principe, Haines, et al., 2010; Principe, Tinguely, & Dobkowski, 2007) can lead to error levels higher than those typically produced by misleading interviews (Bruck, Ceci, & Hembrooke, 2002; Roberts & Powell, 2006) or other commonly examined sources of suggestion, such as parental coaching (Poole & Lindsay, 2001), stereotype induction (Leichtman & Ceci, 1995), and visualization (Ceci, Huffman, Smith, & Loftus, 1994).

In line with findings in the adult literature of high levels of interference from socially transmitted misinformation, Principe, Daley, and Kauth (2010) demonstrated that the conversational interactions that ensue following children's exposure to rumor, rather than the rumor itself, give rumor its mnemonic potency. In this study, Principe and colleagues replicated their original rumor paradigm