
Do Prosecutors Use Interview Instructions or Build Rapport with Child Witnesses?

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This study examined the quality of interview instructions and rapport-building provided by prosecutors to 168 children aged 5–12 years testifying in child sexual abuse cases, preceding explicit questions about abuse allegations. Prosecutors failed to effectively administer key interview instructions, build rapport, or rely on open-ended narrative producing prompts during this early stage of questioning. Moreover, prosecutors often directed children’s attention to the defendant early in the testimony. The productivity of different types of wh- questions varied, with what/how questions focusing on actions being particularly productive. The lack of instructions, poor quality rapport-building, and closed-ended questioning suggest that children may not be adequately prepared during trial to provide lengthy and reliable reports to their full ability. Copyright © 2015 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Child interviewers have long been encouraged to utilize interview instructions (Enos, Conrath & Byer, 1986) and rapport-building (Conerly, 1986; Faller, 1988), and both are important components of interview guidelines [American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC) guidelines, 2012; Home Office, 2007 (Achieving Best Evidence); Lamb et al., 2008 (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) protocol); Lyon, 2005 (adaptation of the NICHD protocol)]. The most often recommended instructions teach children that they should feel comfortable giving “don’t know” answers and letting the interviewer know when they do not understand a question. Rapport-building, designed to put children at ease and facilitate children’s productivity, typically entails asking children questions about neutral or positive aspects of themselves, their family, and their experiences.

Instructions and rapport-building are potentially useful tools when prosecutors question children in court. Although a substantial amount of research has examined how child victims are questioned at trial, it has focused on ratings of attorneys’ “supportiveness,” and on the age appropriateness, complexity, and suggestiveness of their questions (e.g., Evans, Lee, & Lyon, 2009; Flin, Boon, Knox, & Bull, 1992; Goodman et al., 1992; Zajac, Gross, & Hayne, 2003). Typically, defense attorneys are judged to perform less well in these regards than prosecutors (Cashmore & De Haas, 1992; Davies & Seymour, 1998; Goodman et al., 1992; Hanna, Davies, Crothers, & Henderson, 2012; Zajac et al., 2003). However, to argue for a defendant’s innocence, defense attorneys must discredit allegations against the accused, and cross-examination of the child is a means of doing so. Under the rules of evidence, leading questions are

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routinely permitted in cross-examination (Federal Rules of Evidence Rule 611, 2015). Hence, what defense attorneys do in court could be portrayed as an integral component of their job. Indeed, defense attorneys freely acknowledge that their motivation is to undermine child victims' ability to produce a competent report (Leippe, Brigham, Cousins, & Romanczyk, 1989).

Prosecutors do not necessarily utilize more helpful questioning techniques than defense attorneys; one study that systematically assessed the syntactic complexity of questions found no differences between prosecutors and defense attorneys (Evans et al., 2009). Recently, prosecutors' behavior in questioning child witnesses has been found wanting in other respects, in studies examining the age-appropriateness of their questions attempting to establish children's competency to take the oath (Evans & Lyon, 2012), and their elicitation of abuse characteristics that may help jurors understand the dynamics of sexual molestation (Stolzenberg & Lyon, 2014). An important unanswered question is what prosecutors ask before they move to the topic of abuse. Do they give instructions? Do they attempt to build rapport before introducing the topic of the abuse? And, if they do give instructions and build rapport, do they do so in the most productive manner? This study asked those questions.

In what follows, we briefly review the research on giving instructions and building rapport. With respect to instructions, we highlight the importance of feedback, and with respect to rapport-building, we highlight the importance of avoiding the topic of abuse and the value of asking open-ended questions. We then discuss how instructions and rapport-building are likely to be used in court, and introduce a potentially useful distinction among question types that can assess productivity in a finer-grained manner than prior research.

Interview Instructions

Children are often hesitant to give "I don't know" answers (Memon & Vartoukian, 1996; Poole & Lindsay, 2001). Instructing children to utilize "I don't know" can reduce errors (Gee, Gregory, & Pipe, 1999; Saywitz & Moan-Hardie, 1994). To make the instruction effective, however, it is not enough to merely tell the child that "don't know" responses are acceptable (Memon & Vartoukian, 1996; Moston, 1987; Peterson & Grant, 2001). Rather, children should be given examples and feedback. That is, the interviewer should ask the child a question that the child must not know the answer to, and then reinforce the child for answering "I don't know." Furthermore, interviewers should reinforce giving an answer when one does know, so children do not overuse the "I don't know" response (Gee et al., 1999; Saywitz & Moan-Hardie, 1994). Similarly, providing children with practice flagging incomprehensible questions increases the likelihood that they will object when they do not understand a question (Peters & Nunez, 1999; Saywitz, Snyder, & Nathanson, 1999).

Rapport-building

The primary functions of rapport-building are to secure a supportive environment and maximize the children's comfort and competence in recalling past events (Lamb et al., 2008; Powell & Thomson, 1994). Commentators recommend that interviewers question children about their hobbies, likes and preferences (Sanders, Schwartz & Mohay, 1985), and these suggestions have been incorporated into interview guidelines

(e.g., APSAC, 2012). Of course, rapport-building should precede questions about the alleged abuse and approximately 5 minutes of rapport-building time appears to be sufficient (Hershkowitz, 2009). It would also seem sensible to avoid references to the defendant during rapport-building, particularly those that require the child to look at the defendant, as child witnesses have reported that their greatest fear of testifying was facing the defendant in court (Goodman *et al.*, 1992).

The NICHD protocol recommends that interviewers use “invitations” and “cued invitations” to maximize children’s productivity. Invitations and cued invitations are recall-based prompts. Invitations “do not constrain children’s response to a particular category of information, and include questions such as ‘Tell me everything that happened’” (Brown *et al.*, 2013, p. 369). Cued invitations use children’s previous statements during the interview as prompts for further information,

either to elicit additional detail (e.g., “You said he gave you a special cuddle, tell me more about the special cuddle”), or to request additional information about the sequencing of events mentioned by the child (e.g., “Tell me what happened right before/after the special cuddle...”) (Brown *et al.*, 2013, p. 369).

Rapport-building that asks children to narrate a recent non-abusive event, emphasizes the use of invitations and cued invitations, and avoids the use of yes/no and forced-choice questions has been shown to increase the productivity of children’s abuse reports in the field (Hershkowitz, 2009; Sternberg *et al.*, 1997), to increase the accuracy of children’s reports in laboratory research (Roberts, Lamb, & Sternberg, 2004), and to increase the productivity of invitations and cued invitations about the target event in laboratory research (Brown *et al.*, 2013).

How Instructions and Rapport-building Could be Used in Court

The recommendations that interviewers utilize interview instructions and open-ended rapport-building are based on the goal of maximizing the amount of information that children produce while minimizing errors. The same goals will apply when prosecutors present child witnesses in court. Of course, legal rules that apply in court may not apply to interviews, and this might affect the way in which instructions and rapport-building occur in court. For example, to assess children’s competency to testify, most courts in the United States first question children about their understanding of the truth and lies and the importance of telling the truth (Lyon, 2011). Hence, one would expect to see questions about children’s competency in the early stages of the direct examination.

Rapport-building can be legally justified in several ways. First, asking children preliminary questions about recent non-abusive events can help fulfil trial courts’ obligation to protect child witnesses against “undue embarrassment” (Cal. Evid. Code Section 765, 2015). Although there is little specific case law on the subject, at least one appellate court has approved of rapport-building questions designed to help the child witness “feel comfortable on the stand, before delving into the sexual conduct at issue in the case” (*State v. Hanna*, 2003, p. 2). In *Hanna* the court approved a

series of questions concerning whether [the child witness] had pets, what kind of dog she had, what she liked to do in her spare time, who she played softball for, what kind of music she liked, what kind of subjects she liked in school, and what kind of food she preferred.

Second, rapport-building questions can help to establish children's ability to recall and report experienced events, another element of testimonial competency in many jurisdictions (Lyon, 2011).

Although there are no clear legal impediments to the use of invitations and cued invitations, they are likely rare in preliminary questioning of children. First, invitations and cued invitations are uncommon in forensic interviews unless interviewers have been specially trained (Sternberg et al., 2001b). Indeed, prosecutors at trial ask very few invitations when they question children about the details of sexual abuse (Andrews, Lamb, & Lyon, 2015). Prosecutors might use a few "What happened?" or "What happened next?" questions, which would qualify as invitations or as cued invitations, but it is unlikely that a prosecutor would use a cued invitation simply to elicit additional information (using the form "Tell me more about...") for two reasons. First, a popular (albeit mistaken) belief among attorneys is that it is clearly objectionable to ask questions that "call for a narrative" (Lyon, 2013), which could deter them from asking children to "tell me more" about topics the child has mentioned. Second, prosecutors are likely to structure their direct examination quite carefully, based on a child's prior disclosures, and in their opening argument (before the child testified), they will tell the jury what they expect the child will say. As a result, they are likely to avoid invitations in eliciting the child's abuse report. One might nevertheless anticipate the use of invitations during rapport-building, since by definition the child is not discussing abuse during this phase of the questioning. Furthermore, it may be possible for prosecutors to maximize children's productivity without moving to highly specific questions.

Distinguishing Among the Productivity of Different Types of Wh-Questions

Even if invitations are rare, differences in productivity may nevertheless emerge when comparing other question types. Researchers examining the NICHD protocol also distinguish between directive questions and option-posing questions. Directive questions are largely wh- questions (who, what, when, where, why, how), and elicit recall memory about specific aspects of the child's report. Option-posing questions include yes/no and forced-choice questions, and elicit recognition memory (Brown et al., 2013). Wh-questions tend to be preferable to yes/no and forced-choice questions, both because they are less likely to elicit inaccuracies and because they are less likely to lead to miscommunication between the interviewer and the child (Lyon, 2014).

It may also be profitable to distinguish among different types of wh- questions, most of which would be called "directives" in the NICHD scheme. Some researchers have distinguished between wh- questions that focus on specific contextual information (e.g., "What did he wear?"), wh- questions that focus on actions or events (e.g., "How did you get hurt?") and those that ask for a reason or cause (e.g., "Why?", "What made him leave?") (Peterson & McCabe, 1992; Price & Roberts, 2011). Researchers examining NICHD protocol interviews have found that cued invitations that reference actions (as opposed to appearances or locations) elicit the most details (Lamb et al., 2003). More specific wh- questions that focus on actions and causes might also be more productive than specific wh- questions focusing on other details.

Indeed, we suspected that there may be a number of important differences in productivity among the wh- questions. We classified questions by the wh- question word

(who, where, when, which, why, what, how), and further distinguished among different kinds of “what” and “how” questions (what/how). With respect to what/how questions, we distinguished between those that asked for action-focused descriptions of unfolding processes or events (e.g., “What did he do with his hands?”), which we term “dynamic,” and those that asked for non-action descriptions (e.g., contextual information such as location, time, or objects – “What color was his shirt?”), which we term “static.” We suspected that what/how dynamic questions would be more productive than what/how static questions. We also suspected that “why” questions might be more productive than most other wh- questions insofar as “why” asks for an explanation or cause, whereas most other wh- questions (who, where, when, and which) request specific information that can often be supplied with a single word or short phrase.

Current Study

The purpose of the present study was to evaluate how prosecutors question children in criminal trials of alleged child sexual abuse, focusing on prosecutors’ administration of interview instructions and rapport-building with children and children’s responsiveness. We hypothesized that prosecutors would sometimes instruct children that “I don’t know” and “I don’t understand” answers were appropriate, but that prosecutors would not provide examples with feedback. We hypothesized that prosecutors would ask some rapport-building questions before introducing the topic of abuse, but that their questions would be predominantly less productive questions.

METHOD

Transcript Selection

Pursuant to the California Public Records Act (California Government Code 6250, 2015), we obtained information on all felony sexual abuse charges under Section 288 of the California Penal code (sexual abuse of a child under 14 years of age) filed in Los Angeles County from January 2, 1997 to November 20, 2001 ($N = 3,622$). In all, 9% of the cases went to trial ($N = 309$; additional information about the study population can be found in Stolzenberg & Lyon, 2014). We obtained transcripts for 235 of the 309 cases, which included nearly all of the acquittals and mistrials (95% or 53/56) and 71% (182/253) of convictions. For the purposes of the present investigation, we examined all 168 cases in which child witnesses under 13 testified regarding allegations of sexual abuse; 18% of these cases resulted in acquittal, 4% in mistrial, and 78% in conviction. The trials involved 68 different prosecutors and 88 different defense attorneys. The child witnesses ranged in age from 5 to 12 years of age ($M = 9.51$, $SD = 1.89$), and the number of child witnesses ranged from 1 to 7 ($M = 2.57$, $SD = 1.59$) per case. Sixty-six percent of suspects were charged with multiple instances of abuse and 22% were charged with force. The defendant was a stranger to the child 10% of the time, a biological parent 8% of the time, a step-parent 21% of the time, or another person the child knew (e.g., relative, neighbor, or childcare provider) 61% of the time. On average, there was a delay of 8 months ($SD = 4$ months) between the filing of charges and the child’s testimony.

Coding

All of the prosecutors' prompts directed toward the child were coded from the time the child was introduced as a witness until the first direct question about abuse. Questions about abuse included references to genitalia, something bad happening with the defendant, or the child being sexually abused. The different types of prompts are described in Table 1.

Instructions and Competency

If more than one instruction or competency topic occurred within a single prompt, each instruction or competency topic was dually coded. Instructions and competency-related questions were sometimes administered by the judge and sometimes by the prosecutor; we did not distinguish between the two.

Table 1. Topics of prompts before the first abuse question

	Examples	# questions		% cases
		M	(SD)	
Instructions				
Don't know	If you don't know, just say "I don't know" or "I don't remember."	0.20	(0.68)	11
Don't understand	Don't answer a question if you don't understand it, all right?	0.21	(0.52)	17
Speak out loud	You have to answer out loud.	0.71	(1.24)	37
Court roles	I'm [name] and I'm in charge of the courtroom.	0.40	(1.33)	20
Take a break	If you need a break, just let us know.	0.14	(0.39)	12
Other	You can speak in Spanish if you want.	0.14	(0.49)	11
Total		1.79	(3.07)	50
Competency				
Truth lie competency	Which is good, truth or lie?	4.57	(6.56)	64
Body parts/touching	When I say private part, do you understand what I mean?	0.25	(1.64)	4
Total		4.82	(6.79)	64
Rapport/Pre-abuse				
Likes/hobbies	Do you like fourth grade?	1.77	(3.14)	55
Birthday/holiday	When is your birthday?	1.63	(1.95)	72
Feelings/comfort	Are you okay there?	0.79	(1.73)	37
Demographic information	Where do you go to school?	13.30	(11.73)	97
Abuse circumstances	Where did you go in July?	12.83	(15.82)	93
Total		28.70	(24.20)	100
Defendant				
Identification of defendant	Could you point to where Luis is sitting?	2.11	(1.68)	73
Interaction with defendant	Where did you go with Luis?	3.20	(3.95)	60
Other facts about defendant	Where does Luis live?	6.03	(6.32)	79
Total		11.34	(9.08)	86

Note. A single turn could contain more than one instruction, but otherwise the number of questions is synonymous with the number of turns. Two percent of cases constituted "other" competency questions (e.g., "What is this a picture of?") ($M = 0.07$, $SD = 0.56$). Subtotals for the percentage of cases reflect whether any of the content categories were mentioned.

Rapport/Pre-abuse

We initially planned to end coding when prosecutors deliberately transitioned from neutral or rapport-related topics to the allegation in question. However, prosecutors often asked indirectly about the allegation, which could be categorized as either rapport or pre-abuse. For example, prosecutors would ask children where they went to school at a particular time (presumably as a means to establish the date of the allegation) but then ask about the children's favorite subject. Therefore, we elected to code all questions until one could unmistakably say that the prosecutor was attempting to elicit an abuse report (or until the child clearly acknowledged abuse). If more than one rapport or pre-abuse topic occurred within a single prompt, a hierarchical rule was followed to ensure that the topic most representative of rapport-building was selected. For example, if the child was asked about his/her feelings at court along with her age, the prompt would be coded as an inquiry into the child's feelings.

Defendant References

Every prompt was coded for whether it referenced the defendant. If a prompt referenced the defendant, it was further coded for whether it required the child to look at the defendant (usually to identify him), whether it explicitly mentioned the child's past interactions with the defendant, and whether it only mentioned the defendant without referencing the child.

Question type. Every prompt was coded for question type. First, we distinguished among "tell me more" invitations, wh-, forced-choice and yes/no prompts (Table 2). Second, wh- prompts were further coded as why, where, what, who, which, how, and when questions (Table 3). Third, "what" and "how" (what/how) questions were further classified (Table 4). Dynamic what/how questions (questions that ask for action-focused descriptions of unfolding processes or events) usually included the word "happen" (which refers to a sequence of events that take place over time), "do" (which refers to actions) or asked the child to elaborate on a more specific kind of action or process (so, instead of "do," the questions ask about the action of "touching" or "pulling" specifically). Static what/how questions asked for non-action-related descriptions, usually contextual information such as location, time, or objects (e.g., "What color was his shirt?"). Causality what/how questions asked for a cause or "why." Evaluation of what/how questions asked the child to make an evaluation about judgments, emotions,

Table 2. Types and productivity of questions asked during the rapport/pre-abuse questioning

	# questions		% questions asked	# words in child response	
	<i>M</i>	(SD)		<i>M</i>	(SD)
Tell me more invitations	0.02	(0.13)	0.06	8.00	(5.00)
Wh-	11.99	(9.39)	43	3.97	(5.56)
Forced-choice	1.45	(2.06)	4	3.42	(3.59)
Yes/no	16.01	(14.41)	51	2.02	(3.57)
Not a question	0.70	(1.22)	2	4.06	(6.19)
Other	0.13	(0.43)	0.3	2.23	(2.19)
Total	30.30	(24.50)		2.89	(4.59)

Table 3. Types and productivity of wh- questions asked during the rapport/pre-abuse questioning

	# questions		% questions asked	# words in child response	
	<i>M</i>	(SD)		<i>M</i>	(SD)
Why	0.25	0.61	1	7.24	(5.70)
Where	1.46	2.01	10	5.17	(4.98)
What	4.96	4.44	38	4.14	(6.83)
Who	1.86	2.20	13	4.01	(3.86)
When	0.58	0.75	6	3.39	(4.21)
How	2.71	1.98	29	2.91	(4.26)
Which	0.17	0.46	1	2.72	(2.07)
Total	11.99	9.39		3.97	(5.56)

thoughts or physical sensations. Ambiguous what/how questions technically asked for dynamic content (e.g., saying) but pragmatically asked about an end-product or label (e.g., what was said). Unclear what/how questions included vague references (e.g., “What about?”).

Children’s responses. We used word count as a measure of children’s productivity. Word count has been found to correlate well with number of details (Poole & Dickinson 2000; Thoresen, Lonnum, Melinder, & Magnussen, 2009), and is particularly appropriate in the current context to assess the extent to which various types of prompts elicited longer responses from children.

Reliability

Two research assistants, blind to study hypotheses, independently coded 20% of the transcripts for each variable. They achieved kappas > 0.80 for all variables.

RESULTS

Children received an average of 48.23 (SD = 33.77) prompts before being asked an abuse question and an average of 25.98 (SD = 22.64) prompts before being asked about the defendant. In 86% of cases, the children were asked at least one question about the defendant before being asked about abuse, including direct requests for the child to identify the defendant (Table 1). Preliminary analyses revealed no significant effects due to child age, gender, or ethnicity, and as such, these factors are not considered further.

Instructions and Competency

The number of questions asked about different topics, and the percentages of cases in which those topics were mentioned, are shown in Table 1. The most common instructions included requiring the child to answer out loud and explaining the roles of legal professionals. Only two of the 35 “I don’t know” instructions asked children to demonstrate their understanding (e.g., “If you don’t remember, what are you going to tell me?”, “If I said to you Jennifer, what do you think I had for dinner before your eighth birthday, what would you say?”). None of the children were given feedback so that they

Table 4. Types and productivity of what/how questions asked during the rapport/pre-abuse questioning

	Definition	Example	# questions		% what/how questions	# words in child response	
			<i>M</i>	(SD)		<i>M</i>	(SD)
Static	States or contexts	How old are you?	6.16	(4.82)	81	2.93	(4.72)
Dynamic	Actions	What did you do?	0.82	(1.83)	8	8.11	(10.38)
Causality	Causes/explanations	What makes you think that they went inside?	0.15	(0.42)	2	8.08	(9.47)
Ambiguous	Activities (making, seeing, writing, saying) for which a response could describe either actions or the end-product	What did you make?	0.21	(0.62)	2	8.23	(7.79)
Evaluation	Judgments, emotions, thoughts, or physical sensations	What did you think?	0.25	(0.51)	6	1.76	(2.39)
Unclear	Question referent unclear	What about that?	0.07	(0.27)	1	4.73	(7.85)
Total			7.67	(5.84)		3.70	(6.08)

would not excessively respond “I don’t know” or “I don’t understand.” Competency questions were almost exclusively about children’s comprehension of the difference between a truth and a lie. Three children were asked to demonstrate knowledge of prepositions (e.g., “over” and “under”).

Rapport/Pre-abuse Topics

To focus on the rapport-building nature of the transcripts, the following analyses and tables were limited to questions preceding the first direct inquiry into abuse that did not reference the defendant and were not coded as instructions or competency. As noted in Table 1, just over half of children were asked at least one question about their likes or preferences, as well as their birthdays. Virtually all children were asked for demographic information and about circumstances of the abuse.

Types and Productivity of Questions

The prevalence of question type and mean number of words children produced are presented in Table 2. An ANOVA was conducted with question type entered as the between-subject variable (“Tell me more” invitations, wh-, forced-choice, yes/no), and the number of words children produced in response to each prompt as the dependent variable. A significant main effect emerged for question type [$F(3, 4951) = 75.51, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 2.04$]. To test our predictions, the mean number of words children produced in response to “tell me more” invitations was compared with the other question types. A trend emerged for “tell me more” invitations eliciting higher word counts $\{t(5088) = 1.9, d = 1.05, 95\% \text{ CI: } [-0.15, 10.33]\}$.¹ In addition, wh- prompts elicited higher word counts from children than yes/no prompts $\{t(4702) = 1.96, p < 0.001, d = 0.42, 95\% \text{ CI: } [1.69, 2.21]\}$.

The prevalence of wh- question type and mean number of words children provided in response are presented in Table 3. An ANOVA was conducted with wh- question type entered as the between-subject variable (why, where, what, who, how, which, when) and the number of words children produced in response to each prompt as the dependent variable. A main effect emerged for wh- question type [$F(6, 2204) = 7.80, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.02$]. In line with our predictions, why prompts were more productive than other wh- question types $\{t(2013) = 3.85, d = 0.60, 95\% \text{ CI: } [1.64, 5.02]\}, p < 0.001\}$.

The prevalence of what/how questions and the length of children’s responses are shown in Table 4. To examine the effects of various what/how question types, an ANOVA was conducted with what/how question type entered as the between subject variable (dynamic, causality, evaluative, ambiguous, static) and the number of words children produced in response to each prompt as the dependent variable. A significant main effect emerged for what/how question type [$F(4, 1371) = 34.90, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.09$]. Children produced more words to dynamic than static what/how questions $\{t(1174) = 10.07, p < 0.001, d = 0.64, 95\% \text{ CI: } [4.17, 6.19]\}$.

To explore productivity differences among rapport/pre-abuse topics, an ANOVA was conducted with rapport/pre-abuse topic (demographic information, likes/hobbies,

¹ All confidence intervals reported relate to mean differences.

birthday/holiday, feelings/comfort, pre-abuse) entered as the between-subject variable and the number of words produced in response to each topic as the dependent variable. A main effect due to topic emerged [$F(4, 5085) = 17.72, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.01$]. Follow-up *t*-tests revealed that children produced higher word counts to likes/hobbies ($M = 3.62, SD = 7.52$) and pre-abuse ($M = 3.43, SD = 5.50$) topics than demographic information ($M = 2.49, SD = 3.31$) [$t(2531) = 4.53, p < 0.001, d = 0.19, 95\% \text{ CI: } [0.64, 1.62]$], $t(4384) = 6.87, p < 0.001, d = 0.21, 95\% \text{ CI: } [0.67, 1.21]$ }, birthdays/holidays ($M = 1.93, SD = 1.73$) [$t(569) = 3.63, p < 0.001, d = 0.31, 95\% \text{ CI: } [0.77, 2.61]$], $t(2422) = 4.48, p < 0.001, d = 0.37, 95\% \text{ CI: } 0.84, 2.16$ }, and comfort/feelings ($M = 1.99, SD = 1.87$) [$t(429) = 2.48, p = 0.01, d = 0.30, 95\% \text{ CI: } [0.34, 2.94]$], $t(2282) = 3.02, p = 0.003, d = 0.35, 95\% \text{ CI: } [0.51, 2.38]$ }.

Because of the productivity differences among different question-types, we examined the types of questions associated with the different rapport-building topics. Although children were often asked about their likes or preferences, 54% of these questions were yes-no. Most what/how questions about likes and preferences were static (64%). Virtually every what/how birthday or holiday question was static (96%; e.g., “When is your birthday?”) rather than dynamic (4%; “What happened on your birthday?”).

DISCUSSION

This is the first study to examine prosecutors’ initial questioning of children in court, before abuse is mentioned. We examined whether prosecutors followed recommendations for the use of interview instructions, rapport-building and open-ended questions. We found that although instructions were common, don’t know and don’t understand instructions were rare, and were virtually never administered with appropriate feedback. Although rapport building was common, the questions tended to be closed-ended. Moreover, the defendant was mentioned in virtually all cases, and children were often asked to identify the defendant. Consistent with our predictions, dynamic what/how questions that focused on actions elicited higher word counts from children than static what/how questions that focused on non-actions. The lack of instructions, poor quality rapport-building, and closed-ended questioning suggest that child witnesses are underperforming.

Instructions

Children were only very rarely given “don’t know” or “don’t understand” instructions. Even when they were, they were rarely given with feedback, which appears to be essential for efficacy. This is not too surprising, as unless investigative interviewers are specially trained, they are similarly unlikely to give such instructions (Sternberg, Lamb, Davies, & Westcott, 2001a; Sternberg *et al.*, 2001a; Warren, Woodall, Hunt, & Perry, 1996). The fact that children were given instructions of some sort in half of the cases suggests that prosecutors and judges are capable of giving instructions and might not anticipate any legal impediments to doing so. Moreover, it suggests that they understood the importance of reminding the children of the rules of testifying, even if the children might have been instructed at some prior point in time. Rather, the lack of

“don’t know” and “don’t understand” instructions suggests that prosecutors and judges do not recognize the utility of teaching children these instructions.

Rapport-building

In most cases, children were asked at least one question about their likes, hobbies, birthday, or another holiday. Hence, prosecutors intuited that these topics were appropriate fodder for preliminary questioning. Furthermore, the prosecutors did not appear to be deterred from asking these questions on the grounds that they might be legally objectionable. Indeed, defense attorneys raised objections to preliminary questions in only 1% of the cases ($n = 2$). However, these questions typically took up a very small proportion of preliminary questioning, and they were asked in an unproductive manner, either by yes/no or by what/how static questions. We never observed the kind of rapport-building in which interviewers ask children to narrate an event using invitations and open-ended questions, an approach that has been proven to increase the productivity of children’s abuse reports in forensic interviews (Sternberg et al., 1997). The lack of effective rapport-building is also not very surprising; prior research has similarly found that without special training, interviewers fail to ask open-ended questions or ask children to narrate events during rapport-building (Sternberg et al., 2001b). For example, in one study, even interviewers specially trained to elicit a practice narrative did so in only 36% of the interviews (and did so using predominantly open-ended questions in only 16% of the interviews) (Price, Roberts, & Collins, 2013).

Instead, the most common rapport-building strategy was to ask factual questions (e.g., “What grade are you in?”) and questions about circumstances surrounding the abuse, which were predominantly what/how static and yes/no questions. Furthermore, prosecutors mentioned the defendant during the preliminary questioning, often asking children to point out the defendant. This last finding was rather surprising, given the attention paid in legal circles to the potential traumatic effects of forcing children to face the accused in court (e.g., *Maryland v. Craig*, 1990). There is no legal requirement that the defendant be mentioned early in the testimony; indeed, a potentially useful strategy for decreasing children’s stress during testifying would be to instruct the child to focus on the prosecutor during questioning, and not ask for identification until the end of the direct examination.

Question Type

As we expected, prosecutors virtually never asked the “tell me more” invitations that are recommended in the NICHD protocol (e.g., “You said you went to a party. Tell me more about that”). Prosecutors occasionally asked what/how dynamic questions, the most open-ended of which would be classified as invitations or cued invitations under the NICHD scheme (e.g., “What happened”), but these were also quite uncommon. Instead, over 80% of prosecutors’ what/how questions were static. These findings are consistent with research on prosecutors’ questions about abuse itself, with very small percentages of invitations (Andrews et al., 2015).

In accordance with our predictions, what/how dynamic questions were significantly more productive than what/how static questions; indeed, they elicited on average almost three times as many words. These findings are consistent with research demonstrating that invitations focusing on actions elicit greater amounts of information

from children than prompts focusing on specific contextual information (Lamb et al., 2003). What/how causality and what/how ambiguous questions also appeared to be quite productive, although these question types were not asked often enough by prosecutors to be statistically analyzed. The average productivity of what/how causality questions (e.g., “What made you scared?”) was consistent with the finding that why questions were particularly productive wh- questions (“Why were you scared?”). It seems likely that in addition to eliciting more details from children, these types of questions will also elicit more cogent narratives (e.g., temporal terms linking events) (Peterson & McCabe, 1992). Moreover, interviewers who wish to avoid the potential accusatory tone of why questions could alternatively ask for such information using what/how questions (“Why did you go there?” vs. “What made you go there?”). Ambiguous questions refer to activities that can be answered by reference to either actions or a product. We suspected that these questions might be less productive, and thus separated them from what/how dynamic questions, but their possible greater productivity suggests that this concern was unwarranted, and that they could be grouped with what/how dynamic questions in future research. What/how evaluative questions (e.g., “How did you feel?”) appeared particularly unproductive, which is consistent with research finding that these sorts of questions elicit responsive yet brief answers (e.g., “bad”) (Ahern & Lyon, 2013). They may nevertheless lead to productive information if paired with a question about causality (“How did it make you feel bad?”) or a cued invitation (“Tell me more about feeling bad.”) (Ahern & Lyon, 2013).

Implications for practice

The results clearly suggest that prosecutors might improve child witness performance by administering don’t know and don’t understand instructions with feedback and rapport-building with invitations, cued invitations, and what/how dynamic questions. Prosecutors might be resistant to instructions and rapport-building on the grounds that these are investigative methods, whereas the purpose at trial is to elicit the same story the child has disclosed previously. However, instructions are designed to increase accuracy and reduce confusion, and narrative practice rapport-building is designed to make children comfortable answering questions and to enable the trier of fact to hear children in their own words. These goals are as important at trial as during the investigation.

One of the apparent benefits of narrative practice during the rapport-building phase is that the child’s responses to open-ended questions are more productive when describing the allegation (Sternberg et al., 1997) and this might alarm prosecutors who fear that children will provide new and inconsistent information at trial. However, this assumes that open-ended questions are more likely to elicit inconsistencies than closed-ended questions. This is a dubious proposition; in one recent examination of contradictions by child witnesses at trial, invitations were no more likely to elicit contradictions than yes/no and forced-choice questions (Andrews et al., 2015).

Limitations and Concluding Thoughts

Several limitations should be noted. Although our results clearly indicate that certain types of questions are more productive, in particular what/how dynamic questions, we cannot say whether the additional information is accurate. It is important to note, however, that experimental work supports the notion that children’s memory for

actions tends to be superior to their memory for descriptions (the sorts of information elicited by what/how static questions), and that wh- questions are less likely to elicit errors than yes/no questions (Peterson et al., 1999).

We were unable to measure the extent to which children received trial preparation before testifying, and prosecutors might argue that such preparation obviates the need for instructions and narrative practice rapport-building. However, this argument raises several problems. First, the research supporting the use of instructions and open-ended rapport-building utilized these procedures immediately before eliciting the child's report; it would be surprising if children were able to retain the information and the response habits from pre-trial to trial, particularly given the stresses of courtroom testimony. Second, it seems highly unlikely that pre-trial preparation was done effectively, because it would be strange if prosecutors practiced instructions with feedback and asked open-ended questions before trial but then failed to do so at trial.

In the present sample, all of the trials occurred in the late 1990s in one county. It is possible that the results are not representative, or that prosecutors' questions have improved over time. However, Los Angeles County is the largest county in the United States. Further, in the 5-year period covered by this study, 3,622 cases of felony child sexual abuse were charged. The county is also highly diverse, both socioeconomically and ethnically, and the courts are located in 11 different branches throughout the county. Furthermore, the prosecutors were surely well aware of the dangers of poor questioning. Los Angeles County was the jurisdiction in which the *McMartin* daycare molestation case was tried, one of the first and most highly publicized sexual abuse cases in which the suggestiveness of interviewing was highlighted (Cheit, 2014). More recent research has found that prosecutors continue to rely on closed-ended prompts (Zajac & Cannan, 2009). Furthermore, the legal literature has not uniformly embraced the utility of interview instructions; two recent articles have argued against instructions (Anderson et al., 2010; Russell, 2006; but see Anderson, 2012).

Finally, our analyses examined prosecutor questions and children's responses at the question level. We proceeded in this fashion, rather than treating question types as repeated measures, because of the infrequency with which children were asked invitations or what/how dynamic questions. As a result, we cannot say for sure whether the productivity differences we observed are clearly attributable to the types of questions or whether they might be attributable to differences among children (or, for that matter, among cases, as many cases involved multiple children). For example, it might be that attorneys selectively ask invitations and what/how questions of children who are more talkative. Fortunately, there is clear experimental support for the superior productivity of invitations (Brown et al., 2013); future experimental work should examine the relative productivity of different types of wh- questions. Furthermore, our failure to find age differences in children's performance could also be attributable to the small percentage of highly productive questions. These questions may be most likely to reveal age effects, as they capitalize on older children's superior free recall skills.

The findings suggest that children's cognitive and emotional needs may be overlooked in criminal court, arguing for changes in the training and supervision of legal professionals responsible for questioning child witnesses. Future work is critical to enhancing our understanding of children's performance as witnesses and the means through which we can foster both their comfort in the courtroom and their ability to provide more complete and reliable reports.

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