



The effect of using trained versus untrained adult respondents in simulated practice interviews about child abuse[☆]

Martine B. Powell^{a,*}, Ronald P. Fisher^b, Carolyn H. Hughes-Scholes^a

^a School of Psychology, Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia

^b Department of Psychology, Florida International University, Miami, FL, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 22 February 2006

Received in revised form 11 March 2008

Accepted 15 May 2008

Available online 21 November 2008

Keywords:

Investigative interviewing

Training

Child protective services

Child sexual abuse

ABSTRACT

Objective: A single study tested the hypothesis that simulated practice interviews for investigative interviewers of children are more effective when the role of the child respondent is played by trained actors (i.e., postgraduate psychology students) than untrained fellow participants (i.e., child protection workers).

Method: The interviewers included 50 child protection service workers. Each interviewer received instruction in the use of open-ended questions and then engaged in two simulated practice interviews. The role of the child respondent in the practice interviews was played by either a trained psychology student or an untrained fellow participant. The key outcome measure was the proportion of open-ended questions, which was assessed immediately prior to and after the practice sessions, as well as 12 weeks post-training.

Results: Interviewers who had practiced with trained actors had higher post-training performance ($M = .83, SD = .12$) compared to those who had practiced with untrained fellow participants ($M = .73, SD = .13, p < .05$), even at the 12-week follow up (M actors = $.66, SD = .25$; M untrained actors = $.49, SD = .23, p < .05$).

Conclusions: Training programs that make better use of practice opportunities (e.g., by using trained respondents) will be more effective in improving the performance of investigative interviewers.

Practice implications: A single study investigated the relative effectiveness of two simulated practice exercises for professionals who interview children about abuse. This research is relevant to professionals who design investigative interviewer training programs because it indicates that practical exercises, which are currently chosen on an 'ad hoc' or convenience basis, can vary markedly in their effectiveness in encouraging adherence to open questions.

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Introduction

In cases of suspected child abuse, children are usually crucial witnesses. To ensure that the evidence obtained from child witnesses is both accurate and admissible in court, investigative interviewers require special training. There is international consensus that investigative interviewers should use open-ended questions (where possible) to ensure that children tell their own accounts (Home Office, 2002). Compared to specific or closed questions, open-ended questions encourage more elaborate, accurate and unsolicited information from respondents (Fisher, 1999). Open-ended questions also make the interviewer's task easier compared to specific questions since the witness (rather than the interviewer) is required to create the

[☆] The research was funded by an Australian Research Council Linkage Grant (LP0347170).

* Corresponding author. School of Psychology, Deakin University, 221 Burwood Hwy, Burwood, 3125 Victoria, Australia.

retrieval probe. The use of open-ended questions is, therefore, taught to child protection workers when they undergo initial training in child abuse investigation (Powell, 2002). However, evidence indicates that most of these professionals do not use these questions when interviewing children in the field. Instead, investigative interviewers mostly ask specific questions, which risk contaminating the witness' account (see Powell, Fisher, & Wright, 2005 for review).

Professionals' difficulties in adhering to "best-practice" interview guidelines reflect several unique characteristics of the investigative interview process. These characteristics include the specificity of the detail required for successful prosecution of child abuse and the unfamiliar nature of the open-ended discourse style (specific questions are more commonly used in English-speaking countries, Powell, 2000). Further, children's ability to narrate an event in their own words (the very substance of a good investigative interview) depends largely on skills that are 'under construction' in a typically developing child (Fivush, 1993). Unless the interviewer persists with an open-ended interviewing style and refrains from interrupting the child witness with excessive questioning, children do not engage in the type of elaborate memory retrieval required to elicit a detailed narrative account. The multiple pressures associated with the investigation of child abuse and the level of detail that is required often compel interviewers to use specific questions (e.g., questions starting with who, what, when, where, how) soon after the narrative account commences (Davies, Wilson, Mitchell, & Milsom, 1995). The problem with specific questions is that they inevitably increase error rates (compared to when witnesses volunteer accounts in their own words). This is due to response biases (a witness' tendencies to provide answers without reflection) and to false recognition of details contained in specific questions (Roberts & Powell, 2001).

Although prior research has highlighted the benefit of using open-ended questions, as well as interviewers' difficulties in maintaining these questions, it is not yet established how expertise in interviewing is learned and sustained. Indeed, most prior research has merely demonstrated the ineffectiveness of training programs by comparing interviewers' performance pre- and post-training (see Powell et al., 2005 for review). Only one group of researchers to date (Lamb and colleagues) has investigated the factors that *promote* the use of 'best-practice' interview guidelines. Overall, the work by Lamb and colleagues has shown that substantial improvements in the outcome of interview training programs can be achieved by providing: (i) multiple practice sessions, (ii) regular supervision and feedback, and (iii) the adoption of structured interviews protocols including example questions. This conclusion was based on studies that showed an increase in interviewers' use of open-ended questions with the adoption of these elements, and a decline in performance following a period of time when these techniques were not maintained (Lamb, Sternberg, Orbach, Esplin, & Mitchell, 2002; Lamb, Sternberg, Orbach, Hershkowitz, Horowitz, & Esplin, 2002; Orbach et al., 2000; Sternberg, Lamb, Orbach, Esplin, & Mitchell, 2001).

Research is still in its infancy, however, and work is now needed to define the precise way in which feedback and practice exercises should be offered in training programs. The current study focuses on one factor that may influence the effectiveness of training programs: the type of respondent used in simulated practice exercises. For obvious ethical, legal and practical reasons, trainee interviewers do not practice their interviewing skills on abused children. Rather, 'mock' interviews are staged. In some training programs, mock interviews are conducted with mainstream children who are required to recall an innocuous event that was staged at their school or training venue. For example, Warren et al. (1999) used this procedure in a training program involving 22 child protection service workers. Children aged 3–5 years participated in a scripted magic show and 'silly doctor' game at their school. These children then attended the training venue where they were interviewed individually by professionals about the staged events.

The main advantage of staging mock interviews involving school children is that the communication process is a *genuine* interaction between an adult interviewer and a child. Thus, the process realistically portrays the communication barriers and misunderstandings that commonly arise when children (whose language and memory ability are not as developed as that of adults) are questioned about an event. The main disadvantage, however, is that because the event is novel and innocuous, the interview may have little similarity in content and structure to those interviews conducted in the field. Indeed, one of the most challenging tasks in field interviews with child abuse victims is to elicit an unambiguous *disclosure* of an abusive act and to identify contextual and temporal details that may assist in particularizing separate offences (S vs R, 1989). These are not usually problems when interviewing a child about a recent enjoyable and novel event such as a magic show.

Another practice procedure commonly used in training programs is to have child abuse investigators (trainee interviewers) play the role of respondent in simulated interviews, either recalling actual events they had experienced (e.g., a trip to a restaurant) or acting the role of a child who alleges abuse. The main advantages associated with this procedure is that the topic can mimic that of field interviews and the procedure allows considerable flexibility in scheduling interviews and involving trainers whose job is to provide feedback during or immediately after the interview (Powell, 2002). This procedure also allows abuse investigators to learn about the interview process from the perspective of the interviewee, rather than from only the interviewer's perspective. This new perspective may enrich investigators' understanding of the interview process and give rise to insights they would not have acquired from their real-world role as the interviewer. The main disadvantage with this approach is that the task may not mimic the challenges faced when interviewing children in the field (Lexton, Smith, Olufemi, & Poole, 2005). Indeed, we have noted in our training programs that professionals' responses in simulated interviews often reflect superior skill in memory and language than that typically portrayed by child witnesses in investigative interviews (Powell, 2002). In other words, too much detail is provided too quickly in the simulated interviews. While children are clearly capable of providing detailed accounts of their experiences, considerable skill and patience is required on the part of the interviewer to assist the child in telling his or her story, and to avoid interruption (Powell & Snow, 2007).

The literature on human learning suggests that overestimating the skill of child witnesses in practice interviews could have a negative impact on the amount of learning transferred from the training session to the field. When practicing any

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