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Running head: Interviewing Children

Interviewing Children

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Abstract

This paper reviews best practice for interviewing child witnesses. In most officially recognized abuse cases, the child previously disclosed abuse, making it possible to elicit disclosures without asking closed-ended questions. Interviewers nevertheless overuse closed-ended questions, which lead to short unelaborated responses, privilege the limited perspective of the interviewer, maximize the potential for linguistic difficulties, increase children's tendency to guess, and risk response biases. Interviewers can avoid closed-ended questions through narrative practice, in which interviewers ask children to narrate a recent innocuous event before introducing the abuse topic; cued invitations, in which interviewers repeat details reported by children and ask for elaboration; open-ended wh- questions, and interview instructions, including asking children to promise to tell the truth. A remaining challenge is how to elicit disclosures from reluctant children. Better understanding of the dynamics of abuse disclosure and optimal interviewing strategies can assist the legal system in assessing the veracity of children's reports.

Keywords: child witnesses, developmental psychology, suggestibility

Introduction

Psychological research examining children's abilities as witnesses has undergone a revolution in the past 25 years. Researchers were originally inspired by extensive media coverage in the 1980s and 1990s of a series of criminal court cases in which preschool children accused day care providers and teachers of bizarre acts of sexual abuse (Ceci & Bruck, 1995). Examination of the investigative interviews in these cases typically revealed highly suggestive questioning. Researchers mimicked the coercive techniques with preschool children and demonstrated high rates of false responding, and, in the extreme cases, the formation of false memories (Bruck & Ceci, 2009).

Interviewers attempted to justify their suggestive methods by arguing that children were afraid to reveal, or that they needed support because of their cognitive immaturity. The difficulty with their reasoning was that their success in eliciting disclosures did not enable them to determine if they were uncovering true abuse or creating false reports. Also of concern was the fact that children were informally questioned by parents who had been led to believe that abuse had occurred, and that children were exposed to information through other sources as well, such as other children and the media (Ceci & Bruck, 1995).

For many years, research was dominated by demonstrations of the dangers of suggestibility. Researchers identified a number of sources of suggestibility: repeated interviews in which children were told that the false events in fact occurred (Bruck, Ceci, Francouer, & Barr 1995; Bruck, Ceci, & Hembrooke, 2002), encouragement that children visualize the false events (Ceci, Loftus, Leichtman, & Bruck, 1994), false

disparagement of the alleged perpetrator, so that children would form negative stereotypes of the accused (Leichtman & Ceci, 1995; Lepore & Sesco, 1994), positive and negative reinforcement of false responses (Garven Wood, & Malpass, 2000), and exposure to adults recalling false events (Principe, Kanaya, & Ceci, 2006). Much of the research focused on preschoolers, the most vulnerable group and the age of the children in the high profile daycare cases.

The problem with the suggestibility research was that it provided worst-case scenarios for children's ability as witnesses. There are large age differences in suggestibility, even within the preschool years (Goodman & Aman, 1990; Leichtman & Ceci, 1995). Children are less vulnerable to suggestions that negative events occurred (Ceci et al., 1994), particularly events that they find embarrassing (Saywitz, Goodman, Moan, & Hardie, 1991) or incriminating (Billings et al., 2007). Moreover, children are protective of adults with whom they are close (Tye et al., 1999).

Research examining typical investigative interviews found that many of the most suggestive techniques are uncommon in forensic interviews (Schreiber, 2000, Schreiber et al., 2006; Warren, Woodall, Hunt, & Perry, 1996). Rather, the primary problem with most interviews is that they contain predominantly closed-ended questions, which are not highly leading, but elicit less complete and less accurate reports (Lamb et al., 2008). As a result, the research informed interviewers about highly suggestive techniques that they should avoid, but little constructive advice regarding techniques that they should pursue.

More recently, however, another line of research has emerged that provides positive advice for maximizing children's productivity. Researchers have shown that if

interviewers adequately build rapport with children, and provide children guidance regarding the purpose and method of an interview, interviews can be enormously productive without suggestion. Interviewers can now find guidance in the NICHD protocol—which has been the subject of dozens of studies examining well over 30,000 children (Lamb et al., 2008). The key elements of the protocol have been endorsed by several recent practice guides (American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children, 2012; Walker, 2013), and I have created a simplified version of the protocol to facilitate its use in the field (Lamb, 2014; Lyon, 2005). [Insert Sidebar about here]

This paper will review the state of the art with respect to interviewing child witnesses. Because children are most likely to appear as witnesses when they are the victims of sexual abuse (Goodman, Quas, Bulkley, & Shapiro, 1999), that topic will be emphasized, but it is important to note that the interview techniques are effective with child witnesses of all kinds, including children who are suspected of having experienced physical abuse or having witnessed violence. First, I'll discuss the evidence that sexually abused children are reluctant to disclose abuse. Reluctance helps us to understand secrecy and delays in disclosure. Somewhat paradoxically, reluctance ensures that most children who come forward with their abuse are unusually willing to disclose, and therefore provide an opportunity to elicit a complete and compelling disclosure. Second, I'll explain why closed-ended questions—questions that can be answered with a single word or short phrase—are a poor response to children who appear reticent about abuse. Third, I'll discuss how interviewers can move away from closed-ended questions and toward open-ended questions without sacrificing detail or specificity. I'll also discuss the utility of interview instructions in improving children's

performance, but note continuing difficulties in overcoming reluctance among reticent children. Fourth, I'll discuss how the legal system can best respond to the current state of knowledge regarding child interviewing.

Non-disclosure of abuse and its implications for interviewing

Large-scale nationally representative surveys of adults reveal that most respondents who disclose sexual abuse to surveyors do not recall disclosing the abuse to anyone as a child, and only 10% report that their abuse was ever reported to authorities (see review in Lyon, 2009). These surveys provide some insight into the reasons for non-disclosure. Four of the five surveys that assessed the effects of the child-perpetrator relationship found that the closer the relationship, the less likely disclosure occurred (Anderson et al., 1993; Kogan, 2004; Smith et al., 2000; Wyatt & Newcomb, 1990; but see Fleming, 1997). Two surveys asked respondents what deterred disclosure (Anderson et al., 1993; Fleming, 1997), and the most common reasons included embarrassment, shame, and expectations that the disclosure recipient would blame the child or fail to believe the allegation. Respondents also mentioned wanting to protect or fearing the perpetrator, wanting to avoid upsetting others, and not feeling bothered by the abuse.

Surveys are imperfect guides to abuse victims' willingness to disclose, because of survey reluctance: surveyors have found that respondents only inconsistently report abuse when questioned over time (Fergusson, Horwood, & Woodward, 2000), and the fewer the number of questions, the less likely respondents disclose abuse (Wilsnack et al., 2002). If surveys are overlooking victims because of their reluctance to disclose, they will exaggerate the percentage of victims who disclosed their abuse in childhood,

because survey respondents who fail to disclose abuse to the surveyor are likely to be victims who also failed to disclose as children (Lyon, 2009). Surveys of children are likely affected even more by reluctance to disclose; this explains why prevalence estimates are often lower in childhood surveys than in adult surveys (underreporting is a larger problem in childhood surveys) (Finkelhor, 1994; Finkelhor & Dzuiba-Leatherman, 2004), and why official recognition of cases are sometimes higher (childhood surveys disproportionately identify cases that had already come to light) (Boney-McCoy & Finkelhor, 1995). In sum, surveys reveal high rates of non-reporting, and the rates are probably even higher, because the most reluctant victims fail to disclose to anyone.

Of course, it is also possible that surveys might exaggerate both the prevalence of abuse and the reluctance of abuse victims to disclose. But it is unlikely that a large percentage of survey respondents are falsely reporting abuse; since few cases were known to authorities, coercive investigative tactics could not be blamed for their reports, and only a very small percentage report having recovered memories of the abuse with the help of a therapist (Wilsnack, et al., 2002). It is possible that some respondents did in fact disclose at some point, but have forgotten doing so (London et al. 2008), but this possibility has not been quantified, and it may be countered by the fact that many respondents report disclosures that were vague and probably misunderstood (Ullman & Filipas, 1995). Finally, the statistics on official intervention must be qualified by the fact that about a third of abuse victims who are subject to official intervention fail to report it when surveyed as adults (Hardt & Rutter, 2004), and there is evidence this is attributable to reluctance to report (Femina, Yeager, & Lewis, 1990). But if adults are reluctant to disclose officially recognized cases, they are likely even more reluctant to

disclose cases that never came to the attention of the authorities. For that reason, the 10% figure for abuse known to authorities is probably a fair estimate.

The research examining abuse from the perspective of perpetrators also helps explain non-disclosure and reluctance. The modus operandi by which perpetrators commit abuse contributes to secrecy. Perpetrators often choose children on the basis of their vulnerability and the likelihood that they will comply and keep the abuse a secret (Beauregard, Rossmo, & Proulx, 2007; Conte, Wolf, & Smith, 1989). Perpetrators describe spending time with the child (Christiansen & Blake, 1990; Smallbone & Wortley, 2001) and giving the child gifts (Budin & Johnson, 1989; Christiansen & Blake, 1990). When the perpetrator is the child's parent (or parent-figure), the extra attention paid to the child not only has the effect of making the child feel special, but also isolates the child and the offending parent from the other family members (Christiansen and Blake, 1990).

Perpetrators commonly desensitize the child to sexual touch through progressively more invasive sexual touch and talk (Kaufman et al., 1998). The perpetrator can test the child's willingness to acquiesce (Christiansen & Blake, 1990) and the likelihood that the child will disclose (Kaufman et al., 1988). If the child discloses at an early stage of the process, the perpetrator can claim that the touch was merely affectionate, accidental, or otherwise nonsexual (Lang & Frenzel, 1988). As the abuse progresses, the perpetrator can assure the child of the harmlessness and morality of his actions (Christiansen & Blake, 1990). In part because of careful victim selection and preparation, initiation of overtly sexual acts need not involve violent force.

Moreover, much of the persuasive power comes from the perpetrator's status as an authoritative adult (Kaufman et al., 1998).

Once the abuse has begun, perpetrators typically make an effort to keep the abuse a secret. The perpetrator may overtly threaten the child with harm (Smith & Elstein, 1993), but more often the threats concern harms to the perpetrator (who the child wants to protect) (Smallbone & Wortley, 2001), and harms to the family if the abuse is disclosed (Lang & Frenzel, 1988).

Non-disclosure can also be understood from the child's perspective. Among the youngest children, there is lacking awareness that the abuse is wrong, and difficulty in describing sexual behavior (Cederborg, Lamb, & Laurell, 2007). Children are likely to feel complicit in sexual abuse, and hence will often experience self-blame (Quas, Goodman, & Jones, 2003). The more manipulative forms of abuse are likely to increase children's perceptions that they are partially responsible for the abuse. If the child fails to resist, she is more likely to believe that she consented. If she delays in reporting, she is more likely to believe that subsequent acts of abuse were consensual, or at least that her failure to disclose was responsible for their reoccurrence. Studies examining children who ultimately disclosed their abuse supports the contention that fears of negative consequences to the perpetrator, the self, and others close to the child deter immediate disclosure (Goodman-Brown, Edelstein, Goodman, Jones, & Gordon, 2003; Hershkowitz, Lanes, & Lamb, 2007; Malloy, Brubacher, & Lamb, 2011). Moreover, delays in disclosing are greater when the perpetrator is close to the child (London et al., 2008), when the perpetrator groomed the child (Hershkowitz, 2006; Sas & Cunningham,

1995), and when the child anticipated that the mother would be unsupportive post-disclosure (Hershkowitz, Lanes, & Lamb, 2007).

Developmental research examining children's false denials of wrongdoing also helps to explain non-disclosure, particularly of abuse that occurs within the family. Children begin to lie by two years of age, and their first lies predominantly involve denials of transgressions (Talwar & Crossman, 2012). In the lab, children's tendency to lie about committing minor transgressions quickly increases from two to four years of age (Evans & Lee, 2013; Talwar, Lee, Bala, & Lindsay, 2002). Children are also willing to lie to cover for others' transgressions (Talwar, Lee, Bala, & Lindsay, 2004) and those in which they are jointly implicated (Lyon, Malloy, Quas, & Talwar, 2008), and are more likely to lie for a parent than a stranger (Tye, Amato, Honts, Davis, & Peters, 1999). By 4 years of age, children recognize that children are more likely to lie for parents than for strangers, and by 6 years of age, they endorse this difference as a norm (Lyon, Ahern, Malloy, & Quas, 2010). By 6 years of age, children recognize that parents are less likely to believe their children when they accuse another parent (rather than a stranger) of wrongdoing, and by 8 years of age, children recognize that parents are less likely to contact authorities when another parent has harmed the child (Malloy, Quas, Lyon, & Ahern, in press). Hence, quite early in life children learn that when bad things happen in the family, they will stay in the family.

The literature thus supports two propositions: sexual abuse is difficult to disclose and officially recognized cases of sexual abuse comprise only a small percentage of child sexual abuse. These propositions enable us to understand the fact that high percentages of substantiated cases of sexual abuse are children who disclose their

abuse (London et al., 2008). Because children are not routinely screened for sexual abuse, sexual abuse cases usually come to the attention of the authorities because of a disclosure (Heger, Ticson, Velasquez, & Bernier, 2002). Because other evidence of abuse is typically lacking (e.g. medical evidence, eyewitnesses, or confessions by the perpetrator), sexual abuse cases are primarily substantiated by a disclosure (Haskett, Wayland, Hutcheson, & Tavana, 1995). Hence, if a child does not disclose abuse, he or she is unlikely to be suspected of being a victim, and unlikely to be substantiated as a victim. It is therefore unsurprising that the disclosure rates of substantiated cases of sexual abuse are often close to 100%.

The high rate of disclosures of sexual abuse among substantiated cases does not mean that sexually abused children are forthcoming about abuse, and that non-disclosure of abuse under questioning is convincing evidence against abuse. Rather, investigators are questioning children who have typically disclosed abuse before, and are substantiating cases when children are willing to disclose abuse again. Children who have disclosed abuse are nevertheless susceptible to pressures to recant, and when they are young, have disclosed against a member of the household, and have a non-supportive caretaker, they are very likely to recant (Malloy, Lyon, & Quas, 1997). Moreover, children who are questioned about abuse for suspicions other than disclosure are likely to initially deny abuse. For example, a review of several decades of research examining disclosure rates among children with gonorrhea, most of whom had been diagnosed before ever being questioned about sexual abuse, found that less than half of the children disclosed sexual abuse when first questioned (Lyon, 2007). Similarly low rates of initial disclosure have been found in studies examining cases in

which evidence other than disclosure led to both the suspicion and substantiation of abuse (Muram, Speck, & Gold, 1992; Sjoberg & Lindblad, 2002).

Recognizing that most children who disclose abuse have disclosed abuse before, authors of the leading protocol for interviewing children, the NICHD protocol, recommend that interviewers transition to disclosure by initially asking questions that do not directly mention abuse (Lamb et al., 2008). For example, the protocol begins with "tell me why you came to speak with me," which elicits disclosures in a majority of children who ultimately disclose abuse (Sternberg et al., 2001). If the initial question does not produce a disclosure, the protocol then recommends that the interviewer refer obliquely to prior disclosures (e.g., "I heard you talked to a teacher. Tell me what you talked about") before asking about anything explicitly "bad" or wrong." At the same time, proponents of the NICHD protocol approach emphasize that a substantial percentage of children for whom there are strong suspicions of abuse (but no prior disclosure) fail to disclose when interviewed using the protocol (Lamb, Hershkowitz, & Lyon, 2014).

In sum, there is substantial evidence that the typical victim of child sexual abuse will not disclose abuse during childhood. Children who disclose their abuse are therefore the tip of an iceberg, and are unusually forthcoming about their abuse. And although this review has focused on sexual abuse, similar dynamics operate to deter children from reporting physical abuse and domestic violence (Hershkowitz, 2006; Hershkowitz & Elul, 1999). Recognizing the dangers of suggestibility, researchers have developed tools for interviewing children who have come forward with their allegations.

With respect to children who are reluctant to disclose, research is ongoing, as I discuss below.

The problem with closed-ended questions in interviews

The NICHD protocol (and many other guidelines for interviewing children) emphasizes the need to avoid asking children closed-ended questions, so as to increase productivity and minimize suggestibility. Closed-ended questions are questions that can be answered with a single word or detail. Yes/no questions are clearly closed-ended, as are forced-choice questions (in which one asks the respondent to choose among options using the word "or"). Some types of suggestive questions are also closed-ended. In tag questions, one adds a tag to a declarative statement (e.g. "the car was red, wasn't it?"), and in negative term questions one asks a yes/no question with a negative term (e.g., "wasn't the car red?"). (Questions may also be suggestive not because of their form but because of their presuppositions; for example, asking "what happened after he shut the door" would be suggestive if nothing had previously been said about shutting the door.) Wh- questions run along a continuum from open-ended to closed-ended (without clearly defined boundaries). An open-ended wh- question is "what happened," whereas a closed-ended wh- question is "what color was the car."

Closed-ended questions are ubiquitous in normal conversations (Stivers, 2010). They are also the most common sort of question asked of children in forensic interviews (Lamb et al., 2008) and in court (Lyon et al., 2012; Stolzenberg & Lyon, 2014). When child interviewers are provided misleading information, and left to their own devices,

they will predominantly ask yes-no questions about the suggested events (Gilstrap, 2004; White, Leichtman, & Ceci, 1997).

Unfortunately, reliance on closed-ended questions in interviewing children about abuse raises several problems. First, closed-ended questions lead to simple, unelaborated responses in children. In adult/adult conversations, closed-ended questions are productive because respondents elaborate on their responses. For example, if a co-worker asks “did you have a good trip,” it would be uncooperative to simply answer “yes” or “no.” Rather, one interprets the question as “tell me about your trip.” The elaboration on one’s response generates content that in turn enables the questioner to ask further questions. In contrast, in adult/child conversations, If a question can be answered with an unelaborated “yes” or “no,” then a child is very likely to do so (Stolzenberg & Lyon, 2014). In order to keep the conversation going, the questioner must generate additional content on his own.

This raises the second problem with closed-ended questions. If the questioner is generating all the content, then the narrative that emerges is going to look more like the questioner’s perspective than the child’s perspective. For example, if one is asking a child about sexual abuse, and asking predominantly yes/no questions, then one will ask about aspects of an abusive event with which one is familiar. If something unusual occurred, it is unlikely to be discovered. Moreover, the child’s perspective is likely to be overlooked. This will make it more difficult to determine if the child’s report is credible, because the report that emerges will look similar to a report that an adult may have suggested to the child.

The third problem with closed-ended questions also stems from the fact that the interviewer is doing all the talking. If most of the words are the interviewer's, then this maximizes the likelihood that the child's limited language abilities will undermine the reliability of the child's report. The child may answer yes or no to a question because the child misunderstands some part of the question. Of course, children sometimes misuse words, and therefore their narratives will contain errors as well. However, when a child spontaneously uses a word incorrectly, one is more likely to detect a problem, because the statement will often appear non-sensical, and one can ask the child to elaborate.

Attempting to avoid all words that might present problems for children is a difficult, indeed nearly impossible, task. For example, children often have limited understanding of terms that are ubiquitous in conversation, such as prepositions (e.g., "on," "off," "in," and "under"). Interviewers sometimes attempt to test children's understanding of different prepositions by asking them to place various objects in or under other objects, but in addition to taking up precious time, there is no evidence that children's understanding of prepositions in that context applies to their understanding of the words in other contexts (e.g., under a box may be perceived differently than under one's clothing, because one is perceived vertically and the other proximally).

Asking a child if they know what "x" means is going to exaggerate comprehension, because children will answer "yes" if the word sounds like a word with which they are familiar (Saywitz, Jaenicke, & Camparo, 1990). Asking a child to tell you what "x" means is going to understate comprehension, because children understand far more than they can explain (Flavell, Miller, & Miller, 1985). It is very hard to develop a

task that accurately assesses comprehension. We have spent considerable time developing tasks for assessing children's understanding of "truth" and "lie," because of courts' insistence that their understanding be tested (Lyon, 2011). Despite our best efforts, however, our tasks are still insensitive to some understanding: children who fail our truth/lie understanding tasks but are nevertheless more likely to be honest when asked to "promise to tell the truth" (Lyon, Malloy, Quas, & Talwar, 2008).

Children have deficiencies in comprehension monitoring, which enables one to determine when one understands another's utterance. At a very young age, the very possibility of incomprehension is not understood; recognizing that one doesn't understand something requires insight into the workings of one's mind. At still older ages, children understand less than they realize, because adequate comprehension monitoring requires active self-assessment (Lyons & Ghetti, 2011) . Furthermore, there are surely motivational barriers to acknowledging that one doesn't understand a statement. As a result, children are likely to attempt to answer even the most incomprehensible questions (Carter et al., 1996; Perry et al., 1995).

A fourth problem with closed-ended questions is that children are unlikely to answer "I don't know," and instead will guess when they can (Poole & Lindsay, 2001). It is easier to guess in response to a closed-ended question than an open-ended question, because the open-ended question requires the respondent to generate an answer.

The final problem is that children may exhibit response biases: a tendency to respond to certain types of questions in a particular way, regardless of the truth. For example, with respect to yes/no questions, one could exhibit a "yes" bias, a tendency to

always say yes, or a “no bias,” a tendency to always say no. With respect to forced-choice questions, one could exhibit a tendency to always choose the first option or the last option.

The evidence regarding children’s response biases to yes/no questions is mixed. Although some research has found a “yes” bias among young children (Peterson, Dowden, & Tobin, 1999), other research has found a lack of any bias (Brady et al., 1999). It is likely that the content of the questions influences bias. Children are particularly likely to exhibit a no bias when they are asked about unpleasant content. As noted above, children’s first lies are denials of misbehavior. Children are most adept at telling falsehoods when they can answer with reference to their desires rather than reality (Ahern, Quas, & Lyon, 2011). Relatedly, children exhibit a positivity bias, which reflects their assumption that they and other people are good (Boseovski, 2010). Hence, if a young child recognizes that questions reference something negative, and intimate misbehavior, then they will be biased to answer “no.”

Research specifically designed to examine children’s response bias have used incomprehensible questions (this reduces the likelihood that content will influence children’s responses). Although 2 year olds exhibit a yes bias, 3 year olds show no consistent pattern, and by 4 children exhibit a no bias (Fritzley & Lee, 2003, 2013). The potential for children to simply say no to a series of yes/no questions about abuse raises the point that the danger of yes/no questions is not simply that false allegations can emerge (which is most likely if the yes/no questions are combined with overtly suggestive influences, or if the child does not recognize the negative implications of the

suggested behavior), but that true allegations will be undiscovered because the child will simply answer no.

In order to override any “no” bias, it is necessary to make the questions more suggestive than simple yes/no questions. So, for example, tag questions make yes/no questions more suggestive by clearly communicating the questioner’s expected response (he hurt you, didn’t he?) (Cassel, Roebers, & Bjorklund, 1996). Furthermore, as noted above, repetition with positive reinforcement of “yes” responses increases children’s acquiescence (Garven, Wood, & Malpass, 2000). Whether repetition alone is enough to create false reports is disputed (Lyon, 2002); again, content appears to be key, with children unlikely to change their answers to repeated questions when those questions imply wrongdoing (Lyon, Malloy, Quas, & Talwar, 2008).

In sum, closed-ended questions reduce the reliability and productivity of children’s responses. Because of their limitations, interviewers must be concerned both with creating false allegations and with missing true allegations.

How interviewers can avoid asking closed-ended questions

Interviewers questioning children are likely to feel frustrated when they first attempt to ask children open-ended questions. A classic finding in the memory literature is that although recall is more accurate than recognition, it is less complete (Pear & Wyatt, 1914). Free recall utilizes open-ended questions (such as “what happened?”) whereas recognition utilizes yes/no or forced-choice questions. In children, the different between recall and recognition is accentuated, because children’s recall is particularly poor, and their recognition abilities quite good (Fivush, 1993). Parents who ask their children to tell them about their day in preschool are likely to

report than when they ask “what did you do today,” the child’s response will be “we played.”

Moreover, open-ended questions may not elicit specific details that are important to an investigation, for several reasons. First, children are likely to omit details that are forensically important because they are unaware of their importance (Fivush, 1993). For example, a highly relevant detail is whether ejaculation occurred. Children who are unaware of the mechanics of sex, however, may not spontaneously mention this fact. Second, as they mature, children acquire the ability to tell more elaborate and convincing narratives, that include, for example, the thoughts and feelings of the protagonist (McCabe & Peterson, 1991). They are more likely to omit details that an observer would use to assess their credibility. For example, children disclosing sexual abuse are likely to omit discussion of their reactions to abuse (Lamb et al., 1997). Third, if children are motivated to conceal information, they are more likely to do so when asked free recall than when asked recognition questions. Hence, when interviewers ask children “what happened,” they are less likely to elicit a true report of a transgression than if they ask a yes/no question (Pipe & Wilson, 1994).

Researchers have identified a number of means for increasing children’s productivity in responding to open-ended questions. First, there is the method called narrative practice rapport building. Because children are unaccustomed to providing narrative responses, it is helpful if the interviewer first asks the child to narrate a neutral event by asking open-ended questions. In the field, narrative practice rapport building leads children disclosing sexual abuse to provide a significantly longer initial report, before any followup questions are necessary (Sternberg et al., 1997). In the lab, the

method has been found to increase the accuracy of children's responses (Roberts et al., 2004) and to increase the productivity of open-ended questions (Brown et al., 2013). Although narrative practice rapport building does not appear to increase children's willingness to disclose transgressions, it can increase the productivity of their disclosures when combined with other methods for overcoming reluctance (Lyon et al., in press). Interviewers must be careful, however, to keep the practice to about five minutes, because more lengthy rapport building can fatigue children (Hershkowitz, 2009; Roberts et al., 2004).

Second, another effective tool for increasing the productivity of children's free recall is a type of question called "cued invitations." For example, if the child mentions being pushed onto a bed, the interviewer follows up with "you said he pushed you onto the bed" and then adds "tell me more about that" or "what happened next?" Cued invitations have been shown in field studies to elicit a large number of new details per question (Lamb et al., 2008), and lab research has found that they are highly accurate (Brown et al., 2013). Prior research has likely underestimated the potential for eliciting additional free recall from young children, because children were typically asked unelaborated "tell me more" questions, which provided no guidance with respect to the additional details that could be produced (Saywitz, Goodman, Nicholas, & Moan, 1991).

Third, children can be asked free recall questions keyed to their different sensory experiences. After children are asked to narrate everything that happened, additional details can be elicited by asking children to recall everything they "saw" and "heard" about the event (Elischberger & Roebers, 2001; Poole & Lindsay, 1995). Fourth, there are non-suggestive means of increasing the productivity of children's narratives,

including vocatives (e.g., the use of the child's name) and back-channel responses (e.g., "uh-huh," also known as facilitators), in which the interviewer signals that he or she is listening without taking the floor) (Hershkowitz, 2009).

Fifth, interviewers can supplement children's free recall through the judicious use of wh- questions, particularly open-ended wh- questions. One reason why children's free recall is so deficient is that there are large developmental improvements in children's ability to self-generate cues that enable them to recall information (Bjorklund & Muir, 1988). For example, when asked to recall an event, adults naturally ask themselves questions about the context (e.g. "who was there?") in order to remember additional details. Therefore, the interviewer may need to scaffold the child's performance by asking the appropriate specific questions. Furthermore, most yes-no questions can be replaced with less specific wh- questions. As noted above, children's narratives of abuse often exclude information about their emotional reactions. When questioned specifically about their reactions, children are likely to be asked closed-ended questions, such as "did it hurt?" In contrast, asking children "how did you feel?" focuses their attention on their reactions without suggesting information (Lyon et al., 2012), and asking a cued invitation as a follow-up may elicit additional content (Ahern & Lyon, 2013). The most effective wh- questions concern actions; children's responses to wh- questions about actions are both most accurate (Peterson, Dowden, & Tobin, 1999) and most productive (Lamb et al., 2003). A number of studies have found that wh-questions, particularly when they involve central details of the event, elicit highly accurate information from even young children (Hudson, 1990; Peterson & Bell, 1996).

Instructions as a means of improving children's performance

In addition to changing the kinds of questions they ask of children, interviewers can improve children's performance through interview instructions. One purpose of instructions is to provide children guidance on the nature of an investigative interview. Children are accustomed to interactions with adults, such as teachers and parents, who know the answers to their questions. They may be accustomed to answering questions so as to conform to the expectations of the questioner. In an investigative interview, the usual roles are reversed: the child is the expert and the adult is ignorant of the truth.

Providing children some practice with flagging incomprehensible questions improves their performance (Peters & Nunez, 1998; Saywitz, Snyder, & Nathanson, 1999.). Two studies have found positive effects from warning children that questions might mislead them and then giving permission for them to correct the interviewer (Saywitz & Moan-Hardie, 1994; Warren et al., 1991). A number of studies have found that instructing children that "I don't know" answers are acceptable reduces children's errors (Cordon, Goodman, & Saetermoe, 2005; Endres, Poggenpohl, & Erben, 1999; Gee, Gregory, & Pipe, 1999; Saywitz & Moan-Hardie, 1994; Warren, Hulse-Trotter, & Tubbs, 1991). In order to make the instruction effective, however, it is not enough to merely tell the child that don't know responses are acceptable (Geddie, Fradin, & Beer, 2000; Memon & Vartoukian, 1996; Moston, 1987). Rather, children should be given examples and feedback. Furthermore, interviewers should reinforce giving an answer when one does know, so children don't overuse the "I don't know" response (Gee et al., 1999; Saywitz & Moan-Hardie, 1994). Informing the child that the interviewer doesn't know the answers to his or her questions also reduces suggestibility (Mulder & Vrij, 1996).

There are contexts in which instructions are likely to be less effective. Very young children are likely to be less responsive to instructions, because they are less aware of when they don't know the answer to questions and when they don't understand questions. Furthermore, if an interview utilizes a great number of closed-ended or suggestive questions, instructions are likely less effective. Hence, instructions have the greatest utility if combined with moves toward more open-ended questioning.

Researchers have also identified some instructions that can reduce children's reluctance to disclose transgressions. Reassuring children that they will not get in trouble with the interviewer has had positive effects on children (Lyon & Dorado, 2008; Lyon et al., 2008), but interviewers must be careful not to specify the suspected transgression, as this can be suggestive (Lyon & Dorado, 2008). Eliciting a promise from children to tell the truth has been found to increase children's willingness to disclose self-transgressions (Evans & Lee, 2010; Talwar, Lee, Bala, & Lindsay, 2002, 2004), joint transgressions (Lyon & Dorado, 2008; Lyon et al., 2008), and to decrease children's willingness to provide a coached false report (Lyon et al., 2008). Most recently, we have found that children are more likely to disclose a transgression if they are told that the suspect told the interviewer "everything that happened," without specifying any details, and that the suspect wants the child to tell the truth, an approach called the putative confession (Lyon et al., 2014). This instruction must be used with caution, however, lest the interviewer suggest information. In the field, there is preliminary evidence that disclosures of abuse can be facilitated through various types of interviewer support, such as acknowledging the difficulties of the interview, without specifically reinforcing disclosure (Lamb, Hershkowitz, & Lyon, 2014). Much work

remains to be done to understand how to overcome non-disclosing children's reluctance without risking suggestibility.

Implications for the legal system

The research reviewed here can assist the legal system in assessing the reliability of children's reports of abuse. A better understanding of the dynamics of abuse disclosure can help fact-finders assess the significance of delays, inconsistencies, and recantation in deciding whether to believe that a child was abused. The fact that children who are recognized as abused are disproportionately those who are forthcoming about abuse, and therefore non-representative of the abused population, teaches us that when a child fails to initially disclose, we should not inevitably conclude that the child's report was the product of suggestion. Just as we examine children's abuse disclosures for possible evidence of adult influence, children's denials may also be the product of pressure from others close to the child.

An understanding of optimal interviewing strategies, which both minimize suggestion and maximize productivity, can also assist legal decisionmakers. Courts are often in the position of assessing the quality of forensic interviews, including in determining whether to admit them into evidence under special exceptions to the hearsay rule for children's complaints of abuse (Myers, 2011). In some states, the courts may exclude children from testifying if they conclude that pretrial interviewing tainted the child's report (Raeder, 2010). Defense attorneys will routinely argue that children's reports are the product of adult influence (Stolzenberg & Lyon, 2014). Moreover, the defense will often seek to offer expert testimony on the suggestibility of children and the quality of interviews (Bruck & Ceci, 2013).

Unfortunately, the legal system has failed to fully heed the lessons of current knowledge. The law knows how to criticize the interviewing performance of professionals who work outside the courtroom, but has been slow to reform how children are questioned inside the courtroom. Prosecutors' questions tend to be closed-ended, leading to unelaborated responses from children (Lyon et al., 2012; Stolzenberg & Lyon, 2014), and their questions are often unnecessarily difficult (Evans & Lyon, 2012) and as complex as defense attorneys' (Evans, Lee, & Lyon, 2009). Prosecutors frequently fail to ask children about their reasons for failing to disclose (or why they disclosed when they did), and do little to teach jurors how abuse perpetrators' behavior induces compliance and silence (Stolzenberg & Lyon, 2014).

Conclusion

This review has highlighted the positive advice that psychological research examining child witnesses' performance in the lab and in the field has for child interviewing. There is substantial evidence that the child abuse cases that come to light are disproportionately cases in which children have disclosed and can provide a complete report if questioned effectively. Interviewers can avoid suggesting information by avoiding the egregious forms of suggestion that have been exposed in high-profile abuse cases and by moving from closed-ended to open-ended questions. Instructions about the nature of interviews can improve children's performance. Researchers are now developing methods for overcoming reluctance to disclose among children who remain silent about abuse. The findings are of use to the legal community, both when assessing the quality of children's reports, and in prescribing optimal methods for questioning children in future cases.

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Sidebar

Ten-Step Investigative Interview

(Lyon, 2005; adapted from the NICHD structured protocol (Lamb et al., 2008))

1-5. Interview Instructions (don't know (with feedback), don't understand (with feedback), you're wrong (with feedback), ignorant interviewer, promise to tell the truth)

6. Practice Narratives (Ask about things child likes to do, doesn't like to do, child's last birthday, followed up with "tell me more about [child's words]" and "you said [child's words]; what happened next?"

7. Allegation Question (Ask "Tell me why I came to talk to you," and if no disclosure, questions about prior disclosure or abuse concerns.)

8. Allegation Follow-up (Ask "You said that [allegation]. Tell me everything that happened.")

9. Additional Follow-up (Ask "Tell me more about [child's words]," "You said [child's words]; what happened next,"and open-ended wh-questions. Avoid yes/no and forced-choice questions.)

10. Multiple Incidents (Ask "Did [allegation] happen one time or more than one time?," "Tell me everything that happened the time you remember the most," "Tell me everything that happened the first time," and "Tell me everything that happened the last time.")