

What happens when interviewers ask repeated questions in forensic
interviews with children alleging abuse?

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Abstract

This study was designed to explore 1) the ways in which interviewers refocus alleged victims of abuse on their previous responses and 2) how children responded when they were refocused on their previous responses.

Transcripts of 37 forensic interviews conducted by British police officers trained using the best practices spelled out in the *Memorandum of Good Practice* were examined. The instances in which interviewers asked repeated questions were isolated and coded into categories with respect to the *reasons* why interviewers needed to ask the repeated question (i.e., there was no apparent reason, to challenge a child's response, clarification, no answer the first time the question was asked, digression, or compound question). The children's *responses* to the repeated questions were further categorised into mutually exclusive categories (i.e., elaboration, repetition, contradiction, or no answer). On average interviewers asked children 8 repeated questions per interview. Most of the time interviewers asked repeated questions to challenge a previous response (62%), but they were also sometimes asked for no apparent reason (20%). Children repeated previous responses or elaborated on a previous response 81% of the time and contradicted themselves 7% of the time when re-asked the same question. We conclude that children did not appear unduly pressured to change their answers, and, more importantly, did not contradict themselves when interviewers attempted to refocus them on particular responses.

Keywords: forensic interviews, repeated questions, child abuse

What happens when interviewers ask repeated questions in forensic interviews with children alleging abuse?

Most forensic interview guidelines emphasise that details should be elicited from children using open prompts so that children are encouraged to describe what happened in their own words (Home Office, 2007; Home Office, 2002; Lamb, Hershkowitz, Orbach, & Esplin, 2008; Orbach, Hershkowitz, Lamb, Sternberg, Esplin, & Horowitz, 2000; Scottish Executive, 2003). Consistent with this recommendation, research on human memory has established that open prompts elicit information that is usually more accurate than that elicited using closed questions. (Dent & Stephenson, 1979; Goodman, Hirschman, Hepps, & Rudy, 1991; Orbach & Lamb, 2001). Children who provide information in response to open prompts are therefore considered more credible than those who provide the same information in response to closed or focused questions.

Interviewers are also counselled against placing pressure on children to change their answers, by, for example, refocusing them on previous responses by asking the same questions again (Home Office, 2007, section 2.165; Home Office, 2002, section 2.122). Re-asking questions can be perceived as coercive and may reduce the credibility of children's testimony, especially when answers to repeated questions change or are contradictory (Brock, Fisher, & Cutler, 1999; Gilbert & Fisher, 2006; Poole & Lamb, 1998, Poole & White, 1993). Research shows that, in experimental settings, children frequently change their answers when asked repeated questions, perhaps reasoning that the initial response must have been incorrect (for reviews see

Fivush & Schwarzmüller, 1995; Fivush & Shukat, 1995; Lyon, 2002; Poole & White, 1993).

For example, Poole and White (1991) studied 4- to 8-year-old children who were asked the same questions immediately after an event, and again 1 week later. When open prompts were repeated, children provided additional accurate information not reported earlier, a phenomenon known as reminiscence. When yes/no questions were repeated, however, children provided inconsistent responses 25% of the time, and when children were asked repeated questions that were actually unanswerable the majority expressed uncertainty, while some offered plausible educated guesses.

Krähenbühl and Blades (2006) similarly reported that the overall accuracy of responses did not change when answerable questions were repeated 1-week later, but a small decrease in accuracy (8%) was observed when the repeated questions were unanswerable. Children also changed their answers to such questions as much as 20% of the time. Howie, Sheehan, Mojarrad, and Wrzesinska (2004) estimated that 88% of the children they studied changed at least one response to repeated questions. After a considerably longer delay of 2 years, Poole and White (1993) found that children almost always (95%) responded consistently when yes/no questions were repeated in the later interview, but when children's answers to the same questions 2 years earlier were compared, consistency was approximately 50%, perhaps because the children had forgotten their original answers, the event in question, or both.

Nonetheless, forensic interviewers may sometimes need to refocus children on their previous responses because initial answers are incomplete

or unclear, to summarize and check details about topics already discussed, or after reassuring reluctant or afraid witnesses that it is safe to disclose information. As a safeguard against inadvertently suggesting that children's previous responses are 'incorrect,' therefore, professional guidelines recommend that witnesses be told the rationale as to why questions are being repeated in order to minimize the risk that they may feel pressured to change their responses (Home Office, 2007, section 3.139 & 3.202).

Surprisingly, however, although children's responses to repeated questions have been studied in controlled experiments (e.g., Howie, Sheehan, Mojarrad, & Wrzesinska, 2004; Krähenbühl & Blades, 2006; Poole & White, 1991, 1993), very little is known about children's behaviour when interviewers directly refocus them on previous responses in real forensic interviews. This is an important issue because most forensic interviews with children are believed to include some repeated questions (Warren et al., 2000, cited in Lyon 2002).

The difficulties involved in analysing children's responses to repeated questions in real forensic interviews may explain why so little research has been conducted. The most relevant information comes from experiments in which questions are precisely constructed and read to children word-for-word across experimental blocks, allowing the effects to be examined systematically. However, no two forensic interviews are the same and because they are generally much longer than 'research' interviews, very large numbers of questions need to be coded and analysed. Most importantly, as we shall see, investigative interviewers seldom repeat questions exactly (i.e. word-for-word). In field research, it is therefore necessary to broaden the

scope and definition of 'repeated questions' to include all interviewer questions and prompts that refocus children on their previous responses in the same way that repeated question might. For example, "When did it happen?" followed by "when did you say it happened?" should be considered repeated questions. Challenges (e.g., "Are you sure about that?") may also cause interviewees to rethink their previous responses because they directly draw the interviewees' attention to the previous responses, and importantly, also provide opportunities and some pressure to change previous responses.

On the other hand, interviewer prompts that are identical are not always intended to refocus children on their previous responses, and it is thus important to consider the context carefully. For example, very specific questions may not be repetitious when the interviewers are clearly referring to different topics (e.g., Interviewer; "What did he do?" Child; "He didn't do anything it was my brother," Interviewer; "What did *he* do?"). It is also important to distinguish among questions seeking details about the same topic. For example, "Did you see how it came out of his jeans?" is not the same as "How do you *think* it came out of his jeans?" even though it might appear that the same question had been asked twice. Overall, it is important to place interviewer prompts and questions in context by considering children's responses and the dynamics of the interview.

For the purposes of this study, we looked at interviewer prompts and questions that directly refocused children on their previous responses, providing opportunities for children to repeat or change their previous responses in the same way that asking repeated questions does. By adopting a broad definition of 'repeated questions', we hoped to assess more

accurately how children respond. Instead of focusing only on word-for-word repetitions of questions, we focused on all prompts and questions that were specifically used to refocus children on their previous responses.

This study thus addressed two specific issues. First, we calculated the proportion of interviewer prompts and questions that could be considered repeated questions. Second, we examined the reasons why interviewers repeated questions and the types of changes to their responses that children made. This allowed us to assess the potential risks and benefits associated with this practice.

Method

Subjects and materials

The 37 forensic interview transcripts included in this sample were drawn from an earlier study of interviews conducted by British police officers conducting 'Memorandum interviews' (Sternberg, Lamb, Davies & Westcott, 2001). The number of interviews used amounted to a third of the original sample. The transcripts were non-selectively chosen with the constraint that there was a representative sample of ages ranging from 4 years to 11 years old with a mean age of 7.91 ($SD=2.24$) years. The sample comprised 12 male and 25 female interviewees. Seventeen children alleged that they had been penetrated, 15 alleged they were touched under their cloths, 3 alleged indecent exposure, and 2 alleged they were touched over their clothes. The alleged abuse had almost always (86%) occurred in either the victims' or alleged abusers' home. The alleged abusers were known to the victims in 33

of the cases (89%) and in 25 cases (68%) multiple incidents of abuse were alleged.

The interviews were conducted between 1994 and 1997 in 9 different Constabularies in England and Wales by police officers and social workers trained to implement the recommendations of the *Memorandum of Good Practice (1992)*. The interviews began with a rapport-building phase followed by a substantive phase in which the interviewers asked questions about the allegations. In 19 of the interviews, both police officers and social workers were present; 12 interviews were conducted only by police officers; 1 interview was conducted solely by a social worker and 5 interviewers were accompanied by other adults, such as parents or caregivers. The 'primary' interviewer was a police officer in 33 of the 37 cases, and was female in all but 1 of the interviews. The interviews averaged 40 minutes in length.

Coding of transcripts

Step 1. Only the substantive phases on the interviews were analysed. The substantive phase began when the interviewer raised the topic of concern usually by saying "Tell me why you came here today." The substantive phase ended when the child indicated that they had no more to tell the interviewer or when the interviewer concluded the interview. Thus, questions asked in the initial rapport building phase of the interview and during the closure phase of the interview were not examined. Two researchers identified interviewer prompts and questions that clearly refocused children on their previous responses, asked again about the same topics, and provided opportunities for the children to change their previous responses. These prompts almost

always occurred in immediate succession with exceptions being when interviewers made introductory comments such as “hang on, let me get this straight” before refocusing a child on their previous response. The reasons why children were refocused on their previous responses were then further categorised as:

1) *No reason* – when a child replied in a clear and unambiguous manner and the interviewer nonetheless repeated the question (e.g., Interviewer: ‘What did he do?’ Child: ‘Nothing.’ Interviewer: ‘What did he do?’).

2) *Challenge* – when the interviewer queried the truth of a previous response (e.g., Interviewer: ‘What was he wearing?’ Child: ‘His shorts’. Interviewer: ‘Really, is that what he was wearing?’). Other challenges included statements by interviewers such as “Are you sure about that?” that refocused the child on their previous response requiring them to answer the questions again.

3) *Clarification* – when the interviewer repeated a question because the child did not hear and/or asked for clarification (e.g., Interviewer: ‘Did he hit you?’ Child: ‘Who, Bob?’ Interviewer: ‘Yes Bob; did he hit you?’).

4) *No answer* – when the child was not responsive (e.g., Interviewer: ‘Tell me what happened.’ Child: ‘When are we going to be finished?’ Interviewer: ‘Not too much longer. Now, umm, tell me what happened.’).

5) *Digressions* – when the child did not answer the question or provided an irrelevant response (e.g., Interviewer: ‘And has there been anyone else in the room?’ Child: ‘I went to the park yesterday.’ Interviewer: ‘That’s nice, was there anyone else in the room?’).

6) *Compound* – when the interviewer asked for several different pieces of information in a single prompt, and when the child did not provide all the information asked for (e.g., Interviewer: ‘Where were you both, where was he?’ Child: ‘Outside.’ Interviewer: ‘Where were you?’).

Interviewer prompts and questions were not considered to be repeated when the verbs differed, when interviewers probed for more details using a series of open-ended prompts and/or questions, and/or the context made clear that the interviewers were seeking information about something else (e.g., Interviewer: ‘What did he do?’; Child: ‘He didn’t do anything it was my brother.’ Interviewer: ‘What did *he* [the brother] do?’).

Step 2. The children's responses to the refocusing prompts and questions were then categorised as: *repeated* responses (if they reported the same information), *elaborated* (if they added new information), *contradictory* (if they negated what was previously reported), or *no answer* (if the child did not respond).

Reliability. The relevant interviewer prompts and questions were categorized by two researchers who independently achieved over 85% agreement on a random selection of 20% of the transcripts. All disagreements were discussed until consensus was reached. All transcripts were then coded by a single researcher who discussed any issues needing clarification with the other coder.

Results

How many times were children refocused on their previous responses?

Interviewers refocused children on their previous responses and provided them with opportunities to change their previous responses in 97% of the interviews. The substantive phases of the interviews contained an mean of 146.68 ($SD=89.91$) interviewer prompt questions and of these 8.22 ($SD=7.99$) or 5.60% refocused children on their previous responses. Figure 1 depicts the percentages of the numbers of questions asked showing that the majority of interviews contained fewer than 10 repeated questions (76%).

The numbers of questions did not differ depending on whether the children were younger (4 to 6 years) or older (7 to 11 years), $F(1,36) = 0.08$, $p = .78$, $\eta^2 = .002$. The correlation between age and the numbers of questions asked was also not significant, $r(37) = .13$, $p = .44$.

What were the most common reasons why interviewers repeated questions and how did children respond?

Table 1 depicts the frequency and percentage of interviewer prompts and questions as a function of the reasons that children were refocused on their previous responses and the responses they gave after being refocused.

Analyses of Variance (ANOVA) revealed significant differences in the relative frequencies of the reasons why children were asked repeated questions, $F(5,180) = 27.21$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .43$. Post-hoc t -Tests with Bonferroni corrections (new alpha level = .003) showed that questions were most frequently repeated to challenge children ($M=5.09$; $SD=5.07$; 62%), this was significantly more common than any other reasons (all $ts > 4.48$). In

addition, children were asked repeated questions without any apparent reason ($M=1.62$; $SD=2.17$; 20%), more often than when they failed to answer ($M=0.41$; $SD=1.09$; 5%), clarification was needed ($M=0.45$; $SD=1.50$; 5%), or compound questions were asked ($M=0.08$; $SD=0.36$; 1%). Thus, questions were most often repeated to challenge a previous response (62%) or for no apparent reason (20%).

A second ANOVA examining children's responses to repeated questions revealed significant differences in the relative frequencies of different types of responses, $F(3,108)=17.58$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2 = .33$. Children typically repeated their responses ($M=4.54$; $SD=4.90$; 54%) or elaborated on previous responses ($M=2.13$; $SD=2.44$; 27%); contradictory responses ($M=0.60$; $SD=0.92$; 7%) or no answers ($M=0.95$; $SD=1.64$; 12%) were few in number. Post-hoc t-Tests with Bonferroni correction (new alpha level = .008) of all possible comparisons between these means revealed significant differences among these response types (all $ts > 3.04$, $p<.004$) with only two exceptions. The comparison between the number of times repeated questions were not answered or resulted in contradictions, and between the number of times repeated questions were not answered and the number of elaborations were not significant ($ts < 1.46$, $p>.15$). Therefore, repeated responses (54%) and elaborated responses (27%) differed from each other in frequency, and they each differed in frequency from contradictions and the frequency of not responding to repeated questions.

Discussion

Consistent with previous research and professional experience, our findings show that interviewers refocus children on their previous statements in very many—if not most — forensic interviews (Warren et al., 2000, cited in Lyon, 2002) with 6% of the substantive questions asked being repeated on average. Importantly, when children re-asked the same questions, they repeated their previous responses 54% of the time, and elaborated on what they had said previously 27% of the time. Contradictions only occurred in 7% of the time that children were re-asked the same questions. Because the majority of repeated questions were intended as direct challenges, or were asked again for no reason, it appears that children were generally resistant to perceived suggestive pressures to change their answers. They simply repeated or elaborated their earlier answers.

The results of experimental research suggest that children should have changed their answers more often than they did in the present study: In experimental contexts, children asked exactly the same questions repeatedly often change their answers (Fivush & Schwarzmüller, 1995; Fivush & Shukat, 1995; Home Office, 2002; Lyon, 2002; Poole & White, 1993). In such studies, however, many of the questions are closed (Krahenbuhl & Blades, 2006; Poole & White, 1991) and involve word-for-word repetitions which may more explicitly communicate that that previous answers were incorrect. Moreover, changed responses are invariably contradictory when Yes/No questions are re-asked; they provide no scope for elaboration or explanation. In the present study, by contrast, word-for-word repetitions of questions were too infrequent to be analysed independently. Even so, questions were most

often repeated in the current study to challenge children about what they had just said, so it is remarkable that more contradictions were not observed.

How can we account for these distinctive findings? The events in question here (sexual abuse) may have been more salient, personally meaningful and memorable than the events children are questioned about in experimental studies. Previous studies manipulating memory-trace strength have shown that children resist being misled better when they have strong memory traces (Holliday, Douglas & Hayes, 1999; Marche, 1999; Pezdek & Roe, 1995). For example, Pezdek and Roe (1995) showed slideshows to 4- and 10-year-old children once or twice before asking misleading questions. Children of both ages were less suggestible when they had been shown the slideshow twice, presumably because the memory traces were stronger.

Similarly, the children in the current study were describing relatively serious incidents that should have been well remembered. They may, therefore, have been able to report what they actually remembered, even when being challenged about what they had just said. Events that are less salient and thus less memorable, such as those staged in the laboratory, may be more susceptible to the type of suggestive influence contained in repeated questions. In general, children may find it more difficult to answer questions targeting details that are not well remembered and therefore change their responses in line with the perceived expectations of the interviewer.

In the interviews studied here, children's credibility was not necessarily compromised when questions were repeated. Indeed, because children elaborated on their previous responses or simply restated what they had already said when asked repeated questions, one could argue that their

credibility was actually enhanced; the additional opportunity to reaffirm details may have increased the chances that they would be believed. It is interesting to speculate about the reasons why interviewers might ask repeated questions even when children have already provided clear answers. Perhaps interviewers repeat questions simply to confirm the veracity of statements they are hearing. And perhaps they sometimes found it hard to believe what they are hearing!

The findings of this study are, however, limited because this study is among only a few that have examined the effects of repeated questions in forensic interviews with children and there remain unanswered questions that need to be the focus of future research. It will be necessary for future research to examine whether younger children respond to repeated questions any differently than older children. The analysis in this study showed no correlation between the numbers repeated questions asked and the age of the interviewees, but this does not address whether the responses to repeated questions differed depending on the age of the children. In addition, other variables may prove to be informative in our understanding of repeated questions in forensic interviews, for example, the *topics* of the questions that are asked, as well as different *types* of questions that are asked.

Nonetheless, the present findings do suggest that we should be cautious when generalising about the ways that children respond to repeated questions based on findings from experimental studies alone. Indeed, the present study shows that there are several other ways that interviewers refocus children on their previous responses and that children do not contradict themselves as a matter of course.

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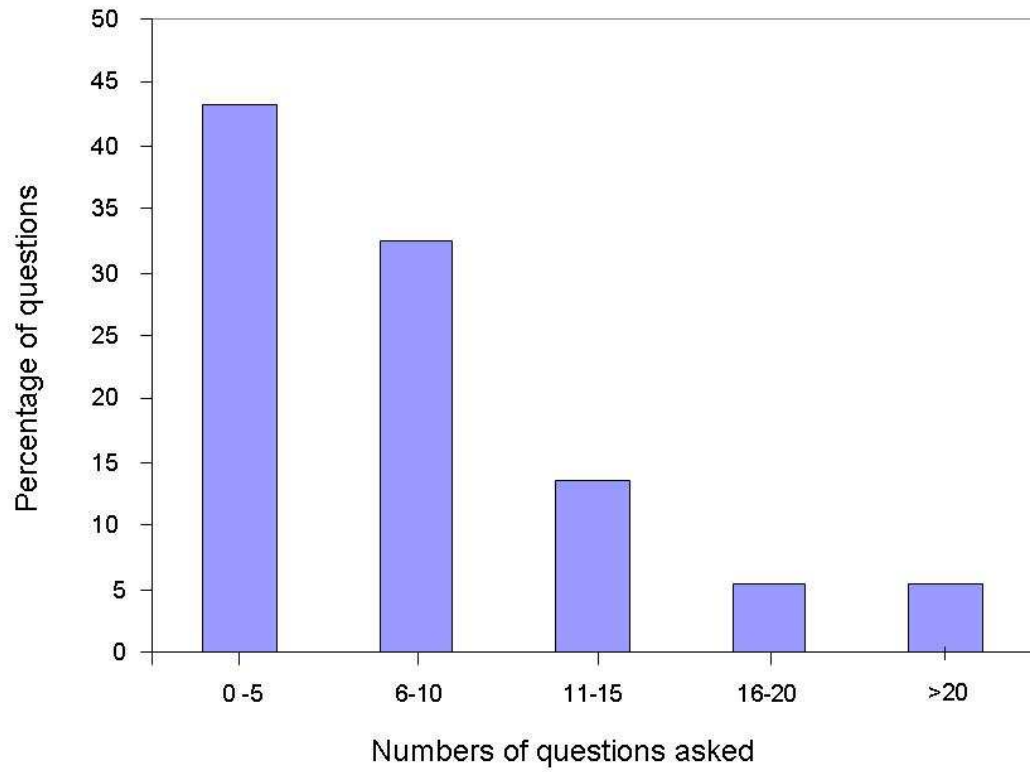


Figure 1. The percentages of the numbers of questions asked in the interviews.

Table 1. The mean numbers of repeated questions (and percentages) asked according to the reasons for refocusing children on their previous responses and their subsequent responses.

	Children's Responses to repeated questions				
Reason for asking the repeated question	Elaboration	Repeated	Contradiction	No Answer	Row Totals
No Reason	0.38 (0.92) 5%	0.78 (1.29) 9%	0.30 (0.57) 4%	0.16 (0.55) 2%	1.62 (2.17) 20%
Challenge	1.03 (1.44) 13%	3.73 (4.44) 45%	0.22 (0.53) 3%	0.11 (0.31) 1%	5.09 (5.07) 62%
Clarification	0.24 (0.83) 3%	0.00 (0.00) 0%	0.05 (.33) <1%	0.16 (0.55) 2%	0.45 (1.50) 5%
No Answer	0.24 (0.76) 3%	0.00 (0.00) 0%	0.03 (0.16) <%	0.14 (0.34) 2%	0.41 (1.09) 5%
Digression	0.24 (0.54) 3%	0.03 (0.16) <1%	0.00 (0.00) 0%	0.30 (0.85) 4%	0.57 (0.95) 7%
Compound Question	0.00 (0.00) 0%	0.00 (0.00) 0%	0.00 (0.00) 0%	0.08 (0.36) 1%	0.08 (0.36) 1%
Column Totals	2.13 (2.91) 27%	4.54 (4.90) 54%	0.60 (0.83) 7%	0.95 (1.64) 12%	8.22 (7.99) 100%