

Revictimisation and false memory formation

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Impact

Main Goal of this Thesis

The main objective of the current thesis was to examine different themes within cases of child sexual abuse revictimization. Specifically, this thesis started with the Jakarta International School (JIS) case, which features accusations of repeated child sexual abuse against two schoolteachers and five outsourced cleaners at three kindergartens. The JIS case shares commonalities with so-called day-care abuse cases, such as the McMartin preschool and Kelly Michaels case. Such cases often present several features that make the children's claims seem a product of high exposure to external suggestion, potentially resulting in false allegations and false memories.

In the JIS case the accused were convicted solely based on children's statements, as no corroborative evidence was found to substantiate children's accusations. Despite their rarity, when such cases occur, they can render significant harm to families involved, while also taxing investigations by the legal system. The JIS case is a relevant and recent illustration of the complexity of themes that can arise in such cases. For instance, a case like the JIS in which revictimisation is present may involve potential false memory formation and credibility assessment issues. In the current thesis, I aimed to investigate false memory formation in different contexts and credibility assessment for revictimised victims of sexual abuse.

Main Findings

Analysing the JIS case in light of relevant research, I concluded that the techniques employed to interview and guide the children through the process of investigation were not in accordance with the guidelines of interviewing protocols recognised by the scientific community as good practice. The main discrepancies between such interviewing guidelines and the techniques used to interview the children in the JIS case concerns the use of suggestive techniques. For instance, children were hardly ever invited to explain what happened in their own words in an open manner. Mostly, children were asked from the outset what had happened during the supposed occasions of abuse. That is, interviewers already assumed some kind of abuse had taken place without necessarily hearing this from the children.

In the JIS case, the suspicions of abuse came from the parents of the children involved before the children had disclosed anything about being abused in school. In this and similar cases, it would be essential for the investigation to listen to the children's version of what happened. An important feature of the JIS case, which corroborates the conclusion that children's claims were rendered unreliable, is the evolution of the allegations. That is, in the first months of the investigation of the case children vehemently denied being sexually abused in school. However, during the course of successive suggestive interviews their statements changed. Interestingly, such issues did

not seem to affect the perceived credibility of the children's statements in the eyes of the professionals involved in the investigation and the trial of the case.

The issues observable in the JIS case and other dubious day-care abuse cases, made me decide to focus my research project on both credibility assessment for sexual abuse victims and false memory formation in different contexts. In the study in which I looked into credibility assessment in sexual abuse victims, I observed that professionals in the legal system viewed the statements of victims who had been sexually abused more than once less credible than the statements of victims who had experienced one incident of sexual abuse. Furthermore, the perceived credibility of the statements by professionals in the legal system did not differ between child or adult victims.

Concerning false memory formation, I examined the effects of suggestion on children's memory statements in a method where children receive suggestion about an event they witnessed and a method in which children did not receive suggestion and were allowed to freely recall elements they had been asked to memorise. Following similar results in the literature, this project showed that children do produce reliable memory statements when asked to freely recall what they remember from a given event. Moreover, this project showed that children are highly prone to external suggestion, and hence may produce unreliable memory statements under those circumstances. Considering that many dubious cases of sexual abuse that come to the attention of the legal system contain allegations of revictimisation, in my last study, I investigated false memory formation for repeated events. In this novel project, I found that it is not more difficult to form false memories for repeated events compared to a single event.

Scientific Relevance

My thesis offers useful information to the professionals in the legal field in terms of addressing the (perhaps) rare but pressing matter of potential false memories of repeated events of sexual abuse. Similar to previous case reports of potential false memory formation or false allegations, the JIS case study is a reminder to researchers that our work investigating this issue is still highly relevant in the present era. Furthermore, this case study is an example of the dangers of carrying out an investigation using suggestive questioning. Specifically, the field of false memory implantation research has been criticised for its lack of ecological validity (Blizard & Shaw, 2019; Brewin & Anderson, 2017). Because the corpus of previous research in false memory implantation for autobiographical events investigated memory for a single event, some critics doubted if such research would be applicable to real world cases. Potential cases of false memory formation for autobiographical events often concern an event that has happened more than once.

By demonstrating that false memories of repeated events can be created in laboratory conditions with the same ease as false memories of single events, I have addressed an important critique concerning lack of ecological validity in false memory

research (see Otgaar et al., in press). This is important because my work shows that false memory implantation findings can be generalised to legal cases concerning false memories. Furthermore, this finding opens the door to new directions within the false memory implantation field. For instance, based on the findings in this thesis, Otgaar and colleagues (in press) replicated my findings showing that false memories for repeated events can be elicited in laboratory conditions. This shows the reliability of my work thereby adding to the generalisability of false memory research. Alongside the JIS case, my false memory implantation of repeated events study shows the negative effect of suggestion on memory, stressing how its consequences may severely affect communities and families, as well as burden the legal system.

Target Group and Dissemination

Besides the scientific community, the main target group of the work performed for the current thesis are practitioners working in the legal field. Every chapter in this thesis corresponds to a project with direct application to the praxis of professionals performing child interviewing, statement credibility assessment, and child sexual abuse cases. Such professionals may work at the police station, child protection services, in the court system as well as at a variety of non-governmental organisations. Moreover, these professionals may have different training backgrounds. For example, in South American countries it is common for child sexual abuse victims to be interviewed and assisted by clinical or forensic psychologists who work for the court. Regardless of their background, the work that composes the current thesis was mainly aimed at the group of professionals around the globe who can benefit from novel findings that are relevant for child interviewing.

I have shown the harm that suggestive interviewing techniques can do with children's memories. Hence, my findings underscore the importance of evidence-based practices when interviewing children. Such evidence-based practice within this branch of the legal field has been the target of a plethora of scientific activities, including peer-reviewed publications, guidelines and protocols. For example, target groups that might profit from my findings could be child interviewers working at for instance the police or child protection. My work shows the danger of using suggestive questions and that empirically validated interview protocols should be used to minimize the use of suggestion. For example, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD; Lamb et al., 2007) protocol developed for child interviewing is based on scientific findings about child suggestibility, memory, communication skills, social understanding, and social tendencies. This protocol has shown to be effective in reducing interviewer's reliance on the use of suggestive questions. The work presented in the current thesis stress the importance of evidence based child interviewing trainings for relevant practitioners to reduce the use of suggestive questions during child interviews.

In terms of dissemination, Chapter V in this thesis has been presented at EAPL (European Association of Psychology and Law) and SARMAC (Society for Applied

Research in Memory and Cognition), international conferences that attract both academics and practitioners. Chapter I and V have been presented at TU Dortmund in a colloquium aimed at students and practitioners. Chapters I, III and V are published in open access journals. More importantly, the work presented in Chapter I was published in a journal that publishes articles for a general academic audience. Publishing in such journals is important as they have the potential to foment dialogue between different academics and to reach interested parties besides psychologists, such as legal professionals.

Furthermore, to increase the reach of my findings to a diverse group of professionals, this work could also be posted on blogs (e.g. Psychology Today), presented at other practitioners' conferences (e.g. International Investigative Interview Research Group Conference, Congresso Internacional de Psicologia Jurídica e Direito Penal, Rapid Fire Conference on Investigative Interviewing, Congresso Internacional de Jornalismo Investigativo), and be included in workshops and symposia. Given the public influence on a variety of legal matters, there is a pressing need for disseminating scientific findings not only to pertinent professionals but also to the general audience. Hence, it may be relevant to broadcast the findings in the current thesis in social media, via written posts, videos and podcasts (e.g. available on podcast platforms: False Memory Deutschland, True Crime False Memories, and Bad People available at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p08lj2sz/episodes/downloads>) fomenting the general understanding about the topic and bridging the gap between academia and society.