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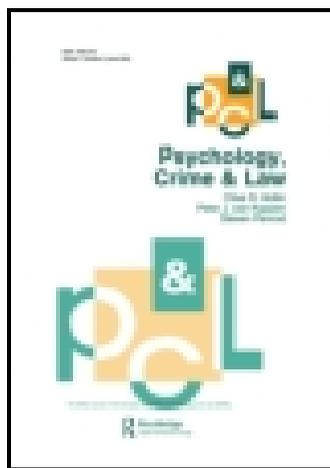
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Who made the disclosure? Recorded discussions between children and caretakers suspecting child abuse

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Within investigations of suspected child abuse, the child's account is often at the core of the judicial process. When analysing the child's account, it is therefore important to consider how parents may have discussed the suspected abuse prior to the official investigation. However, no studies up to the present time have investigated discussions in real cases where parents suspect that their children have been abused. We analysed a sample ($N = 19$) of recorded conversations between parents and their children, delivered to the police as evidence for alleged physical or sexual abuse. Analyses of the questions used and the information provided in the discussions showed that the parent's strategies when questioning their children were extremely leading and that in the majority of the cases, all new information was provided by the parents. In spite of this, the parents deemed the recorded conversations as records of the children's accounts. While the sample was small and likely to be unrepresentative of child abuse suspicions in general, the findings have important practical implications. The results indicate that when planning an interview in a case where the alleged abuse relies on what a child allegedly has told a parent, particular caution should be taken when referring to these conversations.

Keywords: CSA allegations; CSA investigations; suggestive questioning; pre-interview contamination; false CSA suspicions

Introduction

Often, allegations of child sexual abuse (CSA) and other forms of child maltreatment come about through the child telling a close person about the events. Particularly in the case of very young children, in the absence of clear evidence (such as photographs or videos), the suspicion often relies on the child's alleged previous accounts or on interpretations of the child's behaviour. This is the case for both suspected physical and sexual abuse. Interpretations of child behaviour may be problematic, since CSA receives much popular attention and there is an abundance of misleading information available for concerned parents, which may lead to unwarranted suspicions of CSA. For instance, parents who observe sexual behaviour in their children may interpret normal behaviour as indicative of CSA (Poole & Wolfe, 2009) and consequently, question their children about their suspicions. The aim of the present study was to explore how parents question their

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children through analysing a sample of recorded discussions between children and parents who suspect their children may have been abused.

Much research has been conducted regarding how to interview children correctly and, more specifically, how to avoid suggestive influences in child interviews. Previous research has found that investigative interviews of children, even by experienced child interviewers, tend to be leading to an extent that hampers the credibility of the child's account (Brown & Lamb, 2009; Lamb, Hershkowitz, Orbach, & Esplin, 2007). This finding has been robust in a large number of studies in numerous countries (Cederborg, Orbach, Sternberg, & Lamb, 2000; Korkman, Santtila, & Sandnabba, 2006; Lamb et al., 1996; Sternberg, Lamb, Davies, & Westcott, 2001; Thoresen, Lønnum, Melinder, Stridbeck, & Magnussen, 2006). Studies have also shown that interviewers tend to underestimate their use of suggestive prompts, believing that the children's accounts have been achieved far more spontaneously than post-interview analyses have found to be the case (Lamb, Orbach, Sternberg, Hershkowitz, & Horowitz, 2000). Taking into consideration the findings showing that professional interviewers are suggestive in their ways of discussing with children, there is reason to believe that untrained parents may be even more so.

In an experimental study, Bruck, Ceci, and Francoeur (1999) investigated mothers' ($N = 24$) memories of conversations with their four-year-old children and found that the mothers remembered the gist, or the meaning of the discussions, better than the exact wording. The mothers did not recall whether information had come about spontaneously or not. Interestingly, even when the mothers had been particularly asked to pay attention to the exact wording they used when interviewing their children, they were not better at assessing whether the information provided by their children was spontaneous or prompted.

It is well known that preschool-aged children have difficulties in memory source attribution, that is, assessing *how* they have come to know information, confusing between learned-about and actually experienced events (Roberts & Blades, 1996). This is related to the development of memory and, in particular, the gradual development of episodic memory (Gathercole, 1998; Korkman, Kemp, & Kirk, 2001): *episodic* autobiographical components of memory (i.e., memories of personal events with some reference to oneself as a participant in the episode) are the last to develop, while *semantic* autobiographical memory (i.e., knowledge about past events) develops earlier (Piolino et al., 2007). In other words, children are able to time travel through their own personal history only when episodic memory is fully developed. The development of episodic autobiographical memory is also visible through the phenomenon known as *infantile amnesia*, that is, the typical lack of encoded memory before the age of 3 (and a limited number of details typically encoded prior to the age of 5; Piolino et al., 2007).

The limited source-monitoring and other memory skills make preschool-aged children particularly vulnerable to suggestive influences, as they cannot rely on their own memory to the extent older children and adults can. Also, as children develop their understanding of the world surrounding them, all they know and learn derives typically from adult informants and therefore, young children are not in a position to critically evaluate information given to them by adults. As a consequence, children may follow the suggestions of authoritative adults even when knowing the suggested information is wrong (for an overview, see Malloy & Quas, 2009). However, how parents discuss with children when suspecting their children have been abused has not been extensively researched. It has, though, been hypothesised that frightened parents who question their preschool children, believing

they have been abused, may succumb to using highly suggestive questions (Myers, 2009). Taking into consideration children's limited skills of monitoring the sources of their own knowledge, such suggestive questioning can potentially be highly distorting.

Aims of the present study

We analysed a sample of recorded conversations between parents and their children in order to assess the strategies used by parents to retrieve information from their children when they suspected either physical or sexual (or both) child abuse to have taken place. It was hypothesised that the discussions would be to some extent leading, but that the children would articulate some part of the abuse allegation themselves, as the material had been brought to the attention of the police as evidence for the alleged abuse.

Method

The sample consisted of 19 recordings of parents interviewing their child while suspecting that child abuse had taken place. The recorded interviews had been conducted by parents, step-parents and foster parents: 32% of the sample consisted of one male parent, 47% one female parent and 21% of one male and one female parent. The children were 9 boys and 10 girls, aged 2–8 years (mean age 5.4 years). It was evident that around half of the suspicions were related to ongoing custody disputes.

The conversations had been delivered to the police by the caretakers (parents, foster parents or step-parents),¹ in order to give evidence for the alleged abuse. Recording has become increasingly common, as recording gadgets are available to most people within, for instance, their portable phones. It should be noted, however, that the sample studied here is a select sample as parents in the vast majority of investigated cases do not provide the police with records of previous conversations. Records where parents were merely interacting with children in other ways were excluded as well as one tape where it was unclear whether the topic under discussion was actually an abuse suspicion.

The tapes were transcribed word by word and coded in terms of type of suspicion (sexual abuse or physical abuse or both), question types, as well as according to information provided as well as whether the information was provided by the parent or by the child. Also, positive or negative feedback by the parent as a reaction to the child's account was coded.

The coding of question types was done according to a scheme developed by Lamb and colleagues (Lamb, Sternberg, & Esplin, 2000; Lamb et al., 1996). The question categories used were:

- (1) Facilitators: Non-suggestive encouragements to continue with a response. This category includes utterances such as 'ok' or 'hmm', restatements (echoing) of the child's previous utterance and non-suggestive words of encouragement.
- (2) Invitations: Open-ended utterances (questions, statements or imperatives) used to elicit free recall responses from the child. An invitation could be general or relate to the issue just mentioned by the child.
- (3) Directive utterances: Questions focusing the child's attention on details previously mentioned by the child, requesting further elaboration, often posing questions like what, who, where and when.
- (4) Option-posing utterances: Questions focusing the child's attention on incident-related issues that the child had not previously mentioned but which did not imply

that a particular response was expected. These were commonly questions that implied answers like ‘yes’ or ‘no’ or the choice of alternative answers given by the adult.

- (5) Suggestive utterances: Questions stated in such a way that the expected response was clearly communicated.

Every time the parent criticised or praised the child for a response, this was coded as positive/negative feedback. If such feedback occurred in addition to a question, the question type used was coded, but if the feedback was not paired with a question, it was coded as such and thus became a sixth utterance category.

New (in terms of not being previously discussed on the tape) information provided by the child was also coded, defined as details adding to the understanding of the event under discussion (Cutshall & Yuille, 1989; Lamb et al., 1996, 2000). Clearly, the information may have been brought forward prior to the recording by either the child or the parent.

In order to ensure that one specific (e.g., particularly long or leading) interview did not skew the results, generalised estimating equations were used for the hypothesis testing. These methods take into account the dependence between the question–answer pairs coming from a single interview.

In order to conduct this study, permission to collect a sample of recorded conversations between caretakers and children was obtained by the National Police Board of Finland.

Results

Out of the utterances made by the parent in the conversations, 1% were invitations, 15% facilitators, 21% directive utterances, 24% option-posing, 37% suggestive and 2% were coded only as positive/negative feedback.

When looking at the new, allegation-related information, the parent provided the large majority of the information: In 13 out of 19 (68%) interviews, all new information was provided (first) by the parent. In 4 out of 19 (21%) interviews, all new information was provided by the child, and in two interviews (11%) both the child and the parent provided new information.

The type of question used was significantly associated with whether the child provided new information or not, $\chi^2(5) = 33.76, p < .001$. As can be seen in Table 1, 65% of the information provided came in response to option-posing (30%) and suggestive

Table 1. The information provided by the children was given in response to the following utterance types.

| Utterance type | <i>N</i> | Resulted in % of all the information provided by the children |
|----------------|----------|---|
| Open-ended | 6 | 1 |
| Facilitators | 138 | 12 |
| Focused | 207 | 22 |
| Option-posing | 238 | 30 |
| Suggestive | 349 | 35 |

Note: Overall association between the utterance type by the adults and the number of details provided by the children, $\chi^2(5) = 33.76, p < .001$.

questions (35%). Only 1% of the information provided by the children came in response to invitations, while facilitators resulted in 12% and directive questions in 22% of the new information.

The child being unresponsive (providing no new information) was associated with the parent using more positive or negative (the two were combined in one category in order to achieve statistical power) feedback, $\chi^2(1) = 34.20, p < .001$. In 20% of the cases where the child had not provided any abuse-related information, the parent put pressure (mostly in the form of negative feedback) on the child to do so, whereas they did so only in 8% of the cases where the children had provided some information (mostly praising the children).

In the following, we give some examples of excerpts² from the recorded conversations as well as, in Example 1, the codes given to the utterances to further illustrate the typical interview dynamics.

Example 1

Case background: This seven-year-old girl's parents had divorced and the girl's step-mother suspected the maternal uncle of abusing the girl:

Child: ...Did that kind of things...

Adult: What has he done? (directive)

C: ...

A: Who has been harming you? (suggestive)

C: Tom

A: What has Tom done to you? (directive)

C: ...

A: Who told you to say that someone else has been harming you than Tom? (suggestive)

C: Mum

A: What did she ask you to say? (directive)

C: That ... Gabriel

A: Yes. Well, has Gabriel ever been harming you? (option-posing)

C: No

A: *Who* has been harming you? (suggestive)

C: Tom

A: Tell me again what he has done to you (directive)

C: ...

A: And has he been harming you many times? (option-posing)

C: A little

A: You said before I took the camera that he had put his willy between your legs. Is that true? (suggestive)

C: Yes

A: And taken your clothes off? (suggestive)

C: Yes

Example 2

Case background: A three-year-old girl and her foster mother discuss on the tape. The girl had been removed from her home six months earlier (at the age of 2.5) due to the biological parents' drug abuse. She was doing well in the foster family initially but started exhibiting some behavioural problems after some time (nightmares, anxiousness and behaviour perceived as sexualized by the foster parents):

M: I can see you feel bad. Mum is filming while you tell me about it, tell me what are those bad things that have happened to you. You feel so bad about them. Would you like to tell me?

C: Yyyy ... Yeah (whispers)

M: Then tell mummy!

C: ...Showed me his willy ... Uhhh then I was like this (unclear) ... came to see then it (he/she?) went to the barber and then I ... then he/she put on that medicine.

M: What kind of medicine?

C: The one they used.

M: What kind was that?

C: It was green.

M: And where did they put it?

C: On their heads!

M: Heads?

C: Yes. Then they turned green.

M: Tell me more about those sad things, the ones that make you so anxious, I'll take the camera again. Can you tell me now?

C: It (/he) always was spitting to me and the willytheen.

M: What?

C: The willy was spitting, and theentheenthen the baby was spitting.

M: Whose baby?

C: Their baby! The baby spits water (unclear) theen...

M: Nina, who are you talking about?

C: About (biological mother).

M: Well ... what happened then?

C: Oh it happened, the police came, it was nice, so nice!

M: Does it feel better now that you got to talk about this?

C: I'm not telling you. No.

When discussing the tape with the investigators, the foster mother said her daughter often got very anxious and it was obvious she wanted to tell about her traumatic experiences. The foster mother said the girl had on the tape (above) told the mother that her biological father had put his penis between her legs and that she had 'given clear and detailed descriptions' of him ejaculating and the parents using drugs. The foster mother had been advised by sources on the Internet as well as professionals working with abused children to ask the child and to go through the events over and over again to 'release her from her trauma'.

Example 3

Case background: A custody dispute involving two preschool-aged children. The father told the police he suspected the biological mother of abusing the children. On the tape he was asking the siblings what the mother had done since they were so upset; the older child replies she does not give them candy:

Father: Now is this really true?

Child 1: Yes.

F: Do you know what happens to children who lie?

C1: But it's true.

F: What happens to children who lie?

Child 2: I'm afraid.

F: What happened to Pinocchio?

C1: His nose went flat.

F: Yes. That can happen to people too.

Example 4

Case background: The mother and her new husband are suspecting the girl, nine years, has been abused by a previous companion of the mother (who is also the biological father of the girl's younger sibling).

M: Listen, dear, listen we want to know who did something to you, listen listen dear.

C: I don't know.

M: You have daddy and mummy, we'll protect you, nothing bad will ever happen. No adult should do what he has done to you.

F: It's wrong.

M: It's wrong, and we feel so bad about it

C: Really, nothing has happened.

M: Please tell mum, if you don't want to...

C: But there's nothing to tell (Starts crying).

M: Listen, I could do anything for you, I could even kill myself for you, look at me, I want to know about it, etc.

C: What is it you think has happened??

A long discussion later, they have gotten her to respond positively to some highly suggestive questions regarding touching. The parents write a list of all the possible 'perpetrators'.

F: You know how to read don't you darling. (To the mother) Let's write the names of everyone in her life.

M: You see, if you can't bring yourself to say it out loud ... Is it anyone of these?

F: There are the names: there's Frank, Patrick, Tim, Tom and Teddy. Just mark the name of the person you think it was!

M: And you will be protecting lots of small girls by telling us all about this, I'm afraid he's gonna hurt someone else otherwise.

Variations between the discussions

The dynamics were highly similar in most cases with parents in almost all recorded conversations relying heavily on leading prompts. Open-ended questions were present in only four cases. There was one outlier among the cases; a very short interaction in which only open-ended, facilitative and directive questions were used. This was the only case where a conviction was later made (based on the material at hand at the time of the research). The suspicion was not part of a custody dispute, instead, the parent was told by two children that their grandfather had abused them and immediately asked the children to repeat their account when taping the disclosure.

Discussion

In roughly 70% of the interviews, the child did not provide any new information whatsoever. Instead, all event-related information came from the parents. The information that the children did provide came mostly in response to leading and suggestive questions. Yet, the parents in these cases seemed to think the recorded conversation lent support to the abuse allegation – bearing in mind they were sent to the police as evidence of a child's previous disclosure.

Practical relevance

Child abuse is often recognised through a child's disclosure (Lamb et al., 2007). We want to emphasise that we in no way wish to suggest all parental reports should be discredited. However, the present results call for (yet more) caution and a necessity to gather as much information as possible about the actual (pre-interview) disclosure. Possible motives or strong preconceptions by the caretakers should be carefully addressed with the aim of recognising a possible confirmation bias, which easily translates into accepting only

information confirming the one's personal views (Faust, Bridges, & Ahern, 2009) and thus into suggestive questioning. When collecting information from caretakers, warning signs could be 'I had long suspected' or 'I clearly felt there was something more he wanted to tell me' or 'She didn't want to tell me at first but when I had asked her for two hours, she finally opened up'.³

With regard to the formal investigative interview, this study suggests that the following measures could be useful in order to recognise possible previous contamination by parents:

When planning an interview on the basis of what the child allegedly has told an adult, the (formal) interviewer should plan the interview so that the possibility of misunderstandings/manipulation is taken into consideration. For instance, instead of referring to something the child has allegedly told her/his caretaker ('I heard you told mum/dad that ...'), the interviewer could (if needed in order to get the child to understand the topic that is to be discussed) refer to the discussion by saying: 'I heard you and your mum/dad talked about' Also, the interviewer might want to tell the child that adults may sometimes misunderstand things, or that it is unclear what really has happened, and that the interviewer would like the child to tell what has happened according to him/her.

Not surprisingly, the results of the present study are similar to the results by untrained interviewers (Cederborg et al., 2000; Korkman et al., 2006; Lamb et al., 1996; Sternberg et al., 2001; Thoresen et al., 2006), a problem to which much attention has been diverted. While we cannot expect to influence how parents discuss with their children, we do well in recognising that in particular if parents have very strong preconceptions, the pre-interview discussions may be detrimental to the child's credibility and that this needs to be taken into consideration when planning the child's interview. Practically, this could be done through posing questions around how the parents found out about the allegation. In fact, questions concerning how the allegation has been discussed prior to the investigation have been added as a part of the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development protocol ('Information about the disclosure'; Lamb et al., 2007), albeit as a later part of the protocol. In light of the findings in the present study, we suggest that, in cases where there is strong reason to formulate an alternative hypothesis to the alleged abuse as having its source in suggestive conversations between children and care takers, interviewers might consider planning their interview so as to start with this theme, as this might improve the chances of finding out about possible erroneous allegations at the outset of the investigative interview rather than risking to reinforce erroneous allegations that have developed through suggestive questioning.

Another practical use of the present study, echoing the findings presented earlier by Bruck et al. (1999), is that parents – as is the case with professionals – may not be reliable when assessing their own questioning styles, something which needs to be considered in pre-trial investigations and court proceedings.

Limitations of the study

While the analysed sample is small, it is ecologically valid and no previous studies have been conducted on a sample of actual, real-life discussions between parents suspecting abuse and their children. The vast majority of the cases was clearly related to custody disputes, implying that the concerned adults may not be representative of all parents suspecting abuse but at the very least, it gives an insight into just how suggestive parents can be when convinced their children have been abused. In the present sample, it is not

known whether (or how many) discussions there had been between the children and their caretakers prior to recording. It is likely that the parents and children had indeed discussed the matter prior to the recording and it is obviously impossible to know whether these discussions were suggestive or not. However, even if the discussions prior to the recording would not have been suggestive, the present results do suggest that parents did not realise the recorded conversations were (extremely) suggestive, as they provided these as evidence of the child 'telling' about the abuse. Based on these recorded discussions, it is obviously not possible to make judgements about the veracity of the abuse allegation; however, the results do indicate the need to very strongly consider the possible effects of pre-investigative suggestion. Also, if pre-recorded conversations were not suggestive, it would have been expected that parents merely would have asked the children to repeat what they had said earlier instead of suddenly changing conversation patterns completely.

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Notes

1. The term 'parents' is used in this article to refer to all of these groups.
2. The quotes from the recorded conversations have all been made anonymous through manipulating age or gender or other facts concerning the case from which the example is given.
3. Examples are from actual cases at the Forensic Psychiatry Centre for Children and Adolescents, Helsinki University Hospital.

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