Children's false memory and true disclosure in the face of repeated questions

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Abstract

The current study was designed to investigate children's memory and suggestibility for events differing in valence (positive or negative) and veracity (true or false). A total of 82 3- and 5-year-olds were asked repeated questions about true and false events, either in a grouped order (i.e., all questions about a certain event asked consecutively) or in a nongrouped order (i.e., questions about a certain event were interspersed with questions about other events). Interviewer gender was also varied. Individual differences, including attachment style, inhibition, and behavioral adjustment, were examined as potential predictors of memory and suggestibility. Results revealed significant age, valence, and veracity effects on children's memory reports. Path analysis demonstrated that individual differences in behavioral problems and inhibitory ability predicted children's provision of inaccurate information. Implications for psychological theory and legal application are discussed.
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Keywords: Children; Memory; Suggestibility; Attachment; False memory; Disclosure; Cognitive inhibition

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Introduction

Over the past few decades, the large number of children coming into contact with the legal system—mostly as a result of abuse cases—has motivated intense scientific effort to understand children's true and false memory reports. The seriousness of abuse charges and the frequency with which a child victim's testimony provides the central or sole prosecutorial evidence make issues of children's eyewitness memory abilities important considerations. Questions about children's ability to remember and report the truth revolve around both their capability to resist misleading information and their hesitancy to reveal negative experiences. Each of these possibilities poses a significant danger. If children are easily misled by zealous interviewers, then false charges against innocent adults may result. If children fail to reveal negative experiences such as physical or sexual abuse, then child abusers may escape justice and victims may be subjected to further mistreatment. Research has commonly focused on determining the likelihood of the first of these scenarios (Goodman & Schaaf, 1997; Poole & Lindsay, 2002), with much less research aimed at examining the second scenario, although many would say that the latter is at least equally important, if not more so.

Concerns have been raised not only that asking repeated questions within an interview increases the chance of creating false memories in children who have not suffered abuse but also that not asking repeated questions decreases the chances of obtaining accurate disclosures in actual abuse victims. If repeated questioning introduces misinformation, then this interviewing strategy, at least under certain circumstances (e.g., a weak memory or an event that never occurred) (Quas et al., 2007), may lead to false reports in young children (Garven, Wood, Malpass, & Shaw, 1998; Leichtman & Ceci, 1995). However, repeated questions are believed to have beneficial effects as well, including giving a child multiple opportunities to reveal negative information and acting as a measure of consistency and truthfulness. If a child is reluctant to acknowledge a negative event such as abuse, then repeated leading questions may encourage the child to reveal his or her victimization (e.g., Goodman & Clarke-Stewart, 1991). However, inconsistency in children's answers to repeated questions leads to a perceived lack of credibility in children's reports (Leippe, Manion, & Romanczyk, 1992).

Topic switching to minimize social demands

It seems clear that children's memory reports are at times negatively affected by suggestive interviewing techniques (e.g., Garven et al., 1998). Developmental questions about the fate of children's memory in the face of suggestive interviewing became a focus of concentration as the "misinformation effect" (Loftus, 1979) was replicated with children (e.g., Ceci, Ross, & Toglia, 1987; Schwartz-Kenney & Goodman, 1999; but see Zaragoza, 1991) and as underlying mechanisms were explored (e.g., Holliday, Reyna, & Hayes, 2002). Furthermore, implantation of entirely false memories in research studies (Loftus & Pickrell, 1995) indicated that such implantation was more likely in younger children than in older children and adults (Ghetti & Alexander, 2004; Pezdek & Hodge, 1999). Nevertheless, the extent to which children experience memory difficulties, and the degree to which they respond based on social demands rather than on the basis of their original memory, is not fully known. Indeed, social demands may play a larger role in children's memory reports than in adults' memory reports (Ceci et al., 1987). Studies that support