



## A controlled analysis of professionals' contemporaneous notes of interviews about alleged child abuse

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 6 August 2008

Received in revised form 8 September 2009

Accepted 30 September 2009

Available online 29 March 2010

#### Keywords:

Investigative interviewing

Note taking

Record keeping

### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** The current study investigated (under optimal conditions) the accuracy and completeness of professionals' contemporaneous written notes of child abuse interviews.

**Method:** Participants included 107 experienced child abuse investigators who were all trained to adhere to best-practice interview guidelines and who routinely took notes as records of interviews. The interviews documented for this study were read live for 15 min duration, and at a pace of 2.2 words (on average)/s. The professionals' notes of the interviews were analyzed for completeness and accuracy. Key outcome measures were the prevalence and discernability of the questions (i.e., whether the structure of questions was recorded accurately) as well as the child responses.

**Results:** Despite the omission of 39% of abuse-related details, recording of content details was clearly prioritized over interviewer questions. This was revealed irrespective of the measure of note taking quality or the quality of the interview being recorded. Of the various layout styles employed, scrutiny of interviewer questions was maximized by: (a) using symbols or spacing to delineate questions and responses, (b) capturing the first two words of a question, and (c) using abbreviations.

**Conclusions:** Although note taking could potentially improve with further research, training and instruction, this form of documentation does not provide full scrutiny of the interview process, even under optimal conditions.

**Practice implications:** Electronic recording is strongly recommended for all interviews, especially considering global concerns about interviewers' adherence to best-practice interview guidelines. If notes continue to be used as a record of interview, further research and training are urgently warranted to improve note taking competency.

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### Introduction

The current study provides a comprehensive controlled examination of the quality of professionals' contemporaneous written notes of child abuse interviews. Most police and human service organizations still use note taking as a form of documenting interviews in some circumstances, even in those jurisdictions where legislation allows for the electronic recording of children's evidence (Hoyano & Keenan, 2007). Evaluation of professionals' note taking is important given the strong relationship between interviewer questions and the accuracy of child responses, and the fact that professionals across most jurisdictions display difficulties adhering to best-practice guidelines in the workplace (see Powell, Fisher, & Wright, 2005, for review).

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To date, only one prior study has conducted a comparison of professionals' notes against a complete record of interview. Specifically, Lamb, Orbach, Sternberg, Hershkowitz, and Horowitz (2000) obtained parallel audio-taped recordings and hand-written records by investigators in a jurisdiction where electronic recording had just been introduced and the procedure of taking verbatim written notes (to record the substantive conversations in their entirety) had not been completely phased out. Overall, Lamb et al.'s evaluation indicated that the interviewers' notes were not reliable records of interview. A large proportion of interviewer utterances reported were unaccounted for in the professionals' notes, particularly the interviewers' questions (57% of questions were omitted compared to 25% of incident-relevant child responses). Further, although commission errors in relation to abusive event details were rare, the note takers' descriptions of questions (when recorded) were accurate in only 44% of cases.

It is important to note that the study by Lamb et al. (2000) was based on a small sample of interviews ( $N=20$ , conducted by eight Israeli child abuse investigators between 1989 and 1991), prior to the establishment of best-practice interview protocols such as the Memorandum of Good Practice (Home Office & Department of Health, 1992) and the NICHD protocol (Orbach et al., 2000). Further, the note takers were the same investigators who actually conducted the interviews (i.e., the investigator's task was to reconstruct their interviews from notes taken *during* the interview). The purpose of the current study, therefore, was to extend the prior work of Lamb et al. (2000) by examining the notes of a large (representative) sample of professionals and using a design where professionals' *sole* task was to take notes (as opposed to conducting the dual task of interviewing as well). Further, consistent with most current training programs, the participants used in this study were all aware of the role of interviewer questions in obtaining reliable accounts from children. Collectively, these conditions were expected to paint a more optimistic picture of professionals' ability to document interviews compared to Lamb et al.'s study, especially in light of Berliner and Lieb's (2001) anecdotal observation that some interviewers appear to be able to provide near-verbatim records of interviews.

So what would one expect if note taking is to be considered a reliable method of interview documentation? Given the profound impact that interviewer questions can have on the accuracy and detail of the responses, one would expect completeness of recording in relation to interviewer questions as well as the child responses. In addition to examining this issue, the current study examined the strategies and layout styles associated with better quality notes. The purpose of the qualitative analysis was to generate (tentative) recommendations regarding how (if at all) note taking performance may be able to be improved on a global scale.

## Method

### *Participants and interviews*

Participants ( $N=107$ ) were recruited between 2004 and 2006 through supervisors at various Australian police and human service organizations. Participants took part in the study in small groups which were randomly allocated to three conditions. The conditions varied depending on the quality of the interview being recorded (good, mediocre, or poor) but were equated for total words and number of substantive response details in the interview. Further, the profile of the participants (e.g., gender and interviewer experience) was held constant across the conditions and all interviews were modeled on an actual abuse interview where a 5-year-old girl alleged that a friend of her parents had sexually abused her while babysitting her and her older brother. The interviews commenced at the substantive phase by asking "Tell me what you're here to talk about today?" The good interview consisted predominantly of open-ended questions (i.e., those that encourage an elaborate response but do not specify information that the witness is required to report). In contrast, the mediocre and poor interview consisted of approximately one-third open-ended and only a single open-ended question, respectively. These two interviews consisted predominantly of specific questions (e.g., "Wh" questions and closed questions) which specify what precise information the witness is required to report.

### *Procedure*

All professionals had successfully completed an initial training course (designed to teach adherence to best-practice interview guidelines) when they first applied to become child abuse investigators. A 3-h recap of this course was given immediately prior to completing the note taking exercise, which included a practical exercise where each participant was required to demonstrate adherence to an open-ended questioning style. The purpose of the simulated interview was to encourage active (re)learning of the principles, and to (subsequently) allow us to determine whether interviewer performance was equated across the three participant groups. This was found to be the case. In fact, adherence to open-ended questions in this sample was relatively high ( $M prop = .73, SD = .19$ ) at the time the note taking task was conducted.

At the commencement of the note taking task, all participants were seated at desks and were given a pen and 20 sheets of lined note paper along with the following instruction: "The purpose of this task is to examine the quality, accuracy and style of professionals' contemporaneous notes of alleged child abuse interviews. You are required to listen to the following interview which will be read live from a script. You are required to take notes of this interview (while it is being read) in the same manner that you would take notes in field situations where the notes would be the only record of interview."

The interviews were read by two persons; one played the role of interviewer while the other played the role of child respondent. The transcripts were read at a pace of approximately 2.2 words/s and each interview took 15 min to deliver.

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