

**Suggestibility
in Young Children**

Laura E. Melnyk Gribble

Outline

Background
Defining suggestibility
Interviewer bias
Source monitoring
Internal factors
Recommendations

Children in the Courtroom

- USA: ~ 13,000 children testify per year in sexual abuse cases
- Often difficult to validate
- Scope?
 - Incidence: ~ 1/435
 - Prevalence:
 - Women -- 6.8% to 62%
 - Men -- 3% to 31%

Interviewing Children

Seeking complete & accurate reports

- Open-ended questions
 - *But children under 5 generally give sparse (but accurate) responses!*
- Conversational/interrogative strategies
 - *Leading or misleading*

Defining Suggestibility

- Extent to which reporting of events influenced by external and internal factors
- Includes
 - Memory (encoding, storage, retrieval)
 - Psychosocial variables
 - Interviewing factors ***

Interviewing Bias

- Shapes interview to be consistent with suspicions
- Uses strategies to try and get confirmatory information
- No attempt to disconfirm hypothesis
 - No testing of alternate hypotheses
 - Ignoring inconsistent information
 - e.g., Bruck, Melnyk, Ceci, & Finkelberg 1999

Some Manifestations of Interviewer Bias

1. Use of specific questions

- Increasing % of errors from free recall, wh-, yes/no questions

2. Repeating questions

- Case transcripts

3. Emotional tone

- Can be beneficial when recalling stressful event
- But not supportive when using bribes/rewards
- Goodman et al. 1989: atmosphere of accusation
 - 5/15 agreed hugged/kissed
 - 2/15 agreed picture taken in bathroom
- Selective reinforcement
 - Case examples

4. Stereotype induction

- Sam Stone (Leichtman & Ceci)
 - 3- to 4-year olds & 5- to 6-year-olds
 - Interviewed 4x over 10 weeks; book & teddy bear
 - Younger children made more errors
 - Perceptual details, embellishments:
 - 3- to 4-year-olds
 - 72% said Sam did one or more misdeed
 - 44% said they saw him
 - 21% insisted, even when gently challenged
 - 5- to 6-year-olds
 - 11% insisted
 - Pattern not unusual:
 - Source monitoring?
 - » Bruck, Melnyk & Ceci: only 14% recanted
 - » Melnyk & Bruck - ~20% recantation

5. Interviewer status

- Adult vs. peer (Ceci, Ross, & Tolia)
- Police officer vs neutral adult (Tobey & Goodman)
 - More inaccurate statements, fewer accurate
 - 2/13 decisively misled

6. Anatomically detailed dolls

- "Normal" play?
- Increased exposure, increased interest in sexual parts
- Show what happened?
 - *Do not facilitate, and may increase errors of commission*
- Symbolic representation problems
 - *Problematic for preschoolers*

Bruck, Ceci, Francoeur, & Renick – 3-year-olds

- Props
- 1/2 genital exam, 1/2 non-genital exam
- "Did doctor touch you here?"
 - only 47% correct YES
 - 50% INCORRECT yes!!
- Show and tell:
 - Only 25% correctly show touching
 - Errors: Insertion
 - Only 50% correctly show NO touching
- Show sticker, ribbon on doll: No more accurate than on own body; 25-30% errors
- 58% with sexualized/suspicious behaviors:
 - Spoon: 18% insert into genital/anal openings

7. Pretending/Imagining

- Re Hyman's "punchbowl" study
- Reality monitoring
- Ceci et al.'s "mousetrap" studies
 - Preschoolers & 6-year-olds repeatedly interviewed about non-events
 - After repeated interviews, 50% of preschoolers and 40% of 5-6 said happened to them
 - Many produced detailed, vivid accounts

Source Monitoring

Poole & Lindsay – Mr. Science
- Older children more likely to correctly report source; recant

Bruck, Melnyk, & Ceci – Magician study
- Increased misinformation effects even though maintained source

How Long Does False Reporting Persist?

Melnyk & Bruck – series of studies

- No significant changes after ~4 months
- Misinformation effects for control items!
 - ~83% accurate dropped to ~71% !

Melnyk & Bruck

- 15 month follow-up of Magician study
- Misinformation effect still very strong – less than 40% of false details correctly denied
- Some children didn't remember reminder sessions – source?

Internal Factors

- Children provide answers to bizarre questions
 - Hughes & Grieve
 - "Is red heavier than yellow?"
 - "Is a knife happier than a fork?"
 - Melnyk & Bruck: 90% answered questions like Rarely said "I don't know" or "that doesn't make sense!"

- Social (wanting to please adult)
 - Personality factors?
 - IQ?
 - Self-esteem?
 - Social desirability?
- Melnyk & Bruck:
- Imaginative involvement?
 - "Yea-saying" - hyperactivity, ADHD?

Conclusions

- Videotape (or at least audiotape) interviews!
- Neutrality, test alternate hypotheses
- Importance of designing studies to examine applied issues
- Responsibility of science informing frontline workers
