

Revictimisation and false memory formation

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Summary

Revictimisation is common in child sexual abuse cases. That is, if a child has suffered from any form of sexual abuse, there is a high likelihood that the same child will experience such abuse again. Only a small proportion of sexual abuse cases is reported to the legal authorities. When the victim is a child, it becomes even more challenging to prosecute sexual abuse cases. Children's lack of independence from adults makes it difficult for them to identify that a crime is taking place, and consequently, it is difficult for them to report the crime to the police. After entering the legal system, statements of child victims are often evaluated in terms of their credibility and reliability. Sometimes, these evaluations conclude that children's statements concerning abuse are based on false memories.

In the 1980s and 1990s, a waterfall of child sexual abuse revictimisation cases were reported. Some of these cases included signs of suggestive interviewing tactics that might have fostered false reports in children. Cases in which an alleged child victim falsely remembers being sexually abused several times during their childhood likely do not represent most of the child sexual abuse cases that are reported to the legal system. However, cases of false memory for child sexual abuse have proven to be damaging to the legal system for they are likely to consume as much time and as many financial resources as any sexual abuse case. In face of the wave of dubious child sexual abuse cases in the 1980s and the 1990s, such as the McMartin Preschool case, researchers started to explore topics such as child suggestibility and false memory formation. A rich body of literature indicates that given the opportunity to freely report their memories, children can provide reliable statements. Furthermore, several studies have demonstrated that researchers have been able to implant an entire false autobiographical event in participants' (both adults and children) memory in laboratory conditions. Because of this lack of focus given to the implantation of *repeated* autobiographical events, research on false memory implantation has received criticism in terms of its applicability to legal cases.

To put the work conducted in the current thesis into context, I present in Chapter 2 the Jakarta International School (JIS) case, which took place in 2014 in Indonesia. In the JIS case, parents of three kindergartens reported to the police that their children had been sexually abused several times in the course of six months within the school facilities. Apart from the presence of parents' and children's statements, the prosecution of the case lacked corroborating evidence against the accused. Based on official and unofficial reports collected by the defence in the case, we analysed the JIS case in the format of a case report, while consulting the current research literature about the major issues aligned to the topics of the current thesis. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 present studies on three relevant topics for the JIS and similar cases: child suggestibility and false memory formation within a co-witness context (Chapter 3), credibility attested to revictimised sexual abuse victims (Chapter 4), and implantation of false memories for repeated events

of child sexual abuse (Chapter 5).

In Chapter 2, I concluded that the use of interviewing techniques understood as suggestive by the current body of research on child interviewing jeopardised the integrity of children's reports and consequently the investigation in the JIS case. Therefore, in Chapter 3, I used a memory conformity paradigm to investigate children's propensity to have their memory contaminated by the report of a co-witness. The main take of Chapter 3 is that children are more likely to form false memories when influenced by their peers' memory report compared to older developmental groups. This finding contrasts with the development reversal effect observed when children are invited to freely report what they remember from a given event. That is, under those conditions, children outperform older developmental groups in the DRM word learning task, making fewer memory mistakes. Another issue related to the JIS and similar cases concerns the credibility ascribed to sexual abuse victims who report victimisation.

In Chapter 4, I showed that legal system practitioners perceived reports containing sexual abuse revictimisation as less credible compared to reports containing one occurrence of sexual abuse. Despite supporting previous work on credibility assessment of memory reports for repeated events (unrelated to sexual abuse), our results do not align with what happened in the JIS case. That is, all those involved in the investigation and prosecution of the JIS case did not deem children's reports of repeated sexual abuse had low credibility. Finally, when looking into the JIS and similar cases, after repeated exposure to suggestion, false reports are a likely outcome that can occur due to false memory formation.

Similar to the JIS case, other cases also feature children reporting dubious memories of child sexual abuse revictimisation. As much as the research literature on false memory implantation had covered several aspects that could play a role in such process, we lacked a study demonstrating that false memories for repeated events could be elicited in laboratory conditions. In Chapter 5, I addressed relevant criticism of false memory implantation studies, showing that false memories for repeated events are not more difficult to implant compared to false memories for a single event. The research reported in the current thesis is relevant to the practice of investigation in child sexual abuse revictimisation cases and potential false memory formation.