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# Witness recall across repeated interviews in a case of repeated abuse☆,☆☆

Sonja P. Brubacher[a,*], David La Rooy[b,**]

[a] Central Michigan University, MI, USA
[b] David La Rooy Partnership, Dundee, Scotland, UK

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ABSTRACT

In this *illustrative* case study we examine the three forensic interviews of a girl who experienced repeated sexual abuse from ages 7 to 11. She disclosed the abuse after watching a serialized television show that contained a storyline similar to her own experience. This triggered an investigation that ended in successful prosecution of the offender. Because this case involved abuse that was repeated on a weekly basis for 4 years we thus investigated the degree to which the child's narrative reflected *specific episodes* or *generic accounts*, and both the interviewer's and child's attempts to elicit and provide, respectively, specific details across the 3 interviews collected in a 1 month period. Across the 3 interviews, the child's account was largely generic, yet on a number of occasions she provided details specific to individual incidents (*episodic leads*) that could have been probed further. As predicted: earlier interviews were characterized more by episodic than generic prompts and the reverse was true for the third interview; the child often responded using the same style of language (episodic or generic) as the interviewer; and open questions yielded narrative information. We discuss the importance of adopting children's words to specify occurrences, and the potential benefits of permitting generic recall in investigative interviews on children's ability to provide episodic leads. Despite the fact that the testimony was characterized by generic information about what usually happened, rather than specific episodic details about individual occurrences, this case resulted in successful prosecution.


## Introduction

The specificity of information reported in interviews with child victims of repeated sexual abuse is important because the prevalent viewpoint in these cases is that interviewers should elicit *specific accounts* of abusive incidents (Guadagno, Powell, & Wright, 2006; Lamb, Orbach, Hershkowitz, Esplin, & Horowitz, 2007). In cases of repeated abuse it is also likely that repeated interviewing may be necessary to elicit a complete account, although the dynamics of repeated interviews are controversial (La Rooy, Lamb, & Pipe, 2009) and have only been systematically examined in a few studies of forensic interviews (Cederborg, La Rooy, & Lamb, 2008; Hershkowitz & Terner, 2007; Leander, 2010) with even fewer published case studies illustrating their effects (La Rooy, Katz, Malloy, & Lamb, 2010; Orbach, Lamb, La Rooy, & Pipe, 2012). Taken together,

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* Corresponding author address: Central Michigan University, Department of Psychology, 1200 S Franklin Street, Mt Pleasant, MI 48858, USA.
** Corresponding author.

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the combination of repeated episodes of abuse and repeated interviews heighten the complexity of such cases. In this article we contextualize some of these issues through the presentation of a case study such that practitioners, interviewers, and others involved in dealing with similar cases, might be able to recognize their own challenges and potentially enhance practice and training.

In this case study, involving allegations of repeated sexual abuse over several years culminating in successful prosecution of the offender when the child victim was 14 years old, we discuss experimental research of memory for repeated events and why the reporting of generic information (i.e., describing what happens across the series of events) is considered problematic from a legal and psychological perspective, research-based recommendations for interviewers for obtaining particularized occurrences, and our analysis of the interviews in this case. We show, using examples from the actual interview transcripts, potential alternative prompts that may have yielded additional specific information, based on experimental research. We conclude with a discussion of the importance of securing *both* specific and generic details.

## *Experimental research of memory for repeated events*

It is well understood that memories for events that have occurred on repeated occasions differ qualitatively from memories for single-experience events (see Roberts & Powell, 2001, for a review). After one or more exposures to an event people develop a *script* or *general event representation* about what usually happens (Hudson & Nelson, 1986; Hudson, Fivush, & Kuebli, 1992). Scripts are stereotypical knowledge structures that describe event actions or objects (e.g., what happens when you go to a restaurant), and often include information about temporal sequence (Abelson, 1981; Schank & Abelson, 1977), as well as which features are necessary (e.g., the restaurant script must include some manner of payment), which are optional (e.g., one may choose to consume food or only order a beverage), and which are less tightly bound to the script (e.g., food may be ordered from a counter, a drive-through window, or a server); see Nelson, 1986, for a review.

Scripts serve a purpose in helping children to learn about the world and make future experiences predictable (Nelson, 1986). Indeed, research has consistently demonstrated that children's memories are strengthened for details that are always or often present, and they are highly resistant to false suggestions about such details (e.g., Powell, Roberts, Ceci, & Hembrooke, 1999). Thus, generic accounts of "what usually happens," despite lacking the specificity often required in legal settings, can be quite accurate and consistent.

In contrast, details that change across occurrences are often not recalled correctly with respect to *when* they actually occurred, known as *source confusion* in the psychological literature (Ackil & Zaragoza, 1995; Roberts & Blades, 1999). When Powell et al. (1999) asked 5- to 6-year-old children to recall the fourth occurrence of a repeated event the children accurately reported a remarkable 96% of details that were unchanged across the occurrences (*fixed*) but only reported 35% of details that had varied (*variable*), and they made errors with these latter details. The majority of those errors (65%) were source confusions; children reported details that truly happened, but attributed them to the wrong occurrence.

When children are asked to provide information about a *specific* occurrence of a repeated event they must engage in a decision-making process about which of the details they can recall actually happened during the occurrence in question, and filter out other information that was experienced on another occasion. This process is referred to as source monitoring (see Johnson, Hashtroudi, & Lindsay, 1993; Roberts, 2000). Source decisions for details that vary across occurrences are especially difficult because each occurrence shares very similar perceptual information. Increasing similarity across events, and decreasing age, are both associated with greater source confusions (Lindsay, Johnson, & Kwon, 1991; Roberts & Powell, 2001). Children are further impeded by their poorer temporal understanding; they may struggle to determine the order of events in time, one manner in which a source judgment might be made (Powell & Thomson, 1997).

Potential errors arising when describing specific occurrences of a repeated event are also explained by Fuzzy-Trace Theory. According to Brainerd and Reyna (2004), "verbatim traces" are integrated representations of a memory's target surface form and include contextual cues such as source. Recalling the exact features of a specific occurrence can be likened to retrieval of verbatim details. Gist information, or the general meaning/theme of a memory, on the other hand is *reconstructed* from the event experiences (Brainerd & Reyna, 1990; Reyna & Brainerd, 1995). Errors can be made when a retrieved detail that is gist consistent (e.g., "mum was always out of the house") is assigned to the wrong instance of the repeated event (e.g., saying she was at work on the last time, when she actually was at the shops) because the verbatim trace containing source information has decayed. Repeatedly experiencing the event makes the "mum was always out" gist trace stronger. Thus, there can be concern that a child using gist information to reconstruct memory for a specific incident may be retrieving the wrong verbatim trace. Psychologists who research these types of recall errors in memory have emphasized the legal implications of their work.

## *Legal issues regarding 'particularization'*

Despite the importance of scripts to children's cognitive development and potential challenges in describing specific occurrences, there are times when a generic account of events is not desirable, such as in prosecution of child sexual abuse cases. Child sexual abuse is often repeated (Connolly & Read, 2006; Sas & Cunningham, 1995). Children are frequently the only witnesses and thus may be required to testify about their experiences (McGough, 1994). In many cases they must provide enough specific detail (e.g., time, place, clothing worn) particular to one occurrence, known as particularization (Guadagno et al., 2006; Podirsky v R., 1990; R. v B. [G.], 1990; S v. R, 1989).

Generic reports lacking specific episodic detail (e.g., "he always does it when my mum is at work") can impede prosecution because they pose a challenge for determining a charge and do not allow for the possibility of an alibi. In addition, cross-examination will challenge children with respect to confusions across occurrences, or inconsistencies in their accounts (Zajac & Hayne, 2003, 2006; Zajac, O'Neill, & Hayne, 2012), and the process of cross-examination itself necessitates that at least some specific occurrences are particularized (Zajac et al., 2012). In cases where the child's interview is used as evidence in chief it is also preferable to have specific episodes elicited one at a time, producing a coherent narrative account which has positive effects on perceptions of children's credibility (Davis, Hoyano, Keenan, Maitland, & Morgan, 1999; Smith & Milne, 2011). In contrast, a lack of specific information and confusions across occurrences are associated with decreased perceptions of credibility. Connolly, Price, Lavoie, and Gordon (2008) found that children with repeated (lab) experience were generally rated as less cognitively competent, less honest, less confident, and less credible than children with a single experience, and their accounts contained more inconsistencies.

Although particularization requirements exist in many jurisdictions around the world, there have been exceptions wherein judges have ruled that a certain combination of factors such as young child age, very high frequency of abusive occurrences, and familial relationship of perpetrator would make it unreasonable for a child to provide specific accounts (e.g., People v. Jones, 1990). It is important to note that the latter two factors are characteristic of the current case study. Nevertheless, for the psychological and legal reasons described, best practice guidelines (e.g., Lamb et al., 2007) instruct interviewers to secure episodic information about specific incidents because there remain concerns about allowing a child's testimony to consist largely of generic information.

### *Research-based recommendations for interviewers*

It is recommended that children give an account of the alleged events in response to open-prompts because they are more likely to provide accurate information than when asked specific questions (Kuehnle & Connell, 2009; Lamb, Hershkowitz, Orbach, & Esplin, 2008). Interviewers should question children early as to whether the alleged abuse happened "one time or more than one time" and then request information about specific incidents such as the *first* or *last* time (Lamb et al., 2007). Interviewers should be aware of linguistic cues that indicate generic recall such as use of the timeless present (e.g., "he does it when mum's out") and the impersonal "you" pronoun (e.g., "you have to keep quiet or he shouts"). In contrast, verbs in the past tense and some lexical markers (e.g., *yesterday*, *the last time*) tend to indicate *episodic* reports about individual occurrences (Nelson & Gruendel, 1986).

Several studies have now demonstrated that children are highly responsive to interviewer language; providing episodic information in response to episodic prompts, and generic detail when prompted generically (Brubacher, Roberts, & Powell, 2011; Brubacher, Roberts, & Powell, 2012; Brubacher, Malloy, Lamb, & Roberts, 2013; Schneider, Price, Roberts, & Hedrick, 2011). Even before allegations are discussed, interviewers should model effective episodic prompts in the *practice interview*. The practice phase serves cognitive and motivational purposes (see Roberts, Brubacher, Powell, & Price, 2011), including practice reporting *episodic* events and specific details. This phase should comprise of interviewers using open-prompts to elicit detailed accounts of neutral past experiences from interviewees. When practiced in this way, children learn to provide a greater amount of information in response to open prompts (Roberts, Lamb, & Sternberg, 2004; Sternberg et al., 1997).

Across practice and substantive phases of the interview then, prompts should remain open-ended, drawing on free recall memory, and minimize the asking of questions that draw on cued and recognition memory; this is also the recommendation of the interviewing guidelines provided by the country in which this case took place. It has also been suggested that if children are allowed to report freely, they may disclose specific episodic details that can aid particularization (Powell, Wright, & Hughes-Scholes, 2011).

### *Current study*

Cognizant of both the caveats surrounding generic testimony, and evidence-based recommendations to interviewers, we examined the three interviews conducted with a young girl for the proportion of episodic and generic language used in the interviews, the number of times the child provided an opportunity for the interviewer to elicit specific information, and whether the interviewer used these episodic leads to prompt for incident-specific details. We provide examples from the interviews and, at various junctures, describe alternate prompts with which the interviewer could have responded to garner episodic accounts. The purpose of these suggestions is not to critique the quality of the interviews, but rather to illustrate to practitioners other *potential* questions that might have yielded more specific detail. Yet, despite the concerns surrounding generic reports of sexual abuse, this case was successfully prosecuted, and we conclude by discussing potential benefits of permitting children who have experienced multiple abusive episodes to describe their experiences in generic terms.

While our primary goal was to characterize issues arising when a child with experience of sexual abuse persisting for several years is interviewed on multiple occasions, we made several predictions with respect to the interviews. Given the nature of the interview guidelines employed in the country where the case took place, we expected that the interviewer would request predominantly episodic information in earlier interviews with later interviews including more generic prompts. As several studies have now demonstrated that children are responsive to interviewer language, we expected that the child in the current case would respond to episodic prompts with episodic information and to generic prompts with generic detail. Finally, it was expected that narrative information (episodic and generic details) would be provided in response to

**Table 1**
Recommended ground rules and their use in each interview.

| Ground rules | Interview 1 | Interview 2 | Interview 3 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Important to tell the truth | √ | √ | √ |
| Demonstrate 'truth and lies' | | √ | |
| If you don't understand me 'say so' | √ | √ | |
| Don't guess 'say I don't know' | √ | √ | |
| Correct me if I make a mistake | | √ | |

*Note*: A tick '√' indicates the presence of a particular ground rule in the interview.

**Table 2**
Percentage of interviewer prompts used in high and low quality interviews compared to current sample.

| Interviewer prompt/question | Research studies | | Case interviews | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | High quality interviews: Orbach et al. (2000) | Low quality interviews: Sternberg et al. (2001) | Interview 1 | Interview 2 | Interview 3 |
| Open-prompts | 30% | 6% | 40% (12) | 20% (7) | 12.3% (8) |
| "Wh-" and "how" | 44% | 57% | 33.3% (10) | 34.3% (12) | 38.5% (25) |
| Option-posing | 18% | 32% | 13.3% (4) | 31.4% (11) | 41.5% (27) |
| Suggestive | 8% | 5% | 13.3% (4) | 14.3% (5) | 7.7% (5) |
| Total questions | – | – | 30 | 35 | 65 |

*Note*: Raw numbers of each prompt/question appear in parentheses.

open-ended prompts while non-narrative information (contextual; e.g., names, places, addresses) would be elicited through closed questions.

## Method

### *Case materials*

The interviews were selected from a larger set that were previously referred to one of the authors for quality assessment by lawyers seeking expert evaluations (La Rooy, Nicol, Halley, & Lamb, 2012). The project was reviewed and approved by the School of Social and Health Science Research Ethics Committee at Abertay University Dundee. The ethical conditions stipulated that should it be necessary to provide excerpts from individual cases as examples illustrating certain practices, the researchers should anonymize any person and place names, and avoid including statements that could potentially allow identification of individual cases.

In the current case there were three interviews conducted and these were considered as evidence in a criminal investigation. The interviewee was 14 years old when the case went to court and 12 years old when she was interviewed (three times in a one-month period). The abuse had occurred over several years and ended when she was 11. No information was available regarding the individual training that interviewers had received but based on their location it is highly likely that they participated in a week-long training program designed to raise awareness of good interviewer practice (La Rooy, Lamb, & Memon, 2011). One interviewer was a police officer and the other a social worker. The interviews were recorded through a process of scribing whereby interviewers are required to write down *verbatim* exactly what both the interviewer and child said. This practice was used to record interviews with children in the jurisdiction from which the interviews were selected until as recently as December 2011. To accommodate this difficulty, interviewers are trained to conduct the interviews at a very slow pace in an effort to provide as faithfully recorded an interview as possible to the courts. The Social Worker recorded the first two interviews with the Police Officer asking the questions, whereas the roles were reversed for the final interview. Both interviewers were present in the interview room during all three interviews.

### *Coding*

*Phases and interviewer question-types.* We assessed whether the interviewer established the 'ground rules' and engaged in Narrative Practice (recall of an unrelated neutral event) before the substantive phase of the interviews began. Table 1 shows that the interviewer covered most of the suggested ground rules. Practice narratives were not conducted in the pre-substantive phase of any of the interviews.

The substantive phases of the interviews were examined to determine the percentages (and numbers) of each type of interviewer prompt (see right side of Table 2) following procedures identical to those used in many scientific studies (e.g., Orbach, Hershkowitz, Lamb, Sternberg, Esplin, & Horowitz, 2000; Sternberg, Lamb, Davies, & Westcott, 2001). The left side of Table 2 presents the percentages of each prompt-type observed in both high- and low-quality interviews examined in previous research to give the reader a sense of how the set of interviews in this case compare to others conducted according to similar interviewing guidelines.

*Language specificity*. We coded the language used by the interviewer and the child as episodic (requesting or providing information about a specific occurrence), generic (requesting or providing information about the abuse script), or descriptive/contextual (requesting or providing non-event-related information pertinent to the abuse, such as the child's age or address at the time of an abusive incident or incidents, or the layout of the rooms in a house where abuse took place; see Brubacher, Roberts, et al. (2011), Brubacher et al. (2012) and Schneider et al. (2011) for similar coding procedures). We also recorded every instance of the interviewer asking a question about frequency, and noted the type of question (see Table 3). Only two types were used: *Direct* (e.g., "how many times did that happen?") and *Option-posing yes-no* ("had that happened more than once?").

*Episodic leads and labels*. We defined *episodic leads* as episodic details provided by the child that were signaled by the terms "the time when. . ." or "one time/once/one day" (Powell & McMeeken, 1998). When the child used the term again, or the interviewer used it in a prompt to refer the child to that occasion (e.g., "you said one day *he tried to make a deal with you*, tell me about that time") it was coded as a *label*. Interviewer labels not adopted from the child's words were also coded; these were temporal labels (i.e., "the first/last time").

### *Reliability*

All three interviews were double-coded by the primary author and a research assistant who was unassociated with the study and completely blind to its purposes and the case background, but who had extensive experience in the coding procedures described here and thus did not require training with the current set of three interviews. Coding was assessed with Cohen's Kappa, which was .99 for prompt/question type, and .90 for the language specificity of both interviewer prompts and child utterances. The episodic leads/labels noted by both coders were compared and found to be identical.

## Results

### *Interview structure and question types*

Table 2 demonstrates that the recommended open prompts were used and that interviewers also used specific questions. Problematically, suggestive prompts also were used in all three interviews, most notably the first two. Nevertheless, percentages for all prompt-types bear more similarity to the high-quality than low-quality interviews observed in previous research.

*Language specificity*. As predicted by hypothesis 1, there was a general trend for interviewer prompts to move from episodic to generic across the three interviews (although unexpectedly, the aim of Interview 1 appears to have been to secure relevant background context; see Table 3). Interviews 1 and 2 were also characterized by a relatively high proportion of episodic information from the child, while Interview 3 was primarily generic. It was evident that, despite the child claiming difficulty in remembering individual times, she provided descriptively more episodic information than the interviewer requested, in all three interviews.

As in previous research and in accordance with our second hypothesis, it was clear that the language specificity used by the interviewer and child were strongly related (Table 4). In Interviews 1 and 3, the majority of prompts and responses are congruent (e.g., 75% of the generic interviewer prompts in Interview 1 were associated with generic child responses, as opposed to other types). A similar pattern was observed in Interview 2, although the child was relatively uncooperative in this second interview and often indicated she could not remember in response to many of the *narrative* prompts (i.e., pertaining to the abusive incidents; episodic or generic). Nevertheless, she complied in providing contextual information

**Table 3**
Level of specificity percentages for the interviewer and child and number of frequency questions asked.

| | | Proportion interviewer prompt type/child unit of information | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Episodic | Generic | Contextual |
| Interview 1 | Interviewer | 23% | 27% | 50% |
| | Child | 39% | 22% | 39% |
| | Frequency Qs: | 2 (option posing Y/N and Wh-/how) | | |
| Interview 2 | Interviewer | 46% | 26% | 28% |
| | Child | 50% | 18% | 32% |
| | Frequency Qs: | None | | |
| Interview 3 | Interviewer | 12% | 74% | 14% |
| | Child | 13% | 68% | 19% |
| | Frequency Qs: | 2 (option posing Y/N and Wh-/how) | | |

*Note*: Percentages sum to 100% across rows.

**Table 4**
Percentages of episodic, generic and contextual information elicited by the interviewer and provided by the child.

| | | Episodic | Generic | Contextual |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Interview 1 # interviewer | | | | |
| | Prompts | 7 | 8 | 15 |
| Child | Episodic | **57% (4)** | 13% (1) | 7% (1) |
| | Generic | 14% (1) | **75% (6)** | 7% (1) |
| | Contextual | 14% (1) | 0 | **80% (12)** |
| | DK/NR | 14% (1) | 13% (1) | 7% (1) |
| Interview 2 # interviewer | | | | |
| | Prompts | 16 | 9 | 10 |
| Child | Episodic | **38% (6)** | 0 | 0 |
| | Generic | 6% (1) | **33% (3)** | 0 |
| | Contextual | 6% (1) | 0 | **90% (9)** |
| | DK/NR | 50% (8) | 67% (6) | 10% (1) |
| Interview 3 # interviewer | | | | |
| | Prompts | 8 | 48 | 9 |
| Child | Episodic | **63% (5)** | 4% (2) | 0 |
| | Generic | 37% (3) | **90% (43)** | 11% (1) |
| | Contextual | 0 | 2% (1) | **89% (8)** |
| | DK/NR | 0 | 4% (2) | 0 |

*Note*: Raw numbers for child responses in parentheses. DK/NR = Don't know/no response.

**Table 5**
Percentage child units of information by level of specificity and prompt type.

| | | Interviewer prompts | Child proportion episodic | Child proportion generic | Child proportion contextual |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Interview 1 | Open | 12 | 62% | 29% | 9% |
| | Wh-/How | 10 | 0 | 13% | 87% |
| | Option-Posing | 4 | 33% | 0 | 67% |
| | Suggestive | 4 | 0 | 25% | 75% |
| Interview 2 | Open | 7 | 72% | 28% | 0 |
| | Wh-/How | 12 | 11% | 22% | 67% |
| | Option-Posing | 11 | 50% | 0 | 50% |
| | Suggestive | 5 | 40% | 0 | 60% |
| Interview 3 | Open | 8 | 28% | 61% | 11% |
| | Wh-/How | 24 | 12% | 82% | 6% |
| | Option-Posing | 28 | 8% | 52% | 40% |
| | Suggestive | 5 | 0 | 100% | 0 |

*Note*: Percentages sum to 100% across rows.

when requested. As was predicted, open prompts tended to elicit narrative detail, while the more specific questions were associated with the provision of contextual non-narrative information (Table 5).

*Evidence obtained in the interviews*

The child's initial disclosure in Interview 1 was generic: "He was making me do things I don't want to do". The interviewer prompted her to tell more and immediately she provided details of a specific episode spontaneously: "I'll give you an example, one time when mum was putting [name anonymous] to sleep in her room mum fell asleep with her and [suspect] was in my room. . . [truncated]". The interviewer followed up with an option-posing frequency question: "Had that happened before?" and upon the child's affirmation asked her to describe the *first time*.

An alternative response that interviewers could consider under this circumstance is to return to prompting for more details about the episode provided as an 'example' in the disclosure as it is likely to be remembered well instead of switching to a different time (or assuming that the episode provided was not the first time). In fact, the interviewer did not appear to prompt for more information about this episode again until Interview 2 wherein the interviewer asked "the time mum was putting [name anonymous] to bed, when was that?" The child responded by presenting a piece of information that appeared contradictory to the first interview; she said that the suspect was in *his* room, instead of in her room. Problematically, however, we cannot be sure that this is a contradiction in Interview 2. It is impossible to know whether the child and interviewer are talking about the same time because (1) this episode was never given a label in Interview 1 (i.e., not defined as "the time mum put [name] to bed"), and (2) the interviewer did not clarify whether the label was unique (e.g., "Were there other times it happened at [name]'s bed time?"). It may be useful for specific episodes to be labeled as soon as they arise because interviewers have identified not knowing whether they and the child were discussing the same occurrence as a major problem when interviewing about repeated events (Powell, Roberts, & Guadagno, 2007). It may also be helpful to request clarification about uniqueness (e.g., "Did that happen any other times?"), as data from analog lab studies indicates

that school-aged children are aware of details that only occur once (i.e., are unique) in a series of repeated events (Brubacher, Glisic, Roberts, & Powell, 2011; Brubacher, 2011).

*Episodic leads.* Episodic leads are those incident-specific details provided by a child that are, or could be, unique. They are often signaled by "the time when. . ." or "one time/once. . ." (Powell & McMeeken, 1998). In Interview 1, the child provided one episodic lead (discussed above), about which the interviewer did not probe further. In Interview 3, the child reported that "one time I had a big red mark on my nose" in the context of recounting that the perpetrator sometimes put his hand over her mouth. The interviewer did not follow up on this lead, but rather moved the conversation immediately to a discussion about the houses in which the abuse took place. This example represents a missed opportunity to probe a unique occurrence that the *child* spontaneously provided.

In the same interview, the child disclosed "he tried to make a deal, that I licked his front bum then he would take me to the movies, but I said 'no' and he *never asked again*." Later in the same interview, the interviewer use the label 'the time he made a deal' to probe more details about that occurrence which immediately garnered three pieces of episodic information from the child, but then moved away from the narrative account to probe for contextual information and did not obtain further details about this episode. In line with expert recommendations (e.g., Lamb et al., 2007; Powell et al., 2011) interviewers should attempt to elicit as much narrative detail as possible before asking more focused questions about context which disrupt the narrative (e.g., child age and address at the time of the occurrence).

The child provided three low-frequency episodic details in Interview 3: "Sometimes he says 'that was good'"; that the abuse mostly happened when mum was at the shops but "Sometimes it happens downstairs when she's sleeping upstairs"; and "He touches there (points to chest) but he doesn't do that often." Although low-frequency (rather than unique) details may not lead to episodic accounts, interviewers can consider prompting for more information about rare occurrences (e.g., "Tell me about one time it happened when mum was sleeping upstairs"), especially if there are no other promising leads. Most notably, the third interview, which is the most generic, contains the greatest amount of information from the child, and the most episodic leads and low-frequency details. This pattern occurs because the child recounts her script (e.g., "Sometimes if I shout or cry he puts his hand over my mouth. I find it hard to breathe") and adds episodic deviations (e.g., "and one time it left a big red mark on my nose").

## Discussion

The goal of the present research was to describe a case of child sexual abuse that is unique in its characteristics with respect to the psychological literature. That is, there is a paucity of research that has endeavored to examine cases of repeated experiences in combination with repeated interviews about those experiences, and in the few extant lab studies combining repeated experience with more than one interview the number of repeated experiences is small (Hudson, 1990; Powell & Thomson, 1997). This is non-trivial given that the child in the current case experienced regular abuse on an ongoing basis for several years, and it has been demonstrated that as the number of experiences increases children's reports become more generic (Brubacher et al., 2013) and so the interviews conducted here are highly typical.

Despite the generic nature of the child's account, this case was successfully prosecuted. As noted earlier, the particularization requirement is sometimes relaxed when children have experienced a large number of incidents, and the perpetrator is part of the child's immediate home environment. Nevertheless, this child did provide some episodic accounts of abuse (albeit brief) as well as several 'episodic leads' that could have been used to probe incidents that *the child raised* in greater detail. We first summarize theoretically guided alternate ways in which interviewers could prompt children in similar cases for more information specific to individual incidents, although it is important to note that we cannot infer that this particular child would have responded with greater episodic detail. We then discuss potential benefits of generic narratives and conclude with important caveats surrounding interpretation and generalizability of our findings.

### *Recommendations for eliciting incident-specific detail*

Examining the three interviews in this case yields a number of opportunities to prompt for episodic information. Beginning in the pre-substantive phase interviewers can demonstrate to children the amount and *type* of detail expected in children's responses by conducting open-ended narrative practice phases (Roberts et al., 2011). Narrative practice also benefits interviewers; it gives them practice in asking good questions. None of the interviews in the present case study contained a practice phase. Although Interview 1 was characterized primarily by open questions, the proportion was still lower than is recommended (Lamb et al., 2007), and Interviews 2 and 3 were dominated by the less desirable specific questions. It was also evident that the child was responsive to the style of language used by the interviewer, and that she tended to provide narrative detail (episodic or generic) in response to the open prompts. Thus, beginning with an open-ended episodic practice phase, and continuing this style of prompting throughout the interview, is likely to have benefitted the child's account.

There were several opportunities for the interviewer to have encouraged the child to describe specific incidents. Each time a narrative began, the interviewer quickly moved to securing contextual details such as what age she was at each time. It is of course unknown whether the child would have been able to provide further episodic detail if requested, and there is a risk to accuracy associated with attempts to elicit greater amounts of information (see Koriat, Goldsmith, Schneider, & Nakash-Dura, 2001). Nevertheless, interviewers are encouraged to secure whatever narrative information they can initially,

with contextual detail obtained after narrative accounts are complete because it disrupts the recall process (Powell & Snow, 2007).

At various points in the three interviews the child provided either unambiguously unique episodic leads (e.g., the time the perpetrator tried to make a deal and never asked again), or details that happened on rare occasions (e.g., touching her chest) that have the potential to elicit episodic accounts (e.g., "tell me about one time when he touched your chest"). Although no published experimental study has yet compared the quality and quantity of children's accounts when occurrences are and are not labeled, we suggest that, at the very least, labeling occurrences can reduce confusion for both the interviewer and the child (Powell et al., 2007). For example, "let's call that the time he tried to make a deal. Tell me everything that happened the time he tried to make a deal," signifies to the child how the interviewer plans to refer to the occurrence. Research has also demonstrated that children as young as 6-years-old can provide informative responses about unique details (Brubacher, 2011; Brubacher, Glisic, et al., 2011). Thus, if interviewers are unsure as to whether a label uniquely refers to one particular episode, evidence suggests that the interviewee can be asked (e.g., "Did [label] happen any other times?"). If the child says "no", the label can be used and if "yes" it may be possible to amend the label by adding another feature to enhance clarity (e.g., "the time he touched your chest *in the bathroom*). It should be noted, however, that experimental research on labeling is still in its infancy and the effects of compound labels are unknown.

Across the three interviews in general, rather than using the episodic leads provided by the child, the interviewers requested information about the first and last time (to which the child provided little detail), and 'any other times'. The interviewers certainly made attempts to particularize and followed best practice guidelines (e.g., *last*, *first*, and *another time*, are suggested occurrences in the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD] protocol; Lamb et al., 2007), but forgot to *listen* to the child and to let her be in charge of the information flow.

### *Generic recall*

Most of the episodic leads and rare details arose in the third interview, which also contained the greatest proportion of generic language. New evidence suggests that allowing children with repeated experience to report generic information first may lead to the provision of more episodic information than immediately requesting information about incidents. This proposition has been supported by some analog lab research (Brubacher et al., 2012) which demonstrated that children who reported their scripts for a lab-based repeated event before describing one occurrence provided overall more information and told the interviewer about more differences across occurrences (i.e., potential episodic leads) than children who were questioned in the reverse order. A follow-up study in which occurrences of the lab-based repeated event were more distinct from one another demonstrated no effects on the amount of information, but children who recalled their scripts first were more accurate about what happened during a specific occurrence than children questioned first about a specific occurrence (Brubacher, 2011).

There are also motivational reasons to allow children to report generic information at the outset of an interview. Some children, especially following prolonged abuse, may struggle initially to describe their experiences episodically (Terr, 1994). These maltreated children tend toward 'gist' reporting because it permits greater psychological distance from the events than describing specific episodes in detail (Terr, 1990). Allowing them to report their event script first, if that is the most comfortable and those memories are the most accessible, should not mean that occurrences will not be particularized. As demonstrated in the current case, when the child was questioned generically in the third interview she both described what "usually happened" as well as deviations from this general script. We alluded earlier to the notion that perhaps the child's willingness to talk also increased over the course of the three interviews (and we cannot disentangle the effect of the social worker having conducted the third interview). Nevertheless, the extended evaluation model (Carnes, Wilson, & Nelson-Gardell, 1999; Carnes, Nelson-Gardell, Wilson, & Orgassa, 2001) advocates that when interviewing children who may be reluctant to disclose, multiple interviews may be appropriate (see also La Rooy, Lamb, & Pipe, 2009; La Rooy et al., 2010; Leander, 2010).

It can be proposed that: (a) allowing the child to report generic information enhanced her ability to also retrieve those details that were not part of the usual abuse script; (b) the child felt more comfortable by the third interview (or with the social worker) and thus was more willing to access memories for specific accounts; or (c) both of these factors played a role. This question cannot be answered from the current case study, but raises promising lines of inquiry for experimental lab-based research.

Note that existing interview guidelines (e.g., NICHD protocol, Lamb et al. (2007); Step-wise Guidelines, Yuille, Cooper, & Hervé, 2009) do not necessarily preclude allowing children to speak generically before describing specific incidents. In the NICHD protocol the aim of the first substantive prompt, a very open invitation for children to disclose why they are "here today," is to elicit a full narrative account and not to interrupt or prompt further until children have finished. In the Stepwise Guidelines it is acknowledged that children (and adults) being interviewed about a repeated experience may commence with script information and Yuille and colleagues (in press) advise interviewers not to interrupt if this is the case, prompting for information about episodes after generic recall has been exhausted. As such, both methods allow children to report a large amount of information without restriction - much of which *could* be generic - but do they? This question is an empirical one, and we encourage those conducting research on interviewing techniques for eliciting information about repeated events to

carry out an examination of the language specificity and episodic leads contained within the first narrative responses, and how these affect what happens during the remainder of the interviews.

### *Case-specific influences and caveats*

The purpose of the current study is to provide both practitioners and researchers with an illustration of case in which a child disclosed abuse that had occurred copious times over a period of several years and was subsequently interviewed about the abuse on three occasions. While this case is important because little research exists examining repeated interviews about repeated events, it is also an especially valuable teaching tool because it demonstrates both the propensity children (and adults) have in relying on generic memories for repeated experiences and that *despite the former*, their generic accounts contain incident-specific details that can be pursued by attentive interviewers. Nevertheless, readers should not forget that what we have presented is a single *case*, in which other factors such as interviewer training and experience, and level of support provided to the child, among others, could have affected the case outcomes. In addition, although the offender was successfully prosecuted, there is no access to ground truth in this case and we cannot make any claims about the child's accuracy.

## Conclusions

This particular case provides insight into how episodic leads arise in the context of generic reports, how interviewers may glean more incident-specific information from children with multiple experiences across repeated interviews, and demonstrates that testimony dominated by generic detail can be successfully prosecuted under certain conditions. The findings reported here raise new questions for both lab and field research concerning effects of recall order (generic, episodic) across multiple interviews, whether repeated interviews have cognitive and motivational benefits for children with repeated experience, and to what extent children's narratives in response to the first substantive prompt in best-practice interviews are characterized by generic or episodic detail.

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