



“Draw me everything that happened to you”: Exploring children's drawings of sexual abuse

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the current paper is to explore the ways in which drawings facilitate children's narratives in investigative interviews regarding alleged sexual abuse. Although children often lack appropriate words or the ability to pinpoint the effects they experience, some children find drawing to be a natural, accessible language they can use for emotional expression. The use of three case studies and an analysis of children's narratives before, during and after drawing facilitated an assessment of the way in which drawing aided children's retrieval process. The discussion presents the contribution of using drawings when interviewing children about experiences of trauma.

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1. Introduction

This paper explores the way in which drawing can be used as a self-report tool to support children's narratives in investigative interviews on alleged abuse. Using three illustrative cases, children's narratives will be analyzed to investigate the contribution of drawings to the children's testimonies.

Each year, increasing numbers of children worldwide come into contact with legal, social service and child welfare systems as a result of child sexual abuse. In the United States, approximately 3.5 million investigations or assessments are conducted annually in response to reports of suspected child maltreatment. In 2011, more than 8000 children were referred to the Unit of Investigative Interviews in Israel following complaints about sexual abuse. Similarly alarming situations exist in the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and elsewhere (Lamb, La Rooy, Malloy, & Katz, 2011). Although many factors affect children's adjustment, maltreatment can profoundly affect children's socio-emotional, cognitive and even physical development (Corwin & Keeshin, 2011; Malloy, Lamb, & Katz, 2010).

Accurate identification of child maltreatment and its victims is crucial if we wish to end victimization, protect children, and provide children, families, and, potentially, perpetrators with appropriate services and treatment (Lamb et al., 2011). Early identification is often complicated because child maltreatment is a crime that is extremely difficult to investigate. Because corroborative evidence is often absent, especially when sexual abuse is involved, suspected victims may be the sole

sources of information about their experiences (Lamb, Hershkowitz, Orbach, & Esplin, 2008). For this reason, investigative interviews play a vital role in the investigation of child maltreatment. Information originating from investigative interviews may significantly affect legal and administrative decisions that may profoundly affect the lives of children, families, and suspects. Therefore, it is imperative that children's reports are clear, consistent, detailed and accurate (Malloy et al., 2010).

1.1. Investigative interviews with children

In recent decades, policy makers, practitioners and researchers from different disciplines have addressed the issue of investigative interviews with children and their legal context and consequences (Malloy et al., 2010). The understanding that children's testimonies after (usually) one investigative interview can lead to crucial decisions with regard to the victims, their families and the alleged perpetrators has led to intensive efforts to create the best practical guidelines for investigative interviewers (Lamb et al., 2008; Poole & Lamb, 1998).

Despite variations in legal traditions and social welfare policies, there is a consensus about the types of forensic interviews that elicit the most accurate and complete information. This consensus is fuelled by mounting evidence regarding children's linguistic, communicative, social, and memory capacities (e.g., American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children, 1990, 1997; Home Office, 1992, 2007; Lamb et al., 2008; Poole & Lamb, 1998). Most professionals agree that investigative interviews should be conducted using open-ended questions (e.g., “Tell me about everything that happened to you”) with focused (e.g., “When did it happen?”) but not suggestive (e.g., “Tell me about his hand when he touched you”, when the child did not mention a hand or touching) questions used as infrequently and as late in the

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interview as possible. Such recommendations are supported by experimental evidence suggesting that open-ended questions are preferable because they access free-recall memory, which is more likely to be accurate, whereas focused questions tend to engage memory processes that are prone to error and narrow information retrieval (Lamb et al., 2008, 2011).

In response to interviewers' needs, researchers have developed detailed guidelines to make it easier for interviewers to achieve best practices (for review, Malloy et al., 2010). However, only the NICHD (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development) Protocol has been extensively and internationally validated in the field (Lamb et al., 2008). The NICHD Protocol was designed to translate professional recommendations into operational guidelines and to guide interviewers in using prompts and techniques that maximize the amount of information elicited from free-recall memory (Orbach et al., 2000).

The use of the NICHD Protocol has been found to elicit rich testimonies from children of all ages in response to free-recall invitations (Lamb et al., 2008). The NICHD protocol has been implemented in the US, Israel, Sweden, the UK, and Canada, and follow-up studies have systematically shown a significant improvement in the quality of investigative interviews (Cyr & Lamb, 2009; Lamb, Orbach, Hershkowitz, Esplin, & Horowitz, 2007; Orbach et al., 2000; Sternberg, Lamb, Orbach, Esplin, & Mitchell, 2001). In addition, the NICHD Protocol has shown beneficial effects on credibility assessment (Hershkowitz, Fisher, Lamb, & Horowitz, 2007), on the elicitation of investigative leads (Darwish, Hershkowitz, Lamb, & Orbach, 2008), and on case disposition and resolution (Pipe, Orbach, & Lamb, 2008).

The investigative interview demands that children have the ability to self-report alleged incidents of abuse. Traditionally, self-reports by children have not been considered valid measurements. However, in Kazdin (2000) noted that children and adolescents are often asked to report on their own dysfunction and suggested that such a tool depends on both the nature of the problem and the characteristics of the children. This type of tool is pertinent to both paradigmatic and narrative modes, depending on how it is used (Toukmanian & Rennie, 1992; Weiner, 2005).

1.2. Self-reports using drawing

For centuries, art has served as a medium for self-expression (Abraham, 2002; Guttman & Regev, 2004; Ronen, 2000). The language of drawing is a natural activity that many children enjoy when that is not enforced on a child by an adult. This type of expression is an integral part of human development from an early age (Abraham, 2002; Hammer, 1997). By approximately 12 months of age, children have already been exposed to the use of paper and crayons and begin to scribble. Beginning around that age, children use drawings as an alternative language that enables them to express their inner worlds, feelings, and thoughts before they acquire fluency in verbal language (Leibowitz, 1999; Moschini, 2005). Malchiodi (1998) stated that children's drawings are thought to reflect their inner worlds, feelings, and interpersonal styles. She emphasized that most therapists recognize that drawings help children express themselves in ways that language cannot.

Perusal of the research literature on drawing reveals that drawing as part of art therapy can be employed to various contexts such as diagnosis, assessment, research and assessment in the therapeutic process (Abraham, 2002; Betts, 2006, 2012; Leibowitz, 1999). Drawing sometimes was documented as it tends to follow the phenomenological approach (Cohen & Cox, 1995; Cohen, Hammer, & Singer, 1988; Feder & Feder, 1988; Ravas-Shenhar, 1999; Snir, 2006) and sometimes it was documented as a projective technique (Harrower, Thomas, & Altman, 1975; Lev-Wiesel & Shvero, 2003; Rollins, 2005). Altogether, drawing in the context of art therapy was part of a controversial argument with respect to its efficiency and to whether it bares the standards of

reliability, validity and normative comparisons (Allen & Tussey, 2012; Betts, 2006, 2012; Gantt, 2004).

Drawing has been demonstrated as an effective way to assess and intervene with various populations. Gussak (2004, 2006, 2007, 2009) conducted interesting attempts with prison inmates. He reported that drawing and art therapy were particularly beneficial for this population given their exhibited inherent mistrust for verbal disclosure and their rigid defenses, which developed for basic survival. Children, and especially children who were exposed to traumatic experiences, were a focus for various researchers who aimed to assess drawing effectiveness (Cordell & Bergman-Meador, 1991; Ronen, 2000).

Psychodynamic and developmental approaches to the use of drawings to assess children assert that children's drawings are a reflection of their inner worlds and of their emotions, conflicts, and conceptions. By drawing, children express their ideas and perceptions of the world in which they live as well as how they deal with that world (Abraham, 2002; Hammer, 1997; Moschini, 2005; Ronen, 2000). Although children often lack the appropriate words or the ability to pinpoint the specific effects they experience, they find drawing to be a natural, accessible language they can use for emotional expression (Hammer, 1997; Moschini, 2005).

As a projective, interpretable tool, drawing lends itself to use in the psychological diagnostic assessment of children. When therapists interpret children's drawings, they are typically guided by the way they themselves conceive and interpret the world and, especially, the way they believe children perceive the world (Betts, 2006). In their analysis of children's drawings, Thomas and Jolley (1998) claimed that drawing, by itself, is inaccurate and unreliable as a personality state assessment, but it can provide information on children's emotional attitudes toward a topic. Furthermore, these authors suggested that although children's drawings should not be relied upon as sole indicators, they can be very useful as one of several sources and to corroborate other reports. Added to this, recent meta-analysis that was conducted by Allen and Tussey (2012) clearly showed that no graphic indicator or scoring system possessed sufficient empirical evidence to support its use for identifying sexual or physical abuse.

Observing the drawing as a self-report measure it is interesting to take a look into the cognitive-constructivist approach (Ronen, 2001). This approach focuses on an individual's subjective view of events, perceptions, and difficulties. Kelly (1955) viewed the client as a scientist who can analyze and as an architect who can construct his or her own world. According to this approach, clients must be considered the main source to help the therapist attain valid, reliable assessment information in terms of understanding how a particular individual perceives and conceives his or her own world (Hamama & Ronen, 2009; Mahoney, 1995; Neimeyer & Mahoney, 1995; Ronen, 2001).

1.3. Drawing in the forensic context

The medium of drawing has been a focus for many researchers who have attempted to understand its effect on children's narratives (Butler, Gross, & Hayne, 1995; Gross & Hayne, 1998, 1999; Katz & Hershkowitz, 2010; Salmon, Roncolato, & Gleitzman, 2003; Wesson & Salmon, 2001). Although there are many ways to use drawings, in the forensic context there is some risk in integrating the drawing given the basic notion that sometimes-victimized children suffer from dissociative disorders (Lev-Wiesel & Liraz, 2007) and that can hamper their performance within the legal context and their testimonies. Perhaps that is why the preferred way for integrating drawing in the forensic context is the 'draw and talk' method, which provides children with the opportunity to draw while recounting their experiences. Only their verbal responses are of interest (i.e., the content of the drawing is not evaluated). The facilitative effects of allowing children to draw while talking are thought to derive from a number of possible mechanisms. One possible explanation is that drawing allows children to generate their own retrieval cues by reminding

them of additional event-related details as they construct their drawings. Drawing may also serve to make the interview context more comfortable by giving children a focus other than the interviewer (Brown, 2011).

The 'draw and talk' technique has mainly been studied in labs where drawing was integrated into interviews with children on personally experienced events. The results clearly demonstrated that, under ideal circumstances (non-suggestive interventions), drawing yielded an increase in the amount of information recalled without compromising accuracy (Butler et al., 1995; Gross & Hayne, 1998, 1999; Salmon et al., 2003; Wesson & Salmon, 2001).

A recent field study was designed to explore the effects of drawing in investigative interviews with children who were alleged victims of abuse (Katz & Hershkowitz, 2010). The sample included 125 children aged 4–14 years who were alleged victims of sexual abuse. The children were first interviewed with open-ended invitations before they were randomly assigned to one of two interview conditions, with ($n = 69$) or without ($n = 56$) event drawing. They were then re-interviewed. The children in the drawing group disclosed more free-recall information about the abusive events than did children in the comparison group, including forensically relevant information about people, actions, and the time and location of the incidents. The effect of drawing was evident for young children as young as four as well as for older children aged 14 years old, it was found beneficial for both boys and girls and enhanced the children's testimonies regardless the type of the abuse or the time delay between the alleged incidents and the investigations.

The aim of the current paper is to further explore the ways in which drawing facilitates children's narratives in investigative interviews regarding alleged sexual abuse. Focus on three investigations from the previous mentioned study we will attempt to identify how drawing contributes to children's retrieval process using children's drawings and their narratives before, during and after drawing..

2. The interviews

2.1. The sample

The current study put in focus three investigations with children on alleged incidents of sexual abuse. These three interviews were selected among a sample of previous study (Katz & Hershkowitz, 2010) that was comprised of 125 children aged 4–14 years ($M = 9.9$, $SD = 2.41$) who were referred for investigative interviews following a complaint of a suspected single incident of sexual abuse by a perpetrator who was not a family member. The children, 31 boys and 94 girls, were randomly assigned to one of two research conditions: an interview with drawing or an interview without drawing. The alleged abuse included exposure ($n = 29$), touching private body parts over clothes ($n = 35$), skin-to-skin touching of private body parts ($n = 36$), and penetration ($n = 25$). All interviews were conducted by nine well-trained investigative interviewers with similar professional backgrounds (7 years of experience as investigative interviewers and a bachelor's degree in social work).

2.2. The procedure

All of the children were interviewed using the NICHHD protocol until the interviewers had exhaustively probed the children's memory of the alleged event using open-ended questions. The interviewer then opened an envelope revealing the condition to which the child had been randomly assigned.

In the drawing group, the interviewers gave the children a blank sheet of paper, a pencil, and an eraser and said, "You've told me what happened to you. Now I would like you to draw what happened, and then we will continue." Seven to ten minutes were allowed for drawing. During the drawing, the interviewers limited their interventions to

facilitators such as "hmm..." or repeating the children's words. After the children finished drawing, the interviewers said, "You told me earlier what happened to you, and now you've drawn it. The drawing is right here in front of you. Now please tell me again everything that happened to you, from the beginning to the end, as well as you can. You can also look at the drawing if you want." After the children's first post-drawing narratives, the interviewers continued the interviews in accordance with the protocol, moving from open-ended questions to more focused questions. The interviewers were instructed to ignore the drawing completely and to avoid offering any interpretations of it; they focused only on the verbal information that the children provided. Any deviations from these instructions were coded as suggestive utterances.

2.3. Ethical approval

The research was approved by the manager of the investigative interview unit in Israel, the head of the youth department of the Israeli police, the vice president of the Israeli juvenile court, and the chairman of the University of Haifa's ethics board.

3. Case illustrations

3.1. Child A

A girl who was 6 years and 7 months alleged that a stranger sexually abused her by touching her private body parts under her clothes. The girl was interviewed 24 days after the incident.

After being interviewed using the NICHHD Protocol, during which the interviewer became familiar with the girl and developed rapport with her, the interviewer invited her to talk about the reason she was at the investigation. The girl immediately disclosed the alleged incident. She provided a poor narrative of the incident, vaguely describing the suspect's touch, her attempts to resist his touch with her skirt and the scene of the crime. When the interviewer had determined that the girl had provided all possible information in response to the open-ended invitations, he invited her to draw everything that happened to her. The girl first asked how she should draw, and the interviewer told her she could draw anything she chose that related to the incident. While she was drawing, the girl said, "He is religious, with a Cipa and a belt". [Insert drawing A]

Following the drawing, the girl provided information on the time of the incident: "It was a Jewish holiday...it was in the middle of the day...". She also provided information with respect to the suspect's actions: "He touched my legs...he touched my private body part, the one that I pee with...I saw white fluid on his pants". The girl provided a detailed description of the scene of the crime: "It was at the store. It was dark in there...the place where people put their bicycles, babies' cars and strollers". She also elaborated on the suspect: "He is around the age of 15, with a Cipa but no tassel, black hair". In addition to this information, the girl shared her feelings with the interviewer, ("I was scared") and her actions during the incident ("I tried to close my legs firmly so he wouldn't be able to get inside").

The drawing led the girl to retrieve forensically significant details. The retrieved information provided the legal system with the following information: a detailed description of the scene of the crime, the time of the incident, the suspect's identity and the severity of the alleged abuse.

3.2. Child B

A girl aged 9 years and 1 month alleged that a stranger sexually abused her by touching her private body parts over her clothes. The girl was interviewed 10 days after the incident.

The girl was interviewed following the procedure that was elaborated earlier. The girl disclosed the alleged abuse to the interviewer

and provided information related to the context of the incident (the suspect asked her to go upstairs, and she wanted to go downstairs to the computer class) and stated that the suspect hugged her. When the interviewer invited the girl to draw everything that happened to her, her first response was, “I don’t know how to draw”, but the interviewer encouraged her (“You can draw whatever you can”) and she decided to draw. During the drawing, the girl talked and provided the following information: “Here are the chairs, the boy and me, and he is hugging me”. [Insert drawing B]

Following the drawing, the girl provided a rich and detailed description of her interactions with the suspect: “I told him that it is hurting me, so he told me I will do it gently... I told him it is hurting me, so he told me it is kind of a game...first he told me to sit down, and then he sat on me”. The girl disclosed for the first time the body parts that were touched: “He touched my belly with his hand several times, and he hugged me...he held me strongly”. The girl talked about the suspect’s identity (“He has little hair and some bare patches”), and she recognized his name. The girl also mentioned the time of the incident (“It was on Wednesday, noon time, it was a Jewish holiday”) and a detailed description of the scene (“It happened near my class, close to the school library, on the second floor”).

Using the drawing, the girl elaborated her testimony with the details of the incident. She provided rich information with respect to her interactions with the suspect and the sequence of the events. Following the drawing, the girl identified key details about the suspect (including his name), the time of the incident and the scene of the crime.

3.3. Child C

A boy aged 9 years and 6 months alleged that a stranger sexually abused him by touching his private body parts over his clothes. The boy was interviewed 2 days after the incident.

The boy was interviewed following the procedure that was elaborated in section X and disclosed the alleged incident to the interviewer. Before the drawing, the boy told the interviewer about the context of the incident (the suspect asked the boy to help him find his dog and the boy ran away from the suspect). When the interviewer invited the boy to draw, his immediate response was “I don’t know how to draw”, but the interviewer provided support and told the boy that it was not a test. The boy drew in silence except for pointing to the drawing saying, “This is the garden”. [Insert drawing C]

Following the drawing, the boy provided a rich description of the sequence of the incident: “We looked for the dog together. We walked out from the garden, we entered the school, we climbed over the fences, we saw cars, and then I ran away and hid”. The boy elaborated on his interactions with the suspect: “He asked me did I have a circumcision and I said yes...He said that I have muscles, and I told him that I am strong... He offered me a massage, and I told him I don’t want to”. The boy also provided information about the suspect’s actions: “He checked my muscles, he pulled my fingers, he touched my breast over the shirt, and he gave me 50 shekels”. The boy gave a detailed description of the suspect’s identity, including his age, skin color and clothing color, the scene of the incident (near the school), the name of the school and the name of the garden.

The drawing helped the boy to organize his narrative and to provide a coherent and richly detailed story with respect to the alleged incident. The boy’s narrative shed light on the sequence of the events and the key actions of the suspect and provided a description of his identity and the scene of the crime.

4. Discussion and practical implications

The analysis of the children’s narratives before and after drawing was an illuminating process with respect to the effects of the drawings on the children’s testimonies. The contribution of the drawings

to the children’s narratives was impressive. The three different children produced in their interviews richer testimonies when reporting more forensically relevant information with respect to the alleged abuse. The underlying mechanisms responsible for the effect of drawing on children’s reports will be further explored below.

As a method for promoting expression and healing (Eaton, Doherty, & Widrick, 2007) and as a self-report tool, drawing helps children to express and identify intense memories and emotions, especially when they lack the ability to pinpoint the specific effects they have experienced (Hamama & Ronen, 2009; Moschini, 2005). A drawing can act as a “container” for powerful emotions, providing temporal freedom for the child to self-actualize. According to this approach, children can be considered the primary source to help the investigative interviewer attain valid, reliable assessment information about the experience of sexual abuse. Addressing a frightening, violent and painful experience through these images can change a child’s emotional state (Waller, 2006). Through the process of drawing, the child may reexamine intense memories that then become reorganized into a memory that can be more easily addressed in treatment. It has been suggested by some theorists that a detailed narrative constructed by the client is essential to healing trauma (Lev-Wiesel & Liraz, 2007).

It may be that drawing helped the children to produce cues that enabled them to retrieve more information from memory. In the past, research has shown that when young children are asked open-ended questions, they typically report very little information about the target event (e.g., Butler et al., 1995; Fivush, 1993; Hamond & Fivush, 1991; Ornstein, Gordon, & Larus, 1992; Salmon, Bidrose, & Pipe, 1995). Apparently, although young children encode large amounts of information about certain events, they have considerable difficulty retrieving and reporting that information in the absence of specific retrieval cues, including questions, props, or photographs (Gross & Hayne, 1998; Poole & Lamb, 1998). Drawing can provide unique benefits by activating procedural memory in a safe, contained way that is vital for psychotherapy. Accessing procedural memory is central to the treatment of trauma (Green, 2003; Kozłowska & Hanney, 2001) because these types of memories are often located in the amygdala, where responses to traumatic or emergency situations, such as flight, fright, fight or freeze, are determined. Moreover, drawing uses both sensory and emotional stimuli, thus making the drawing process a beneficial means of accessing and integrating traumatic memories (Lusebrink, 2004). In the current study, the children in the drawing condition may have generated more of their own specific retrieval cues, which, in turn, facilitated their verbal reporting. That is, after drawing one aspect of an event, children in the drawing condition may have been reminded about other aspects of the same event.

In addition to providing new forensically relevant information with respect to the alleged abuse, this study demonstrated that children’s narratives following the drawing were more organized and clear, and the children used more words that created a sequence for their story. It may be that the drawing was used as an organizing frame from which the children built their narrative (Brown, 2011; Gross & Hayne, 1998). Drawing may have helped the children to build a coherent story using basic elements that were forgotten in their first retrieval without the drawing, such as the time of the alleged incident and the scene of the crime.

In addition to cognitive and communicative explanations for the effectiveness of the drawing, the emotional layer of the drawing should be explored. During the investigative interview, children are asked to disclose secrets that they have not previously told and to talk about traumatic events that generate fear, guilt and shame (Brown, 2011; Malloy et al., 2010). As a tool that is known to the children, drawing may have helped them to overcome the difficulties of talking to an unknown interviewer about traumatic events. It may also be that after drawing their biggest secret, the children felt that it was no longer theirs to keep, as a 12-year-old girl said: “After drawing everything he did to me, I said to myself that it is ok now; you can

come and talk to her about everything. It is not a secret anymore". Through the constructive process of drawing, children can shift from a helpless position to a position of mastery and empowerment over their experiences.

It is important to note that although the current paper addresses the potential of creative means when interviewing children within the legal context, we should consider the conclusions carefully given the limitations of the study. First of all, the ability to assess the children's credibility is impossible given the fact that there were no external evidence supporting the children's testimonies, since sexual abuse is often taking place as a secret with no evidence. Second, there is no evidence with respect to the efficiency of the drawing when interviewing children that were exposed to complex trauma rather than single incidents as in the current study. Third, the current study aimed only to assess the children's narratives during the investigation, however, it will be highly important to further explore, in future studies, the children's emotional state following investigations.

The current study stresses the value of drawing when interviewing children about traumatic events. When interviewing children about traumatic experiences, the potential of drawing to increase rapport between an interviewer and a child and the contribution of drawing to improving children's emotional state, enhancing their self-expression and promoting the production of forensically relevant information is extremely relevant. The use of drawing can be beneficial to practitioners in the clinical context and to practitioners in the protective services and forensic contexts.

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