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An examination of the types of leading questions used by investigative interviewers of children

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the nature of leading questions used by a representative sample of investigative interviewers of children. In particular, it examined whether these interviewers use the type of questions that are known to elicit reports of false activities or events among child samples.

Design/methodology/approach – A total of 82 police officers who were authorized to conduct interviews with alleged child abuse victims conducted individual mock interviews with children aged 5-7 years. The focus of the interviews was an event that was staged in the children's school a week earlier. Prior to the interview, each officer was provided with accurate and inaccurate information about the event, including details about an activity that did not occur. The officers' task was to elicit as detailed and accurate account of the event as possible using the techniques they would “normally” use in the field.

Findings – Although the officers refrained from using coercive interview techniques, two problematic types of questions were relatively common. These include: questions that presumed that an activity/detail occurred that had not been previously mentioned by the child; and questions that included highly specific details about an activity. Both of these techniques had featured in prior laboratory research on children's false event narratives.

Research limitations/implications – These results support the need for better training techniques for assisting officers to avoid the use of leading questions.

Originality/value – While it is well established that investigative interviewers do sometimes use leading questions when interviewing children, this is the first study to specify the incidence of various types of leading questions.

The act of eliciting reliable and detailed information from a child about an event or situation is a complex process that requires specialised skills in forensic interviewing. While children as young as three years of age are capable of providing detailed and accurate disclosures of events, their ability to do so is determined by a wide range of factors (Ceci et al., 2002). One of the most important factors is the questioning techniques used by the interviewer.
Irrespective of the child’s developmental level, an investigative interview that adheres to “best-practice” interview guidelines (i.e. encourages the child to report what happened in his or her own words) minimises the likelihood of errors (Powell et al., 2005).

Errors in children’s accounts of events tend to be heightened when interviewers propose or presume that certain details (not included in the event) occurred (Greenstock and Pipe, 1996; Roberts et al., 1999). Errors also tend to be heightened when questions narrow the range of response options (Lamb and Fauchier, 2001; Orbach and Lamb, 2001). The majority of work on children’s suggestibility has focused on the degree to which interviewers can mislead children about experienced events. More recently research has focused on situations where the interviewer leads children to report an entirely false (i.e. non-experienced) event or activity. This type of error is relevant in cases where lawyers claim that a child witness had been coerced by an interviewer to provide an entirely false account of abuse (Gardner, 1992).

While not all children can be led to provide false accounts of events, such accounts have been found to occur (in laboratory settings) across a variety of events; events that have varied in content (Bruck et al., 2002), plausibility (Jones and Powell, 2005; Pezdek and Hodge, 1999), saliency (Ghetti and Alexander, 2004) and the degree of the child’s prior knowledge and experience (Ceci et al., 1994a,b). As with recall of experienced events, this type of suggestibility is higher among younger children (i.e. preschoolers) compared to older children, and it tends to occur when the interviewer falsely presumes that an activity or event occurred and then requests that the child report details about it (Ceci et al., 1994b; Ghetti and Alexander, 2004; Jones and Powell, 2005; Pezdek and Hodge, 1999; Powell et al., 2003; Quas et al., 1999). The prevalence of false reports of events/activities is also heightened when the interviewer provides specific details about the event (Bruck et al., 2002; Ghetti and Alexander, 2004; Pezdek and Hodge, 1999; Quas et al., 1999), and uses coercive techniques (e.g. appeal for assistance, instructions to pretend or imagine, selective reinforcement of event-related responses) that encourage the child to report the event in his/her own words (Bruck et al., 2002; Erdmann et al., 2004). With these techniques, false reports can occur that are quite rich in detail, even among children who initially denied the occurrence of the false activity or event (Bruck et al., 2002; Erdmann et al., 2004). For example, in the studies by Bruck et al. (2002) and Powell et al. (2003), assent rates among preschoolers were similar (after suggestive questioning) for true (experienced) and false activities. In fact, by the third interview, the children's narratives about the false activities were no different in detail, structure and quality compared with their narratives about true activities (i.e. the accounts for true and false events included similar references to subjects, objects, actions, temporal markers, descriptive details, locations and contradictions). Taken together, the prior research has highlighted the potential dangers when interviewers of young children assume that events/activities occurred.

Research on interviewer questioning style is still in its infancy, particularly in respect to the evaluation of leading questions used by interviewers in the field. We know that interviewers in the field do ask leading questions (the range varies from 16 to 59 per cent across studies, Aldridge and Cameron, 1999; Cederborg et al., 2000; Davies et al., 2000; Hershkowitz et al., 1997; Lamb et al., 1996, 2000, 2002a; Orbach et al., 2000; Sternberg et al., 1996, 2001; Warren et al., 1999). However, the incidence of various subtypes of leading questions has not yet been specified. Previous evaluation work has focused almost exclusively on the degree to which investigative interviewers adopt best-practice interview guidelines rather
than the risk of error arising from the particular leading questions. Indeed, a single category has generally been used in prior evaluation research to represent all leading questions (Powell et al., 2005). When multiple categories of leading or suggestive questions have been reported (Lamb et al., 2002b; Sternberg et al., 1996), the questions tend to be combined in the following way. One category typically includes all questions that focus on details that the child has not mentioned previously but invite the child to choose yes or no or another option (e.g. “Was your brother home that day?”). Another category includes questions that presume certain information (e.g. Child: “We laid on the sofa.” Interviewer: “He laid on you or you laid on him?”), or imply what answer is desired (e.g. “He forced you to do that, didn’t he?”). The problem with these categories is that they do not discriminate whether the question relates to an entirely false event or activity, as opposed to a more specific detail of an event that was previously disclosed by the child. Further, the categories do not discriminate between questions that include few specific details (e.g. “Was anyone else at your home that day?”) compared to questions that contain details that could be used by the child to construct an account of a false event (e.g. “Was there a man called Mr Briggs at your home that day?”).

So what type of study would be needed to demonstrate the precise nature of leading questions used by investigative interviewers? First, the study would need to discriminate the degree to which leading questions used by investigative interviewers presumed potentially false activities or events and included highly specific details about the event. In addition, the study would need to include a representative or “typical” sample of investigative interviewers. Most of the prior evaluation studies on interviewers' performance have used relatively small groups of interviewers (e.g. 10-20 professionals) whose background experience, knowledge and training had not been identified (see Powell et al., 2005, for review). Further, in most studies, the participants had enrolled in the research in order to improve their skills in investigative interviewing. In other words, the sample of interviewers was self-selected and thus may provide an underestimation of the performance of most investigative interviewers who do not seek further education or training in interviewing technique (Powell et al., 2005). Best-practice interview guidelines (which specify the use of non-leading questions) are now widely taught in interviewer training programs across the globe and such programs usually incorporate considerable practice and feedback in adherence to the guidelines (Powell et al., 2005).

Finally, an examination of the relevance of prior suggestibility research (particularly children's reporting of false events) requires consideration of the background case-related information known to the interviewers. As trainers acknowledge, some leading questions are more justified than others, depending on various case-related factors (Poole and Lamb, 1998). For example, if a child does not disclose abuse, but there is strong corroborative evidence to support that the abuse occurred, the use of a leading question may be quite acceptable to the court (Powell, 2003). The problem with prior studies that have examined the performance of investigative interviewers is that the background information known to the interviewers was not provided. The studies had either utilised field interviews with actual alleged victims of child abuse where the prior information obtained by the interviewer was not documented (Orbach et al., 2000; Sternberg et al., 2001), or mock interviews with school children about a staged event where the interviewers had little prior knowledge about what occurred (Agnew et al., 2006; Gilstrap, 2004; Warren et al., 1999). Using unbiased interviewers is problematic because investigative interviewers (particularly police officers) rarely conduct interviews about abuse without prior case-related
information that is indicative of abuse (Aarons et al., 2004), and we know that strong bias increases the likelihood that interviewers will use suggestive or leading questions (Nickerson, 1998; White et al., 1997).

In summary, although it is well established that investigative interviewers do sometimes use leading questions, the incidence of various types of leading questions (particularly those known to elicit entirely false reports of activities or events from children) is not known. The current study explored this issue with a representative sample of 82 Australian police officers, all experienced in the investigation of child abuse. The precise task of the officers was to demonstrate their interview technique in a standardized mock interview paradigm where 5-7 year-old children recalled an event that was staged in their school one week earlier. The advantage of using a mock interview is that it enabled control of the degree of prior knowledge the officers had about the event. This, in turn, allowed for unambiguous classification of questions that falsely presumed event details.

**Method**

**Participants**

Police officers were recruited through letters sent via senior members of child abuse units situated in multiple states of Australia. The officers were individually invited by their superiors to partake in this study. The initial sample included 119 police officers, however 37 officers were unable to attend the scheduled interview due to illness, appearances in court and emergency jobs. The final participant pool consisted of 34 male and 48 female police officers. Note that all of the officers were authorised to conduct investigative interviewers with children and had completed specialised training in this area that was:

- administered by experts;
- had spanned several weeks; and
- included multiple practice opportunities accompanied by critical feedback in appropriate techniques.

On average, the officers had gained their qualification four years ago and had conducted an average of 59 interviews with a child under 16 years since becoming qualified. Preliminary analyses revealed that the results did not differ depending on the individual background characteristics of the officers.

**Procedure**

The study design and procedure were approved by the Deakin University Ethics Committee, as well as by the managers of the participating organisations.

**The event**

The event (referred to as the “Deakin Activities”) was administered by a research assistant in the children's classroom with the assistance of the regular teacher. It took approximately 25 minutes to administer and consisted of two experienced activities. Possible activities included; hearing a story about an elephant, interacting with a koala puppet, and finding a surprise sticker. The third (non-experienced) activity was referred to in this study as the
false activity. The materials and scripts were developed solely for this research to ensure that the children would not have had contact with them before. To control for item effects, the particular activities that represented the two true activities and the false activity varied among the children. Teachers were instructed not to discuss the activities or to inform the children that they would later be interviewed about the activities.

The child respondents were recruited through letters to parents that were distributed in 18 primary schools throughout three states in Australia. A large number of primary schools were included so that officers could interview children within their regions of employment. A total of 82 children (38 males, 44 females) aged 5-7 years participated in the study (\(M\) age = 6 years, 1 month; SD = 7.48 months, age range = 5 years, 2 months “to 7 years, 9 months). All children who were granted parental consent to participate were included in the study provided they had no significant language or learning difficulties (as determined by the regular teacher).

\textbf{The interviews}

One week prior to the interview each officer was sent background information regarding the event (a mixture of true and false details), along with instructions regarding the interview. They were told that a lady went to the child’s school to do an event called the “Deakin Activities” and they were provided with a brief summary of details that “may have occurred”. The officers were clearly told that the children may or may not have participated in the three activities and information provided about the activities may or may not have occurred. The officers’ task was to elicit as accurate and detailed an account of the event as well as contextual details, using the techniques they would “normally” use to interview a child in the field.

The interviews (each with a different child) were held one week after the event at the children’s school. Each was of 17 minutes duration and was held in a different room to the one in which the event took place. The children were briefed both prior to and subsequent to the interviews, making it clear that the purpose of the task was merely to give police officers practice in talking to children. During each interview, a research assistant knocked on the door after 15 minutes, to indicate that the interviewer only had two minutes remaining in which to finish the interview. Most of the 17 minutes was allocated to eliciting information about the event. The police officers were instructed to limit the rapport-building period to two minutes before moving onto the substantive phase of the interview.

Importantly, the officers were asked not to discuss the details of their interview with their colleagues. However, several additional steps were taken to minimise the likelihood that the officers obtained information about the event (apart from that provided by the researcher) prior to conducting the interview. First, interviewers from the same police station or unit were scheduled to do their interviews consecutively on the same day. In addition, the research assistant, rather than the officer, led the children to and from the interview room to ensure that the officer did not receive any information from the child prior to conducting the interview. Finally, the officers were informed that children from the same school may have experienced different events (due to the adoption of a counterbalancing procedure).

\textit{Coding}
Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim for coding. Each question asked by the interviewers was classified as non-leading or leading. Each leading question was divided into the following categories:

- Option-posing questions that contain non-specific information (e.g. “Was the koala wearing anything?” when the koala did not wear anything).
- Option-posing questions that contain specific information (e.g. “Was the koala wearing a bandage on his arm?” when the koala did not wear anything).
- Option-posing questions that presumed specific detail not previously disclosed by the child (e.g. “Was the koala’s bandage green?” when the koala did not wear anything).
- Cued-recall questions that assume specific details about an activity when the child has not disclosed the details earlier (e.g. “Tell me about the koala’s bandage?” when the koala did not wear anything).

Each non-leading question was divided into the following two categories:

1. Open-ended questions referred to questions that were designed to elicit an account of the event from the child in the child’s own words, but did not dictate the information that the child needed to report (e.g. “You mentioned you saw a koala. Tell me everything that happened”). Yes/no questions that did not dictate what information was required were also included in this category (e.g. “Can you tell me what happened?”, “Did anything else happen?”).
2. Specific cued-recall questions referred to questions that focused the child on specific aspects of the event that the child had mentioned previously, but did not restrict the range of possible responses (e.g. “You mentioned you saw a koala. What did the koala look like?”).

Finally, any techniques used by the interviewers to coerce or pressure the child to provide information were coded. These techniques included:

- pressure from others (e.g. “Your teacher told me...”);
- appeal (e.g. “I’d really like you to tell me more about the stickers, because I really need to know what happened with the stickers”);
- selective reinforcement (e.g. “Were you really paying attention?” when the child does not provide the desired response to a question, or “You’re doing a really good job” when the child provides the desired response to a question);
- guided imagery (e.g. “Just pretend that it happened”); and
- repeating the question when the child does provide an answer, but the answer is assumed to be incorrect (e.g. Interviewer: “Did anybody read you a story?” Child: “No”. Interviewer: “And did anybody read a book?”).

Any question or coercive technique that was unrelated to the Deakin activities was not coded.

Children’s responses were coded in relation to the false activity only. It was first noted whether the child disclosed the false activity. A child was judged to have disclosed the false activity if (s)he provided at least one detail about the activity as if it had happened. The child was not judged to have disclosed if (s)he merely repeated the interviewer’s question (or
part thereof) in the form of a statement. Next, if a child disclosed the false activity, each
detail (s)he provided was classified (where appropriate) as actions, objects, or subjects. In
addition, elaborative details were coded as temporal markers, descriptive information,
dialogue statements, locations, and fantastic/improbable details. Finally, each detail was
also assigned to one of the following two categories; interviewer suggestion when the child
restated an inaccurate detail that was previously provided by the interviewer, and
confabulation when the child provided a detail that was not mentioned by the interviewer
and was not included in any of the Deakin Activities.

Half of the transcripts were coded by the principal researcher and the remaining half were
coded by a researcher who was not otherwise involved in the study. Interrater reliability,
calculated as agreements/(agreements + disagreements), was obtained on 20 per cent of
the transcripts. Agreement was at least 90 per cent for each of the categories listed above.

Results

The results are divided into three sections. First, a description of the questioning techniques
that the officers used to elicit a disclosure of the event and the particular activities is
presented. Second, the prevalence and nature of the questions used by the officers to elicit
further details about an activity that the child had previously disclosed is provided. Finally, a
description of the prevalence and nature of the reports provided by children about the false
activity is presented.

Techniques used to elicit a disclosure of the event and the particular activities

Table I presents the techniques used by the officers to elicit a disclosure of the event and
the particular activities.

All of the officers except one commenced the interview by eliciting a disclosure of the broad
event (i.e. the Deakin Activities). One of the two techniques used to elicit a disclosure was to
invite the child to volunteer what they had come to talk about (49/82, 59.8 per cent). The
second technique was to raise prior information about the event (33/82, 40.2 per cent) (e.g.
“I heard a lady called Natalie did the Deakin Activities with you”, “I heard there was
something to do with a koala puppet”). In some of these cases (18/33, 54.5 per cent), the
officer sought an acknowledgement from the child whether the prior information had
occurred. The remaining officers that raised prior information (15/33, 45.5 per cent)
assumed that the information was correct because they asked the child to report what
happened without seeking an acknowledgement of whether the prior information was true.

In those cases where the child did not disclose any details about the event, the majority of
the officers (32/37, 86.5 per cent; \( \chi^2 \) (1)=19.70, \( p<0.001 \) attempted to elicit a disclosure by
raising prior information about the event irrespective of the method used initially to elicit a
disclosure. The remaining officers (5/37, 13.5 per cent) used the same method they had
used initially to attempt to elicit a disclosure; asking the child to state what they thought the
purpose of the interview was. Again, of the officers who raised prior information, many
(10/32, 31.3 per cent) did not seek an acknowledgement that the information raised was
correct.
Raising prior information was also a common technique used by the officers (43/82, 55.4 per cent) when trying to elicit a disclosure of a specific activity (as opposed to the “Deakin Activity” event). While the majority of officers (33/43, 76.7 per cent; $\chi^2 (1)=12.30, p<0.001$) who raised prior information about an activity attempted to seek an acknowledgement from the child that the information they raised was correct, several (10/43, 23.3 per cent) did not. These latter officers raised the activity and immediately asked the child to recall what happened (e.g. “I heard that you were given stickers in the Deakin Activities. Tell me about the part where you were given the stickers”). Note that in most cases where the officers raised prior information about an activity (40/43, 93.0 per cent, $\chi^2 (1)=31.84, p<0.001$), this was the false activity. Children had already disclosed the two true activities earlier in the interview process in response to open-ended questions.

In summary, many of the officers avoided raising prior information in the interview, and many of those who did raise prior information refrained from presuming that the information was correct. However, it was not uncommon for interviewers to state that an event or activity occurred and ask the child to report what happened, without seeking an acknowledgement from the child as to whether the event or activity had actually occurred.

**The prevalence of questions that elicit further detail about a previously disclosed activity**

Table II displays the mean number and proportion of leading/non-leading questions used by the officers.

As seen in this table, the majority of the questions (68 per cent) that were used by the officers to elicit further information about an activity were non-leading. Specifically, 33 per cent of all the questions were open-ended questions and 35 per cent were specific cued-recall questions. Leading questions accounted for 32 per cent of all the questions the officers used to elicit further information about an activity. Specifically, 19 per cent of all the questions were option-posing questions that contained non-specific information and 10 per cent were option-posing questions that contained specific information about the event that had not previously been mentioned by the child. Cued-recall questions that assumed specific details about an activity (when the child has not disclosed the details earlier) accounted for 3 per cent of the questions asked. Note that no option-posing questions were asked that presumed specific details that had not previously been disclosed by the child.

Only 13 per cent of the questions asked by the officers included or assumed specific information about the event, however, the majority of officers used such questions at least once. About 83 percent (62/82, 82.9 per cent; $\chi^2 (1)=21.51, p<0.001$) used at least one option-posing question that contained specific information to elicit further information about an activity. Further, nearly half (40/82, 48.8 per cent) used at least one cued-recall question that assumed specific details about an activity when the child had not disclosed the details earlier. Note that these questions often occurred early in the interview process. When examining the type of question that was used immediately after the child disclosed an activity, 15 per cent were option-posing questions that contained specific information and 8 per cent were questions that presumed that certain details had occurred that the child had not provided earlier.

In summary, although the officers used a high proportion of non-leading questions to elicit further detail about a previously disclosed activity, two types of leading questions that have
been used in prior research to elicit a false report of an event were relatively common. These included; option-posing questions that contain specific information about the event and cued-recall questions that assume specific details about an activity that had not been disclosed earlier.

**Techniques that coerce or pressure the child to provide certain responses**

Table III presents the mean number and proportion of coercive techniques used by the officers throughout the interview. The majority of the officers (73/82, 89.0 per cent; \( \chi^2 (1)=49.95, p<0.001 \)) did not use techniques to coerce or pressure the child to provide certain responses.

As shown in Table III, of those techniques that were used, these included appeal (e.g. “I’d really like you to tell me more about the stickers, because I really need to know what happened with the stickers”) and repeating the question when the child had already provided an answer (e.g. Officer: “Did anybody read you a story?” Child: “No”. Officer: “And did anybody read a book?”). Selective reinforcement was only used by one of the officers (e.g. “Were you really paying attention throughout the whole story?”). Pressure from others and guided imagery were never used by the officers to coerce or pressure the child into responding during the interview. Coercive techniques were only ever used to encourage the child to disclose an activity or specific details that the officer had been misled about.

**Prevalence and nature of children’s reports about the false activity**

Of the 82 officers who participated in the current study, only 40 officers (48.8 per cent) specifically raised prior information about the false activity. Five of the 40 officers (12.5 per cent) who directly asked about the false activity elicited a report of the activity. Of the five children who provided a report of the false activity, three did so after the first question directly posed about it. For two of these children, the initial disclosure was elicited in response to an option-posing question that contained specific information (e.g. Officer: “… and we know the lady is Stephanie, we’ll call her Stephanie, do you remember if she gave you a sticker?” Child: “She did”). For one child, the initial disclosure occurred in response to a cued-recall question that assumed specific details about the activity (Officer: “I thought you might have done something with some stickers in a lunchbox. Tell me about that.” Child: “Mmm. Something else in a lunchbox… Um. Stephanie told us what was in the lunchbox.”).

The remaining two of the five children who provided a report of the false activity did not disclose the false activity immediately, but after further questioning. One child disclosed in response to three option-posing questions that contained specific information. The other child disclosed in response to two further questions; an option-posing question that contained specific information and a cued-recall question that assumed specific details about the activity. In summary, the disclosure of the false activity was elicited using an option-posing question that contained specific information (3/5, 60.0 per cent) or a cued-recall question that assumed specific details about the activity (2/5, 40.0 per cent).

The number of false reports provided was too low to do any meaningful qualitative analyses. However, it is important to note that all of the false reports included references to subjects, objects, actions, locations and descriptive information. While the reports of the
false activity varied in quality, three were quite credible. Consider the following description of a false activity provided by a child aged five years, five months:

I put my hand in the mouth part. To make the mouth move. And he was speaking at the front part part [...] And I had to roll my sleeve up. Like that. It goes from here, to there [...] Well, the Deakin Activities girl, she just let me hold the koala puppet for one minute [...] And, I was holding it until she got all of the rest in. And I even got one the same as [another child’s name] [...] Mmm, well, it was a big puppet. With its baby on its back [...] And, I got to have a go with one of the big ones too. And, it went from my hand right down, right to there.

The majority of details in the false reports (86.0 per cent) were confabulations (i.e. details that had not been provided by the interviewer previously). The remaining details were interviewer suggestions (14.0 per cent); details that had been provided by the interviewer earlier in the interview. Further, not all reports of a false event were initiated by the interviewer’s questions. In three additional cases, a false activity that was different to the false activity the officers were told about, was disclosed.

In summary, false reports (while uncommon) did occur spontaneously in a few cases, as well as in response to leading questions used by the officers. False reports generally included a range of specific details, usually details generated by the child rather than a repetition of prior information provided by the interviewer.

Discussion

This representative group of investigative interviewers was found to use a variety of leading questions, some of which have been shown in prior research to elicit false reports of events from young children. While the incidence of these problematic interview techniques varied markedly among the officers and the overall rate of such techniques was low, presumptive leading questions relating to the broad event or activity were not uncommon. At the beginning of the interview, 18 per cent of the officers stated that they had heard about the event and asked the child to report what happened, without seeking an acknowledgement from the child that the event had actually occurred. Further, when attempting to elicit disclosures of activities that the officers were informed may have occurred, 12 per cent of the officers stated the activity and asked the child to report what happened without seeking an acknowledgement from the child that the activity had occurred. While prior studies have also reported the use of presumptive leading questions among interviewers (Lamb et al., 1996; Sternberg et al., 1996), this is the first study to document their use in reference to broad events/activities, as distinct from presumptive questions that focus on specific aspects of an activity that had been disclosed by the child.

Evidence was also provided in this study for the use of questions that included highly specific details that had not been mentioned by the child previously. These questions took one of two forms; option-posing questions that contained specific information or cued-recall questions that assumed specific details that the child had not previously disclosed. While these constituted a relatively low proportion of all questions (10 and 3 per cent, respectively), they were utilised by a large proportion of the interviewers. About 83 per cent of the officers used at least one option-posing question that contained a specific detail that the child had not previously disclosed. Almost half of the officers (49 per cent) used at least
one cued-recall question that assumed a specific detail about an activity that the child had not previously disclosed. Further, although the officers in the current study refrained from using imagery or overt pressure to provide a response, approximately one in ten included repetition of questions (when the child had already provided an answer) and the use of appeal. The potential danger of using these techniques was clearly documented in the current study. In five of the officers’ interviews, reports of the false activity were obtained as a direct result of leading and suggestive questions. While it could be argued that this rate (5/82 of the overall interviews; or 5/40 of interviews where children were directly questioned about the false activity) is relatively low, this study provided no way of distinguishing between those reports that were true and those that were not.

When considering how representative the questions are to those used by interviewers in the field, several factors need to be considered. First, interviewers’ performance has been relatively consistent across mock and field interviews using a similar event and similar participants (Guadagno and Powell, n.d.). However, the current design could have minimised the rate of leading questions about the false activity. The interviews were relatively short and the children were quite willing to talk about the true activities. This may have decreased the opportunity for the interviewers to probe about the false activity. Further, the officers in this study were not led to perceive that the false event was more or less important than the other two events. In the field, an allegation of an abusive activity is likely to be the critical focus of the investigation. There would be greater incentive for interviewers to use leading questions in the field, because of the need to elicit specific details to establish relevant “points of proof”.

When considering the children’s responses, there is little basis for speculating about the prevalence of false accounts in the field. The children in this study were young and were not disclosing abuse, which is very different in nature to the innocuous events used in this study. In the field, emotional and motivational factors (especially when the offence was traumatic and included threats of secrecy) would play a much greater role. Further, the interviews in this study (unlike those in the field) did not include ground rules about the importance of telling the truth (Gee et al., 1999; Saywitz and Moan-Hardie, 1994). The main contribution of this research is that it has highlighted the potential negative effect of interviewer bias and the need for better training in investigative interviewing. While they may be low in frequency, questions that suggest and invite details about entirely false events or activities can have very serious consequences on the accuracy of reports of children. By including biasing information in simulated interviews (as we have done here), trainee interviewers can become better aware of the dangers of using leading questions and the importance of remaining open-minded about what occurred.

If the interviewers in this study had not been told about the false activity, they obviously would not have raised it. However, to what degree is the overall questioning style due to the negative effects of bias, as opposed to more fundamental difficulties in adhering to best-practice interview guidelines? First, the overall rate of leading questions (32 or 13 per cent when excluding option-posing questions that contained non-specific information) was similar to that in other mock studies where interviewers were not biased. For example, in the study by Gilstrep (2004), 22 per cent of all on-topic questions used by a sample of British police officers who specialised in child protection interviews were leading (defined as questions that introduce or suggest specific information). Warren et al. (1999) reported that the overall proportion of leading questions (defined as questions that suggest a specific
answer) used by a group of experienced investigative interviewers was 16 per cent prior to receiving training and 19 per cent after training.

Second, if the officers had been aware of best-practice interview guidelines, they would have postponed their leading questions until after the free narrative account was exhausted. About 15 percent of the questions used immediately after the child disclosed an event were option-posing questions that included specific information and 8 per cent were cued-recall questions that assumed specific details. Further, some of the officers presumed that the activity occurred at the beginning of the interview rather than using a less-leading option, such as asking the child what he or she thought was the purpose of the interview (e.g. “Tell me what you’re here to talk to me about today”). These findings imply that teaching interviewers how to be open-minded (i.e. avoiding preconceptions about what occurred) must come hand-in-hand with teaching them the art of letting the child tell what happened in his own words. Bias might enhance the likelihood of leading questions and false accounts, but irrespective of whether the interviewer is biased, the use of leading and specific questions is a global problem.

In conclusion, the current study provided evidence that some of the questioning techniques known to elicit false event reports among children in laboratory research are utilised by investigative interviewers. While the findings provide no basis for discrediting individual child’s account of abuse, they provide support for the current ineffectiveness of training programs in promoting the use of best-practice interview guidelines. Further, these findings highlight the need for research to determine ways of eliciting disclosures of events from children while minimizing the risk of error. The likelihood of eliciting false reports is probably not equated across all combinations of questions (Garven et al., 2000), and on a practical level, it may not be feasible for an interviewer to avoid all leading questions in an investigative interview with a child. Leading questions are sometimes required in interviews when there is strong corroborative evidence that a child is being abused but the child will not disclose in response to non-leading techniques (Powell, 2003). The extent to which interviewers should use leading questions to encourage disclosure of events, and techniques for ensuring adherence to recommended guidelines, are highly pressing but unresolved issues in this field (Poole and Lamb, 1998).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Techniques used to elicit a disclosure of the event</th>
<th>Number and proportion (percent)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Invite the child to volunteer what they had come to talk about</td>
<td>49/82 (59.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raise prior information about the event</td>
<td>33/82 (40.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raise prior information and sought an acknowledgement whether the prior information had occurred</td>
<td>18/33 (54.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raise prior information without seeking an acknowledgement whether the prior information had occurred</td>
<td>15/33 (45.5)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Techniques used to elicit a disclosure of the event when the child did not disclose initially</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Invite the child to volunteer what they had come to talk about</td>
<td>5/37 (13.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raise prior information about the event</td>
<td>32/37 (86.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raise prior information and sought an acknowledgement whether the prior information had occurred</td>
<td>22/32 (68.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raise prior information without seeking an acknowledgement whether the prior information had occurred</td>
<td>10/32 (31.3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Techniques used to elicit a disclosure of a specific activity</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Raise prior information</td>
<td>43/82 (52.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raise prior information and sought an acknowledgement whether the prior information had occurred</td>
<td>33/43 (76.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raise prior information without seeking an acknowledgement whether the prior information had occurred</td>
<td>10/43 (23.3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table I**

Techniques used by the officers to elicit a disclosure of the event and the particular activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mean questions per officer</th>
<th>Proportion of questions asked</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Non-leading questions</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open-ended (e.g. “You mentioned you saw a koala. Tell me everything that happened?”)</td>
<td>13.33 (6.47)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific cue-recall (e.g. “You mentioned you saw a koala. What did the koala look like?”)</td>
<td>17.38 (10.29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtotal</td>
<td>30.71 (13.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Leading questions</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Option-posing questions that contain non-specific information (e.g. “Was the koala wearing anything?” when the koala did not wear anything)</td>
<td>9.67 (7.46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Option-posing questions that contain specific information (e.g. “Was the koala wearing a bandage on his arm?” when the koala did not wear anything)</td>
<td>5.38 (5.66)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Option-posing questions that presumed specific detail not previously disclosed by the child (e.g. “Was the koala’s bandage green?” when the koala did not wear anything)</td>
<td>0.00 (0.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cued-recall questions that assume specific details about an activity when the child has not disclosed the details earlier (e.g. “Tell me about the koala’s bandage?” when the koala did not wear anything)</td>
<td>1.63 (2.35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtotal</td>
<td>16.68 (12.54)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total questions</td>
<td>47.39 (22.23)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table II**

Mean number and proportion of the questions used by the officers to elicit further details about a previously disclosed activity

*Notes:* Questions that have been utilised in prior studies that have led to false-event reports; *N* = 82; standard deviations appear in parentheses.
Table III

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coercive technique</th>
<th>Mean number of coercive techniques per officer</th>
<th>Proportion of overall coercive techniques used</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pressure from others</td>
<td>0.00 (0.00)</td>
<td>0.00 (0.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appeal</td>
<td>0.09 (0.39)</td>
<td>0.44 (0.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selective reinforcement</td>
<td>0.01 (0.11)</td>
<td>0.06 (0.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guided imagery</td>
<td>0.00 (0.00)</td>
<td>0.00 (0.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repeating the question</td>
<td>0.10 (0.40)</td>
<td>0.50 (0.16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total coercive techniques</td>
<td>0.22 (0.62)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N = 82; standard deviations appear in parentheses.

References


**Corresponding author**

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