

Are children really the poorer eyewitnesses?

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Valorisation Addendum

One of my reasons to step into academia was my fascination of people who hold unique knowledge. I was impressed by the abundance of *facts* about how the world works, which researchers managed to accumulate throughout history. Bright minds figured out how important aspects of physics, social interactions, economics, biology, and much more follow predictable patterns. This knowledge often greatly facilitated our lives. Could you, for example, imagine a world without electricity? I worshiped individual researchers and strongly believed that they hold the Holy Grail to knowledge. I soon learned that bright minds truly exist, but that even the ideas of the brightest minds bloom through the dialogue with others. Having an academic dialogue is necessary to refine theories or methods, to initiate new research ideas, and to make sense of what one might have found. I therefore strongly believe that both discussion about and the dissemination of ones work are an essential element of scientific improvement. In order to tailor the research to what is needed in the respective fields, it is not only necessary to talk to other researchers, but also to practitioners or whom it may concern (such as policy makers).

Bearing my admiration for science in mind, it took me by surprise when the American presidential election at the end of 2016/ begin 2017 resulted in a debate on *alternative facts*. Knowledge is to me true until proven otherwise. A scientific theorem called falsifiability. To establish a fact, methodological approaches need to be chosen that can be disproven. Through refinements, replications and testing of diverging explanations, we will approach the real truth step by step. This cautious, tentative, nuanced, and meticulous approach does not mean that facts are bendable to one's liking. The idea is to be open towards all possible outcomes and to let the findings tell their own story, in whichever direction they point.

I believe that we, as researchers, should not blame other people for believing in or defending alternative, disproved facts. This debate about alternative facts, once more, highlighted how important it is to communicate scientific findings in a manner that is targeted to the audience to whom it may be of relevance. Everyday language differs greatly from how scientists communicate in their field of research. If we want to make our research accessible to a broader audience, we need to overcome the mismatch in communication style and to disseminate our findings through multiple, diverging channels.

This chapter aims to tackle the issue of knowledge valorisation. More specifically, I will elaborate on the societal relevance of my research findings and the target groups that may have an interest in them. Furthermore, the innovative aspect of my research and the activities to disseminate the findings are discussed. Note that (aspects of) these points are also discussed in the chapters of this dissertation.

Relevance

The title of my thesis, *Are children really the poorer eyewitnesses? An analysis of counterintuitive developmental trends in eyewitness memory*, directly pinpoints the societal relevance of my research topic. That is, to study how developmental differences influence the likelihood of being a “good” eyewitness. I thereby challenged a widely held assumption among lay people and many legal professionals in which children are believed to be inferior witnesses as compared to older children and adults. The practical consequence of this assumption is that adult’s testimony might be favoured over children’s. Even though this attitude seems to have its bearing for some memory errors that may taint an eyewitness testimony, the present dissertation showed that it is necessary to paint a more nuanced picture. When it comes to memory errors that are caused by external pressure, adults generally outperform children. But this trend is malleable and can even flip when focussing on misinformation that is more readily assessable by adults (meaning-based misinformation). Other memory errors, such as bystander misidentifications in adolescents, may even show a peak at a certain age group. My main message of the thesis, therefore, is that an individual validity assessment of a witness statement, although difficult, is needed and that no rule of thumb that only focusses on age should be employed when judging the credibility of a witness. My findings and the central message of my thesis are thus of relevance to prevent miscarriages of justice due to erroneous or non-believed testimony.

Target groups

My research results may mainly be of interest to legal professionals such as judges and police officers, and to policy makers. These target groups are concerned with the appropriate questioning of witnesses of different ages and the post-hoc evaluation of the investigative value of a witness statement. These professions therefore benefit from scientific attempts to disentangle the conditions under which a witness’ memory is more or less error-prone. They further benefit from research into attempts to improve eyewitness recall as this may ultimately facilitate they job by empirically testing what may work or what not to achieve a more accurate and/or complete witness account.

Furthermore, research on memory, as conducted in this dissertation, is also of importance for professionals like social workers, teachers or anyone working with or in the interest of children or vulnerable people. For example, people in the field of education may want to elicit a more concrete or elaborate account from their students about the teaching material. Providing a model statement or building rapport may also serve this purpose in a non-forensic area.

Activities and Products

In order to enable one's research to have a meaningful contribution to society, it is necessary to assess the difficulties that practitioners face in their daily work life. By talking to police officers, expert witnesses, judges, and more practically experienced researchers, I tried to educate myself about issues surrounding developmental differences in eyewitnesses. These interactions framed the research that was conducted as part of the present dissertation. Such an approach where researchers and practitioners have an interdisciplinary exchange hopefully led to more directly relevant research outcomes. An example of a more standardised way to assess how well researchers do in communicating their findings to legal practitioners is described in the general discussion of this dissertation (Chapter 7). Here, preliminary findings are outlined of a vignette study, pertinent to the aforementioned developmental memory differences, that was constructed with the help of a judge and disseminated among judges and police officers in different countries.

Next to activities that aimed to tailor my research to the practical application, I am also involved in educating university students. Thereby I am informing the next generation of possible practitioners how to understand research findings and how to extract relevant up-to-date information that might be of importance for ones working environment. By this I hope to alert students to have a critical view on research outcomes and to correctly contextualise the findings in a nuanced way.

I was further trained in a standardised protocol aimed to interview children, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) protocol. This training qualifies me to educate police officers and others about child appropriate question styles. Ideally, my research triggers more studies into age-appropriate interview styles. While interview guidelines exist for children and adults (see for example the Cognitive Interview), such protocols are non-existent for adolescents. Pointing out that adolescents also form a unique age group may hopefully, in the long-run, result into age-appropriate interview guidelines also for adolescents.

Innovation

On the one hand, the findings outlined in this dissertation demonstrated the flexibility of developmental trends under forensically relevant circumstances. By doing so, we tested whether findings that pointed to age-dependent developmental de- or increases can be translated to more forensically relevant research questions. We showed that witnesses of all ages can give accurate statements, but that their error-proneness changes in predictable ways. On the other hand, we focused on attempts to improve eyewitness recall by testing innovative efforts to improve statement quality and quantity.

A further overarching aim was to include adolescents into the participant sample. Even though the statement(s) of witnesses of all ages may become the centerpiece of an investigation, developmental research into eyewitness memory typically either focusses on children or adults. Adolescents are rarely included in studies on the proneness to certain forensically relevant memory errors. The studies presented in this dissertation tried to fill this research gap by examining adolescent's performance relative to that of younger children and adults. The current findings therefore add to the understanding of adolescent's error-proneness relative to other age groups.

Implementation and Knowledge Dissemination

To make the findings of this dissertation more accessible, we opted for an open access option whenever possible. This open access enables people who do not have the means to pay for journal articles to be able to read them for free. I am also active on Research Gate as a means to stay in contact with other researchers and to promote my publications. In addition to publishing the current findings in peer-reviewed scientific journals and to discussing them at international conferences, I chose outlets that are read by a more diverse audience. That is, the journal *In-Mind* was chosen as it is a peer-reviewed online journal targeted for the educated lay person. Furthermore, I write blog entries, am in contact with practitioners, and am trying to motivate undergraduate students to continue research into developmental particularities in eyewitness memory.