

Children's memory reports: The effect of co-witness influence

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Department of Psychology, 2010

Avhandling för avläggande av filosofie doktorsexamen i psykologi, som med vederbörligt tillstånd av samhällsvetenskapliga fakulteten vid Göteborgs Universitet kommer att offentligens försvaras fredagen den 21 maj 2010 kl. 09.00 i sal F1, Psykologiska institutionen, Haraldsgatan 1, Göteborg.

Fakultetsopponent: Professor Ray Bull, School of Psychology,
University of Leicester, United Kingdom

This thesis consists of a summary and the following four papers:

- I. Roos af Hjelmsäter, E., Granhag, P.A., Strömwall, L.A., & Memon, A. (2008). The effects of social influence on children's memory reports: The omission and commission error asymmetry. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, 49, 507-513.
- II. Roos af Hjelmsäter, E., Granhag, P.A., & Strömwall, L.A. (2009). Was the stranger alone? On how different sources of social influence affect children's memory reports. *Social Influence*, 4, 155-169.
- III. Roos af Hjelmsäter, E., Granhag, P.A., & Strömwall, L.A. (in press). Co-witness influence on children's memory reports: The difference is in the details. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*.
- IV. Roos af Hjelmsäter, E., Strömwall, L.A., & Granhag, P.A. (2010). *The self-administered interview: A way to improve children's eyewitness performance?* Manuscript submitted for publication.



Abstract

Roos af Hjelmsäter, E. (2010). *Children's memory reports: The effect of co-witness influence*. Department of Psychology, University of Gothenburg, Sweden

Co-witness discussion is relatively frequent, but misinformation in the form of information provided by other witnesses is an under-researched topic. The present thesis investigated how and to what extent children's witness reports were influenced by information from a co-witness. In all four studies, the children were interviewed about a live event they had individually experienced two weeks previously. Some of the children encountered misinformation from a co-witness, and their reports were compared to a control group. In **Study I**, 7 and 12-year old children ($N = 174$) encountered misinformation from a co-witness whom they met before the interview. The misinformation led the children to add false details to their reports (commission errors), but not to omit true details (omission errors). The children made significantly more errors with respect to a peripheral detail compared to a central one. No differences between the age groups were found. **Study II** investigated the effect of the source of influence (adult vs. child). Before they were interviewed, the children ($N = 176$, aged 11-12) encountered misinformation via a videotaped interview with a co-witness. This resulted in an increase in both omission and commission errors in the children's reports. Contrary to our expectations, the children were more vulnerable to influence when the co-witness was a peer child, compared to an adult. Moreover, all children who had made a commission error provided additional (incorrect) details when probed for more information. However, true reports were found to be more detailed than false reports. In **Study III**, children ($N = 115$, aged 10-13) were interviewed together with a co-witness who either provided false details or denied true details. The children were influenced to make omission errors, but not to make commission errors. The effect of influence varied greatly depending on the type of detail. When probing for more details in a subsequent interview, correct reports were found to contain more information than false ones. **Study IV** investigated whether children's recall could be improved by using a self-administered interview protocol (SAI). Immediately after the event, the children ($N = 192$, aged 11-12) reported their experiences in one of two qualitatively different SAI-forms (SAI-Structured or SAI-Open) or did not report their experiences (control). In an interview two weeks later, children who had previously completed one of the two SAI-forms included more details in their free recall of the event compared to children in the control group. Those who had completed the SAI-Structured form reported the most information. The SAI manipulation did not reduce the children's vulnerability to co-witness influence. Taken together, the results of this thesis show that children are vulnerable to co-witness misinformation and that such influence can result in both omission and commission errors. Therefore, in legal situations, it is crucial that measures are taken to avoid the negative effects of co-witness influence.

Key words: Children's memory, social influence, eyewitnesses, omission and commission errors.

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