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Police officers’ ability to play the role of the child during investigative interview training

Stefanie J. Sharman*, Carolyn H. Hughes-Scholes†, Martine B. Powell‡ and Belinda L. Guadagno†

†(Corresponding author) School of Psychology, Faculty of Health, Deakin University, Melbourne, Victoria 3125, Australia. Email: stefanie.sharman@deakin.edu.au
‡School of Psychology, Deakin University, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia
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ABSTRACT
Practice during investigative interview training is crucial for interviewers to develop the ability to adhere consistently to best-practice interview procedures. Given the constraints around using trained actors in the role of the child during practice interviews, this study examined whether officers themselves were able to play this role in a manner known to facilitate interviewers’ performance. At baseline, 24 police officers’ ability to adhere to five rules that were developed to train actors how to play the role of the child were measured. They were then given simple instructions about each of the five rules, and their ability to adhere to these rules was measured a second time. The results showed that participants naturally adhered to two of the rules at baseline (providing broad disclosure initially and responding with no more than four pieces of information to open-ended questions). Their performance improved for one rule (introducing conversational tangents) after receiving the simple instructions; however, participants’ performance showed less improvement for the other two rules (responding with a non-feasible response to complex questions and responding to specific questions with few words). Overall, the results supported the use of fellow interviewers in the role of the child during practice interviews.

INTRODUCTION
Best-practice guidelines for conducting investigative interviews with children promote the use of open-ended questions (Lamb, Herschkowitz, Orbach, & Esplin, 2008; Lamb, Sternberg, & Esplin, 1998; Orbach, Herschkowitz, Lamb, Esplin, & Horowitz, 2000; Wilson & Powell, 2001). These questions encourage even very young children to give accounts containing the
most elaborate, accurate and coherent details (e.g., Agnew & Powell, 2004; Feltis, Powell, Snow, & Hughes-Scholes, 2010; Orbach & Lamb, 2007). A recent Department of Justice-funded report demonstrated that children interviewed using best-practice guidelines give better testimony — leading to more prosecutions — than children interviewed not using these guidelines (Pipe, Orbach, Lamb, Abbott, & Stewart, 2008). Indeed, interviewers around the world are taught to use open-ended questions in their training for conducting investigations with children.

Although interviewers are trained in the use of open-ended questions, this does not always translate into good practice in the field. Interviewers typically ask specific questions that dictate the details required (e.g., What colour shirt was Joe wearing?) (Powell & Snow, 2007). This lack of open-ended question usage is a global concern; for example, an examination of field interviews with children in Norway revealed that officers asked only one open-ended question to every ten closed questions (Myklebust & Bjorklund, 2006). Interviewers' ability to use open-ended questions can be improved through ongoing practice sessions in which they receive feedback about their performance (Powell, Fisher, & Hughes-Scholes, 2008b).

Given that practice is fundamental to investigative interviewers' adherence to best-practice interview guidelines, what is the best way for interviewers to practice? Seemingly, the best subjects for practice would be the targets of the real interviews — children who are suspected of having been abused. However, there are too many practical — not to mention ethical — constraints for interviewers to practice their techniques with these children. Moreover, field interviews do not provide an ideal situation in which interviewers can practise their skills. Encouraging the transfer of knowledge from one situation to another depends on the degree to which interviewers have the opportunity to make errors that are corrected. If interviewers do not have this opportunity during practice interviews — because the witness provides relevant details with little prompting — learning is not maximised (McGeoch, 1947). In investigative interviews, the skill is maintaining open-ended questions even when the interviewee offers little forensically relevant detail. Therefore, mock interviews need to provide responses (e.g., silence, lack of specific detail, irrelevant or ambiguous responses) that would normally provoke inappropriate questions. Otherwise, it is unlikely that any learning arising during the practice sessions will be applied to more challenging interview contexts. This learning is especially important given the intertwined relationship between interviewers' questions and children's responses: the questions asked affect the responses given, which in turn affect the follow-up questions and so forth (see Gilstrap & Ceci, 2005; Gilstrap & Papierno, 2004; Hughes-Scholes & Powell, in press).

To encourage learning of interview skills that can be transferred, researchers have used trained actors to play the role of a child in simulated child abuse interviews (Powell et al., 2008b; Powell & Wright, 2008). In one study, the effect of simulated interviews using trained and untrained adult actors on investigative interviewers' adherence to open-ended questions was examined (Powell et al., 2008b). The training of the actors involved three stages: (1) the development of scripts about different hypothetical 5-year-old children, (2) the development of a standard procedure for playing the role of a child, and (3) rehearsal of the standard procedure. The results revealed that trained actors were more likely to provide event-related details to open-ended questions than the untrained actors, which reinforced the use of those questions.
The greater adherence to open-ended questions among the interviewers whose open-ended questions were more likely to be reinforced with event detail was maintained even at a 12-week follow up where there had been no intervening practice. Overall, this study suggested that trained actors who adhered to the procedure that they had been given benefited the practice interviews of officers.

Although these results demonstrate the benefits that practice has in encouraging interviewers to adhere to open-ended questions, there are many practical constraints in using trained actors in the role of the child. First, the cost of using trained actors can be large, which makes it difficult for officers to practice with actors (Powell, 2002). Second, many interviewers receive their training online, through courses that teach best-practice investigative interviewing. In these situations, it is not practical to use a trained actor in the role of the child and, in many cases, trainees have practised with fellow trainees (Powell, Fisher, & Hughes-Scholes, 2008a; Powell et al., 2008b; Powell, Hughes-Scholes, Cavezza, & Stoove, 2010; Wright, Guadagno, & Powell, 2009). Indeed, asking fellow colleagues to play the role of the child in practice investigative interviews (if they can adhere to the rules) removes many of the practical constraints around trained actors.

The aim of the current research was to understand how easy it is for police officers playing the role of the child to adhere to the rules that have been demonstrated to facilitate performance. Specifically, we wanted to examine how officers played the role of the child naturally (before any specific instructions at baseline) and how they played the role of the child after brief instructions (post-training). We focused on using simple instructions to determine whether they were effective without more cumbersome practice sessions.

Based on our 'think-aloud' research with investigative interviewers, analysis of children's field interviews and studies examining the effects of interviewing practice in the development of interviewers' skills (Guadagno & Powell, 2009; Powell et al., 2008a, 2008b; Powell & Wright, 2008; Powell, Wright, & Hughes-Scholes, 2011), we developed five rules (see Table 1). Briefly, officers playing the role of the child should: (1) initially provide broad disclosure without any details of the abusive act; (2) answer open-ended questions (e.g., 'Tell me what happened?') with no more than four pieces of information; (3) answer specific yes/no questions with 'yes' or 'no', specific forced-choice questions with one of the choices provided by the interviewer, and specific cued-recall questions with one or two words (e.g., 'What colour shirt was he wearing?' 'Red'); (4) answer complex questions (e.g., 'Why do you think that he took you into the toilets?') with responses that suggest the questions were not understood; and (5) introduce tangents that were not related to the questions in response to specific questions later in the interview. We first examined officers' ability to play the role of the child in terms of their adherence to the five rules described above (baseline performance). We then gave officers simple instructions containing the five rules about how to play the role of the child. Finally, we examined officers' ability to play the role of the child a second time (post-test performance).

**METHOD**

**Participants**

Twenty-four police officers from multiple states across Australia participated. At the time of participating in this study, all the participants were completing a three-week intensive training course relating to the investigation of sexual offences and child
abuse. The trainees had various levels of experience in this area (ie, some had been trained many years previously and were merely updating their knowledge whereas some were commencing their current positions). Trainees were told that their participation in the research component of the training was not obligatory; however, all consented to take part. Overall, the sample was heterogeneous in terms of qualifications, background experience and length of service.

Procedure
The procedure was approved by the University Ethics Committee and the coordinators of the training course. Participants took part in three stages: the pre-training assessment interview (to establish baseline performance), the instruction session and the post-training assessment interview.

Pre-training assessment interview
Prior to attending the training course, officers conducted a 10-minute mock interview with a colleague, in which they played the role of a 5- or 6-year-old child who had been sexually or physically abused. Officers were provided with one of three case scenarios which they were instructed to read and to show to their colleague who would be interviewing them (see below for an example of a case scenario). Note that care was taken to assign officers within the same unit different case scenarios to avoid role players copying each other’s scenarios. Officers were instructed to advise their colleague who would be interviewing them to start at the substantive phase of the interview using the prompt ‘Tell me what you’ve come here to talk to me about’.

Instruction session
Officers received training regarding how to play the role of an abused child in mock interviews. Prior to this training, they received a 2-hour session on open-ended questions conducted by a trainer with 10 years’ experience in the field of investigative interviewing.

The training — which lasted for three hours — commenced with the researcher explaining briefly the purpose of the session to teach officers how to play the role of an abused child in mock interviews for training purposes (10 minutes). After completing a demographic questionnaire (background information about participants’ job experience), the officers were shown a film entitled ‘Child Role Play’ which lasted 15 minutes. This film outlined the five rules for role playing a young child who had been abused. It consisted of a preparation stage, in which adults playing the role of the child prepare some background details about the child and the case. The purpose of the role play was to mimic a real child as closely as possible and to encourage the interviewers’ use of open-ended questions. This was achieved by following the five rules outlined in Table 1 as closely as possible. Participants viewed examples of an adult following each of the five rules; they also viewed a mock interview from the initial invitation (‘Tell me what you’ve come here to talk to me about today’) to the disclosure of the abuse in which an adult played the role of the child.

After watching the film, the officers were given a manual entitled ‘Instruction guide for playing the role of a child’ which outlined the rules for playing the role of a child as presented in the film (15 minutes). The film was shown again and officers were invited to ask questions about the role playing procedure (20 minutes).

The officers then had the opportunity to practise the role playing procedure during mock interviews that were conducted in small, isolated rooms in the training facility. For these interviews, officers were divided into groups of four, and they rotated between the roles of the interviewer, child, observer 1 (whose task was to make a note
Table 1: Rules taught to officers about how to respond during the interview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview stage/question type</th>
<th>Rule</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
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| Rule 1: Initial disclosure    | The initial disclosure should only provide broad information and should not contain specific mention of the abusive act. | Interviewer: 'Tell me what you’ve come here to talk to me about today.'  
Child: 'About what Uncle Sam did to me.'                                           |
| Rule 2: Open-ended questions and minimal encouragers | Respond to open-ended questions and minimal encouragers with no more than four pieces of information. | Interviewer: 'Tell me everything that happened the last time you saw Dan. Start from the beginning.'  
Child: 'We had a BBQ, we played footie, went for a walk in the park and had an ice-cream. That’s it.' |
| Rule 3: Specific questions    | Respond to specific cued-recall questions with a few words only. Respond to yes/no questions (including ‘can you’ questions) with a yes or no (one word) response. Respond to forced-choice questions with one of the options given by the interviewer without providing further explanation or elaboration. | Interviewer: 'Who’s Dan?'  
Child: 'My Mum and Dad’s friend.'  
Interviewer: 'Did he say anything to you when he touched you?'  
Child: 'Yes.'  
Interviewer: 'Was it in the morning or in the afternoon?'  
Child: 'Afternoon.' |
| Rule 4: Complex or multifaceted questions | Respond to complex questions with a non-feasible response (that shows these questions were not understood). | Interviewer: 'Why did he come into the toilet with you?'  
Child: 'I don’t know.'  
Interviewer: 'How many times has he touched you?'  
Child: '50 million.' |
| Rule 5: Tangents/lapse of concentration | The child should introduce tangents or changes of topic at an appropriate time (ie, in the latter stages of the interview), and these should only occur in response to specific questions. | Interviewer: 'What were you wearing?'  
Child: 'My new pink Barbie skirt. My grandma got it for me and umm she got me a brand new pair of Barbie gumboots and I go in the puddles in them.' |

whether the officer playing the child adhered to rules 1–3) and observer 2 (whose task was to note whether the officer playing the child adhered to rules 4 and 5). The mock interviews took 10 minutes and involved a new hypothetical abuse scenario (different from those used in the assessment sessions). There were four scenarios and the same scenarios were given to each group. The participants were given 5 minutes to prepare for each simulated interview. The case scenarios reflected a range of abuse and involved male and female children all of whom were either 5 or 6 years old.

For example, in one of the scenarios, participants were told that the alleged victim (Emma Taylor) was 5 years old and that her family consisted of her mother, her mother’s boyfriend (Steve Jacobs), her sister (Amanda; 9 years) and her brother (Josh; 3 years). The suspect of the alleged abuse was Emma’s grandfather (Patrick MacIntyre; 70
years). Participants were given the following information about the nature of the complaint:

After staying at her grandparents' house for a week in the school holidays, Emma has been moody and withdrawn and has told her mother she no longer wants to go and stay at her grandparents' house. When questioned by her mother about why she doesn't want to stay at her grandparents' house, Emma disclosed that her grandfather had come into her and Amanda's bedroom one night and got into bed with her and touched her on her 'gina'. Emma's mother asked Amanda if she saw or heard anything, and Amanda said 'no, I was asleep'. Emma's mother has tried confronting Emma's grandfather (her ex father-in-law) about the allegation, but he has dismissed it as a misunderstanding.

The groups were monitored and provided with feedback by the second author of this paper on each officer's abilities to adhere to the rules of playing a child as outlined in the instruction session. After all the groups had completed their practice interviews, they had a 15-minute break.

**Post-training assessment interview**

After the break, the officers conducted a 10-minute post-intervention interview in pairs. Each pair was provided with two scenarios that were counterbalanced so that each participant received a different scenario from the one they were given in the pre-intervention interview. At the completion of the interviews, the officers engaged in a debrief session with the researcher.

**Coding**

The pre- and post-training assessment interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim for coding. Each transcript was coded according to whether or not the officer adhered to each of the five rules for role playing an abused child that they had been taught during the intervention session.

Half of the transcripts were coded by the second author 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 displayed for each rule. Not all interviews contained every type of question (eg, specific forced choice, open-ended); therefore, the numbers of participants varies for each question type.

**Rule 1: disclosure**

To determine whether participants only disclosed broad information initially (as children usually do), their responses were examined for specific detail. Before training, 20 of the 24 (83.3 per cent) officers provided a broad disclosure. During their disclosure, none of the officers (100 per cent) gave specific details. Similarly, after training 23 of the 24 (95.8 per cent) officers provided a broad disclosure, and 23 of the 24 (95.8 per cent) gave no specific details.

**Rule 2: responses to open-ended questions and minimal encouragers**

To examine whether participants provided no more than four pieces of information in response to open-ended questions and minimal encouragers, we examined their responses. Before training, participants adhered to this rule for 85.5 per cent of the questions ($SD = 18.9$ per cent). After training, participants adhered to the rule for 78.1 per cent of the questions ($SD = 20.2$...
per cent). There was no significant difference in adherence after training, $t(23) = 1.43, p = 0.166$.

**Rule 3: responses to specific questions**
For specific cued-recall questions, participants correctly responded with only a few words for 65.4 per cent of the questions ($SD = 25.2$) before training. They correctly responded with only a few words for 68.9 per cent of the questions ($SD = 27.0$) after training. There was no significant difference between these percentages, $t(19) = 0.39, p = 0.700$.

For specific yes/no and forced-choice questions, participants responded correctly to 40.2 per cent of the questions ($SD = 23.3$) before training. They responded correctly to 50.0 per cent of the questions ($SD = 29.6$) after training. There was no significant difference between these percentages, $t(22) = 1.34, p = 0.196$.

**Rule 4: responses to complex questions**
We next determined whether participants provided non-feasible responses to complex or multifaceted questions. Before training, participants correctly used this rule for 41.0 per cent of complex questions ($SD = 38.9$). After training, participants correctly used this rule for 55.5 per cent of complex questions ($SD = 38.9$). This difference was not significant, $t(15) = 0.99, p = 0.340$.

**Rule 5: tangents/lapse of concentration**
Participants’ number of tangents and changes of topic were assessed. Before training, 5/24 officers (20.8 per cent) used tangents. After training, 13/24 officers (54.2 per cent) used tangents; this increase in the number of officers using tangents was significant, $p = 0.035$ (one-tailed).

At baseline, the five officers used a total of 13 tangents: two officers used 1 tangent, one officer used 2 tangents, one officer used 4 tangents, and one officer used 5 tangents. At post-test, the 13 officers used tangents 25 times: eight officers used 1 tangent, one officer used 2 tangents, three officers used 3 tangents, and one officer used 6 tangents. This difference in the total number of tangents used before and after training was significant, $p = 0.037$ (one-tailed).

**DISCUSSION**
Overall, the results were very positive. First, the findings at baseline suggested that officers naturally adhered to many of the simple rules even before they were instructed about how to play the role of the child. For example, officers provided only broad disclosure initially, and they responded to open-ended questions with no more than four pieces of information at baseline. Their adherence to these two rules without training provides evidence for the value in using fellow officers during practice interviews. These results are also consistent with research showing that officers’ performance improved after practice with their colleagues; for example, in their use of open-ended questions (Powell et al., 2008b). The second positive feature of the results was that, for the rules that officers did not naturally adhere to before training (such as using tangents and showing lapses in concentration), their performance improved after training. This result suggests that merely giving officers a simple instruction about how to play the role of the child in practice interviews was enough to improve their performance in interviews with colleagues.

We now consider participants’ performance for each of the five rules separately. For the first rule — providing broad disclosure initially without any specific details of the abusive act — participants performed very highly, even before training. Given their experience with interviewing children who
have been suspected of being abused, officers probably would have learned that children often do not disclose specific details in response to the first question that they are asked. Instead, they offer broad information (eg, 'about what Uncle Joe did to me'). For the second rule — offering no more than four pieces of information in response to open-ended questions — participants also performed well, even before training. This finding fits with the structure of narrative descriptions in Western cultures: in conversation, we typically include a number of story elements including the setting, the initiating event and the consequences (see Skouteris, Powell, & Snow, under review; Stein & Glenn, 1979).

For the third rule — that they only use one or two words in response to specific questions — participants did not perform so well. It is possible that as they were merely beginning to learn how to play the role of the child, participants were using a 'one size fits all' approach in their responses. In other words, because they were so focused on telling their story and making sure that it was coherent, they provided two or three pieces of information to every question, regardless of whether it was open-ended or specific. This type of responding ensured that participants adhered well to rule 1, but did not adhere well to rule 3. It is possible that, with a more developed story, participants might have focused more on each particular question type and tried to answer them appropriately.

This 'one size fits all' approach is consistent with findings from deception research suggesting that when people make up stories to convince a listener that an event happened in a particular way, they use a lot of cognitive effort (see Vrij, Fisher, Mann, & Leal, 2008; Vrij, Granhag, Mann, & Leal, 2011, for reviews). Officers playing the role of the child may be under similar cognitive load to liars in that they had to invent a story that was plausible and consistent with the known facts; they also had to remember what they had said previously. Therefore, it is possible that officers consistently produced three or four pieces of information in response to each question rather than responding to each question type differently (which would have required extra cognitive effort). With practice, however, officers' ability to detect the question type (eg, open-ended, specific yes/no) should improve and require less cognitive effort to work out how much information is required.

For the fourth rule — that responses to complex questions should be non-feasible — participants improved after training, but not significantly so. They provided non-feasible responses to complex and multifaceted questions for around 40–50 per cent of these questions. It is possible that officers did not realise that children typically respond this way when asked complex or multifaceted questions because, as adults, they were used to answering these types of questions. However, when their attention was drawn to the way in which children typically respond in the simple instructions, officers' performance improved slightly and may further improve with practice. Finally, for the fifth rule — that tangents should be introduced to some specific questions later in the interview — participants performed significantly better after being instructed about playing the role of the child. After receiving instructions, a greater number of officers introduced tangents and lapses in concentration, and they also introduced a greater number of tangents per officer.

It is important not to underestimate the implications of the results. They emphasise the importance of using colleagues to play the role of the child when interviewers practice their interview skills. This practice is particularly important for training courses delivered online, as it provides an opportunity for trainees to practice their skills. As
it is not feasible to have trained actors everywhere, the next best alternative is to use colleagues who have received simple instructions about playing the role of the child. This practice should encourage officers to adhere to best-practice interview techniques, which should result in better testimony from children suspected of being abused.

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