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An Examination of Police Officers' Beliefs About How Children Report Abuse

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The aim of this study was to examine police officers' beliefs about how children report abuse. Fifty-two officers read transcripts of nine interviews, which were conducted with actual children or adults playing the role of the child witness. Officers indicated whether they thought the interviews were with an actual child and justified their decisions. In-depth interviews were conducted to determine the reasons behind their decisions. Overall, officers' decisions were no better than chance. When making these decisions, officers focused on three areas: whether they considered the child's language to be age-appropriate, whether they thought that the content of the statement was plausible, and whether they thought that the child had acted in a manner consistent with recollecting a traumatic event. The findings suggest that the characteristics officers rely on when evaluating children's statements of abuse are not reliable indicators. They suggest that officers' beliefs about these statements need to be challenged during training to reduce the effects of those beliefs on their later decisions.

Key words: child sexual abuse; interviewer training; investigative interviewing.

People's beliefs strongly influence their behaviour; for example, it has been well established that people seek information that confirms their beliefs and discount information that does not confirm them. This confirmation bias can lead to inaccurate evaluations and incorrect interpretations of facts (Nickerson, 1998). Within the legal system, professionals' beliefs about how people report abuse may impact upon their decisions at many stages. For example, a Victorian Law Reform Commission report (2004) revealed that police officers believed that a high proportion of adult victims' reports of sexual offences were false. Furthermore, many officers believed that they could "just tell" when those reports were false (p. 111). Such a belief may affect whether an officer authorizes a case to proceed to prosecution: if the officer believes that the witness is providing a false report, he or she should be less likely to authorize it. To put it simply, because police officers act as the gatekeepers to the legal system, their beliefs about the way in which children normally relay accounts of abuse may determine the case outcome.

To date, little research has examined officers' beliefs about children's abuse statements. Rather, research has focused on officers' perceptions of their own performance when interviewing children (Powell, Wright, & Hughes-Scholes, 2011; Wright & Powell, 2006). For example, one study demonstrated that police officers' beliefs about questioning child witnesses contrasted with best practice procedures (Guadagno, Powell, & Wright, 2006). Police officers, along with other legal professionals, believed that children need to be asked specific questions in order to elicit highly specific

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details (e.g., the location and time of the offence). However, research has shown that open-ended questions also elicit these specific details (e.g., Tell me about...), without the same likelihood of introducing false information into children's statements. Therefore, open-ended questions are recommended in best practice guidelines (e.g., Orbach, Hershkowitz, Lamb, Esplin, & Horowitz, 2000; Wilson & Powell, 2001). Police officers' beliefs about needing to use specific questions to elicit information have led to changes in investigative training programmes to challenge their beliefs. In fact, challenging beliefs that are not consistent with best practice interviewing procedures is the first step to learning these procedures (see Powell, 2008). It is essential that we understand police officers' beliefs before they receive training so that these beliefs can be targeted if they are incompatible with best practice.

We also need to understand officers' beliefs because the decision to proceed with a case to prosecution rests with police officers in many jurisdictions (Hoyano & Keenan, 2007). One recent study determined the factors that influenced officers' decisions to proceed (Powell, Murfett, & Thomson, 2010). Police case files of alleged child abuse were examined. They revealed that one of the main reasons to refer or not refer a case for prosecution was the credibility of the witness. If the witness could not provide a credible account, the case was less likely to be referred. The question then becomes: what makes a witness appear credible? Many studies have investigated the factors that affect the credibility of child witnesses using mock jurors' ratings (e.g., Bottoms & Goodman, 1994; Castelli, Goodman, & Ghetti, 2005; Henry, Ridley, Perry, & Crane, 2011; Newcombe & Bransgrove, 2007; Ross, Jurden, Lindsay, & Keeney, 2003). In general, older children are rated to be more credible witnesses as are children who appear honest and provide consistent and detailed accounts.

To date, only one study has examined the cues that investigative interviewers use to determine children's credibility during an interview (Field et al., 2010). Five interviewers from a State Attorney's Office conducted pretrial interviews with 120 children alleging sexual abuse. After each interview, interviewers completed a questionnaire in which they rated whether the child would make a credible witness in court (yes or no). They also rated the verbal (e.g., the statement was rehearsed or spontaneous, contained inconsistencies or was consistent, was vague or specific) and non-verbal behaviours (e.g., body posture, nervous mannerisms, facial expressions) that helped them to rate credibility. Overall, interviewers believed that two non-verbal behaviours provided important cues for their credibility judgements; this belief varied by the age of the child. These two behaviours were eye contact and affect; however, the authors did not did not provide any details about the specific direction of these behaviours (e.g., avoiding or maintaining eye contact, being calm or upset).

The aim of the current study was to extend this research through examining police officers' beliefs about children's abuse statements. We tapped into their beliefs using in-depth interviews about transcripts that they read and commented on. Officers read nine transcripts of interviews with real children and with adults playing the role of the child witness. We varied the context of these simulated interviews: some were conducted by investigative interviewers with research assistants who had been trained to play the role of the child; others were conducted by investigative interviewers with colleagues playing the role of the child. For each interview, officers judged whether the interview was with a real child and provided reasons for their decision. We included the real and simulated interviews to detect officers' beliefs and biases about the information that children include in their statements about abuse.

The in-depth interviews were designed to draw out officers' beliefs about the ways in which children report abuse. The transcripts

were central to this process for at least two reasons. First, the transcripts provided the officers with a primary task (identifying the interviews with real children), which allowed us to examine their beliefs in a more indirect way. If we had asked them directly about their beliefs about children's abuse statements, officers might have provided more stereotypical responses (see Greenwald & Banaji, 1995, for a discussion of direct and indirect measures of attitudes). The in-depth interviews also elicited more detailed responses than surveys or questionnaires, which are more amenable to tapping knowledge as opposed to beliefs (see, e.g., Wright & Powell, 2006; Wright, Powell, & Ridge, 2007). The second reason that the transcripts were important was that they encouraged officers to respond about specific interviews with examples, rather than talking about interviews in general (Read & Powell, 2011).

Method

Participants

Fifty-two professionals (25 male, 27 female) from two States in Australia participated in the current study; each made nine judgements resulting in 468 data points. Participants were all specialists in child sexual assault who were attending a refresher course on investigative interviewing. They were a heterogeneous sample because their qualifications, background experience and length of service varied. The number of interviews that participants had observed or conducted with a child prior to the current study ranged from 0 to 190 ($M = 26.40$, $SD = 35.90$) and the mean length of experience in their chosen profession ranged from 1 to 21 years ($M = 6.71$, $SD = 4.50$). The ranks that officers held were constable, senior constable and sergeant. Most had received formal interviewer qualifications within the last 3 months (56%), with 84% of officers receiving these qualifications within the past 3 years.

Materials and Procedure

The study design and procedure were approved by the university ethics committee, as well as by the managers of the participating organizations. Prior to engaging in the individual in-depth interviews, participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire. They were given a booklet containing the transcripts and an instruction page. They were told:

> You have been provided with nine transcripts of interviews conducted either with an actor playing the role of an abused child ('*mock interview*'), or a real child who has been abused ('*real interview*'). Note that due to random assignment, you may *not* have received transcripts from each category of interview.
>
> Please read each transcript and indicate whether you think it is a mock or real interview (just write mock or real at the end of the transcript to indicate your decision - if you do not know, just guess). When reading the transcript, please make notes indicating what aspects (e.g., child's responses) helped you come to your decision.
>
> For each transcript, please also rate your confidence in your decision on a scale of 0–10 (0 = not confident at all, 10 = completely confident). You can write your responses at the end of the transcript.

Next participants read nine transcripts: three were excerpts were from actual field interviews with a child aged 5 or 6 years who had been abused ('*real interview*'); three were excerpts from interviews conducted by investigative interviewers with research assistants who had been trained to play the role of an abused 5–6-year-old child ('*simulated interview*')[1]; and three were excerpts from interviews conducted by investigative interviewers with colleagues playing the role of an abused 5–6-year-old child ('*simulated interview*'). The colleagues had received no child role-playing training.

The three real interviews were randomly selected from a sample of 18 transcribed and de-identified interviews with 5–6-year-old children that had been obtained by the authors

for analysis in previous research projects. The six simulated interviews were randomly selected from a sample of 27 interviews that the authors had collected for research purposes during previous training courses. The sample of simulated and real interviews varied in terms of the quality of interviewing, the scenarios, and the respondent. The specific age of 5–6 years was chosen because it was beyond the scope of the study to examine changes in officers' beliefs about children's statements over different age ranges. Instead, we started with a group that emphasizes differences in language between children and adults.

All of the interviews were three pages in length. The three pages of text began after the child had made an initial disclosure that included mention of the offender and/or the abusive act (e.g., "about Bob", "I've seen Nick's willy"). The formatting was kept consistent across all of the interviews (e.g., font, indents and line spacing) so that participants would not be able to distinguish the real interviews from the simulated interviews. The scenarios in the simulated interviews all varied and were based on real cases of child sexual or physical abuse. The real interviews were all de-identified and any procedural parts of the interview (e.g., suspension of the interview to go and discuss details of the interview with the police officer in the monitor room) or irrelevant parts of the interview (e.g., requests for the child to speak up so that they could be heard on the video camera) were removed.

Once participants had judged whether each transcript was real or simulated (approximately 30 minutes), they were taken to private rooms in the training facility. Each person was questioned individually and asked to justify the decisions that they made with reference to the features in the transcripts. Specifically, they were asked three questions: (1) What was it about the interviews that you chose as a real interview made you think it was a real child? (2) What was it about the interviews that you chose as a mock interview made you think it was a mock interview? (3) Overall, what are the features (in terms of the child's responses) that would distinguish a real interview from a mock interview? The interviews ranged in duration from 7 to 25 minutes ($M = 14$ minutes).

Data Management

All of the interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. The data from the interviews were organized, coded and analysed manually. Thematic analysis was used to systematically analyse the content of participants' responses; it involved locating common patterns within the data set (Gifford, 1998). Quotes, which were corrected (where appropriate) for wording and grammatical errors, are provided to illustrate police officers' opinions.

Results

Manipulation Check

To determine whether police officers could systematically identify the real interviews from the mock interviews – which would suggest that there was something different about those interviews – we looked at whether their decision about each interview was correct. Police officers correctly identified whether the interview was real or simulated for 58% of the interviews ($SD = 20\%$). Specifically, they correctly identified 51% of the interviews with an actual child ($SD = 30\%$, range $= 17$–100%), which was no different than chance, $t(51) = 0.31, p = .758$. They correctly identified 63% of the interviews with adult role-players ($SD = 22\%$, range $= 0$–100%), which was significantly better than chance, $t(51) = 4.31, p < .001$. The adult playing the role of the child was not important: there was no difference in officers' identifications in the interviews conducted with trained adults (62% correctly identified) or colleagues (65% correctly identified), $t(50) = 0.43, p = .667$. Overall, participants were

fairly confident about their decisions: they gave an average rating of 6 out of 10. There was no difference in participants' confidence in their decisions about interviews with children and interviews with adults (children: $M = 5.87$, $SD = 1.68$; adults: $M = 5.94$, $SD = 1.19$), $t(51) = 0.37$, $p = .713$.

These findings suggest that police officers performed around chance at identifying real interviews with children. Next, we turned to our main research question and tapped into officers' beliefs about what made the transcripts appear "real" by examining their reasons for each decision. We also determined whether these beliefs were associated with officers' judgement accuracy.

Reasons for Decisions

To determine which factors were important to police officers' decisions about whether each interview was with an actual child or an adult role-player, we analysed their reasons thematically. Officers' reasons converged on three themes: (1) whether the language and response styles were consistent with the child's cognitive and developmental level, (2) whether the content was plausible, and (3) whether the child responded in a manner consistent with recollecting a traumatic event. Each of these themes will be discussed in turn.

Language and Response Styles

The most common theme that officers reported (related to 257 of their decisions) was that when children recall abuse, they use language and response styles that are consistent with their cognitive and developmental level. This theme was mentioned 170 times in relation to simulated interviews and 87 times for real interviews. Within this theme, participants discussed three main topics: appropriateness of vocabulary, hesitations and the length of children's responses. These topics are discussed in more detail below. Other, less frequently, mentioned

topics included the appropriateness of grammar and sentence structure, terminology, complexity of concepts, variation in speech patterns, qualifications and corrections, structure of the storyline and clarity of responses.

Vocabulary

Many participants commented on the level of vocabulary used by the child respondent. Participants believed that a child should use age-appropriate vocabulary when reporting abuse; otherwise they thought that the interview was simulated. However, the use of age-appropriate language did not reliably indicate whether the respondent was an actual child. Officers typically made errors when children provided more specificity than the officers were expecting. For example, one participant stated about a real transcript:

> Unless the kid's regurgitating something straight out of an adult's mouth they're usually pants or shorts. You don't really hear kids say three-quarter jeans and mention the length and the material.

In another transcript, officers focused on the child's description of the number of windows and depth of the swimming pool. For example, one officer mentioned:

> I actually thought that the 18 windows and the 9 metres deep was an exaggeration. My kids would say it had lots of windows and it was deep, but to be so specific wasn't realistic.

Overall, officers mentioned appropriate language 90 times when they made their judgements; they were correct about 54 of those judgements (60%), which was not significantly different from chance. Broken down by interview type, officers made correct judgements about 47 of the 72 simulated interviews (65%) in which they mentioned appropriate language. They made correct judgements about 7 of the 18 real interviews (39%) in which they mentioned appropriate language.

Hesitations

The number of hesitations made by the child was also frequently mentioned by participants when discussing how children recall abuse. Participants believed that a child would not use many hesitations (e.g., umms, ahs) when reporting abuse, but the account would come freely. However, the hesitations that officers identified did not reliably specify whether the interview was real or simulated. The main reason was that officers expected fewer hesitations than occurred. For example, one officer reported that more hesitations indicated a simulated interview:

> There were too many umms in it as if the subject was thinking of a story to tell instead of actually recalling it.

However, another officer reported that more hesitations indicated a real interview:

> The hesitations made me think about what a victim would do if they're thinking about things.

Overall, officers mentioned hesitations 31 times when they made their judgements; they were correct about 17 of those judgements (55%). This percentage was not significantly different from chance. Broken down by interview type, officers made correct judgements about 12 of the 19 simulated interviews (63%) in which they mentioned hesitations. They made correct judgements about 5 of the 12 real interviews (42%) in which they mentioned appropriate language.

Length of Response

Many participants mentioned the length of the child's responses when discussing how they thought children recall abuse. In general, they believed that children provide short responses to interview questions and that long responses were indicative of a simulated interview. In this situation, officers' use of account length to judge whether the interviews were real or simulated was better than chance. For example, one officer accurately determined that the interview was a real interview on the basis of the length of the child's responses.

> I thought it was a real child and it was basically because of the child's answers. They were simple. They had to try and drag more detail out of the child because often they gave two or three word answers and they didn't give much detail.

However, another officer (incorrectly) judged an interview to be real because of length of the child's responses:

> The short answers weren't really that direct, which sounded realistic. The kid was giving short answers and not telling you everything that you were trying to get.

Overall, officers mentioned response length 43 times when they made their judgements; they were correct about 29 of those judgements (67%). This percentage was significantly different from chance, $z = 2.230$, $p = .026$. Broken down by interview type, officers made correct judgements for about 12 of the 19 simulated interviews (63%) in which they mentioned length. They made correct judgements about 17 of the 24 real interviews (71%) in which they mentioned length.

Taken together, these results suggest that although officers believed that children's language should be appropriate for their age and level of development in abuse interviews and that they should have few hesitations when responding, neither their language nor their hesitations reliably indicated credibility. However, officers' beliefs that shorter responses indicated that children's accounts were credible were correct for approximately two-thirds of the interviews.

The Plausibility of the Content

The second major theme that participants mentioned was the plausibility of the content.

They mentioned plausibility 35 times in reference to simulated interviews and 16 times in reference to real interviews. Many participants commented that children provide plausible responses when recalling abuse; therefore, any responses that appeared implausible should be indicative of a simulated interview. For example, the following participant was correct in deciding that the interview was simulated:

> She talks about a vase that mummy bought for her birthday. The kid wouldn't know who bought presents for who. Not a chance in hell. I don't even know who I buy presents for you know.

However, deciding the nature of an interview based on the plausibility of the child's responses did not always lead to an accurate decision, as shown in the following comment about a simulated interview:

> The answers that they've given, "didn't want to tell secrets because they'd get bashed up", seemed realistic to me, so I thought it was an actual child.

Overall, officers mentioned plausibility 29 times when they made their judgements; they were correct about 18 of those judgements (62%). This percentage was not significantly different from chance. Broken down by interview type, officers made correct judgements about 16 of the 20 simulated interviews (80%) in which they mentioned plausibility. They made correct judgements about 2 of the 9 real interviews (22%) in which they mentioned plausibility.

As well as mentioning the plausibility of the details included in the transcripts, participants also emphasized the plausibility of the entire scenarios. Many officers commented that the scenarios from real interviews should be plausible and realistic; those in simulated interviews should be more implausible. Interestingly, two officers disagreed with the plausibility of one of the scenarios used in the interviews. One of the officers decided that

the scenario was plausible, and therefore incorrectly assumed it was a real interview.

> It was real just because of the story I think . . . about the magic jungle and there's animals there like lions and tigers and fairies and it sort of goes on and sticks consistently with that theme, that's the game that daddy plays with me and things like that, so I could see that as being believable that a child would discuss or has been told about this certain game and it seemed like it had been scripted to them so they're regurgitating what's been told to them about the game.

The other officer thought that the scenario was implausible, and therefore correctly decided it was a simulated interview:

> Oh yeah, when he talks about the magic stick and he's got to hide it and all that. And I just thought what a load of crap. My problem is I 'spose I haven't been taking statements off kids, but I've done stacks of interviews with crooks who molested kids. When they've groomed them and done all those sorts of things I just don't have adults using these silly ridiculous stories. They always seem to groom them in such a way that we're not hiding a magic stick. We're either doing something that needs to be done, cause you need to make sure you're clean there and I'm going to use my finger to find out or I'm going to lick you to clean you there or something along those lines. Or they say this is what daddy does and you don't tell anyone it's our secret. I've got no issue with that. But not hiding magic sticks.

Overall, officers mentioned the plausibility of the scenario 16 times when they made their judgements; they were correct about 13 of those judgements (81%). This percentage was significantly different from chance, $z = 2.480$, $p = .013$. Broken down by interview type, officers made correct judgements about 10 of the 12 simulated interviews (83%) in which they mentioned scenario plausibility. They made correct judgements about 3 of the 4 real interviews (75%) in which they mentioned scenario plausibility.

Taken together, these results suggest that officers' beliefs about the plausibility of the details as an indicator of credibility was not supported. However, their belief that real interviews contained more plausible scenarios was a reliable indicator of credibility for around 80% of the interviews.

Children's Responses Should be Consistent with Recollecting a Traumatic Event

Participants often commented that children recall abuse in a manner consistent with recollecting a traumatic event (79 times in relation to simulated interviews and 74 times in relation to real interviews). Participants held a number of beliefs about the ways in which they expected children's responses to be consistent with recollecting traumatic events. These beliefs included the degree of elaboration in children's responses, their adherence to the topic, the directness of their responses, and the amount of information that they provided.

Degree of Elaboration

Many participants believed that when children recall abuse, they do not provide particularly detailed responses. For example, one officer correctly believed that too much detail indicated a simulated interview,

> When the child has said "I went to the toilet, pulled down my pants first then undies, had my skirt on and pulled them down, went to the toilet" it was too much information. A child would just say "I went to the toilet".

However, another officer incorrectly believed that lots of detail indicated a real interview,

> I thought it was real because she described some things that would happen when you're on a bushwalk, for example, she got scratched by a stick and there's some description about toilets. It makes it seem real like she was actually there.

Overall, officers mentioned the degree of elaboration 33 times when they made their judgements; they were correct about 21 of those judgements (64%). This percentage was not significantly different from chance. Broken down by interview type, officers made correct judgements about 18 of the 26 simulated interviews (69%) in which they mentioned elaboration. They made correct judgements about 3 of the 7 real interviews (43%) in which they mentioned elaboration.

Adherence to Topic

Another way in which participants expected a child's response to be consistent with recollecting a traumatic event was the degree to which the child adhered to the topic of concern. Participants often commented that children do not go off on tangents when recalling abuse, but stick to the main topic. For example, one officer incorrectly identified a simulated interview as a real interview for the following reason,

> I got the impression this is a real kid because he knew why he was at the station. And when you ask me questions I'm going to answer them cause that's why I'm here. Um and his answers were short and simple. He doesn't go and give out a lot of crap.

Another officer used the same reasoning to correctly identify a simulated interview,

> The main reason I decided it was a simulated interview was that the child would run off on a tangent quite often. Here he's talking about where daddy's hit mummy, but then all of a sudden he goes on to talk about the colour of the plaster on his arm and I think that would be really quite traumatic for him and he wouldn't switch from dad hitting mummy to the colour of the plaster.

Overall, officers mentioned adherence 39 times when they made their judgements; they were correct about 18 of those judgements (46%). This percentage was not significantly different from chance. Broken down

by interview type, officers made correct judgements about 12 of the 15 simulated interviews (80%) in which they mentioned adherence. They made correct judgements about 6 of the 24 real interviews (25%) in which they mentioned adherence.

Direct Responses to Questions

Participants also focused on the degree to which children responded to a question directly. Some participants commented that children recalling a traumatic event would answer questions directly rather than indirectly or avoiding them altogether. For example, one officer correctly identified a real interview from the directness of the responses:

> I believed that [this transcript] is real because the language is direct. Drawing on my experiences, you ask the question and children will generally frame an answer.

Another said,

> Other interviewees seem too much like they were trying to avoid the questions, which made me think it was a simulated interview.

Another officer incorrectly identified a simulated interview as a real interview:

> This [transcript] sounds realistic. The kid was giving short answers and not like telling you everything that you were trying to get out.

Overall, officers mentioned response directness 27 times when they made their judgements; they were correct about 15 of those judgements (56%). This percentage was not significantly different from chance. Broken down by interview type, officers made correct judgements about 4 of the 12 simulated interviews (33%) in which they mentioned directness. They made correct judgements about 11 of the 15 real interviews (73%) in which they mentioned directness.

Amount of Information

Participants also believed that the amount of information that children volunteered in the interviews was indicative of whether they were responding in a manner consistent with recollecting a traumatic event. Participants felt that interviews containing too much voluntary information were simulated rather than real. They believed that children recalling abuse do not volunteer information but require prompting. For example, one officer correctly identified a simulated interview based on the amount of information provided:

> I don't think a real kid would have offered all this information without being prompted.

Another officer said,

> All the detail was in there without any prompting which is completely unrealistic. That would not happen. The kid might get the gist of the questioning and learn that she needs to give as much detail as possible, but she's never going to be that descriptive to the point where you don't actually have to ask questions.

Overall, officers mentioned the amount of information 29 times when they made their judgements; they were correct about 22 of those judgements (76%). This percentage was significantly different from chance, $z = 2.800, p = .005$. Broken down by interview type, officers made correct judgements about 18 of the 22 simulated interviews (82%) in which they mentioned the amount of information. They made correct judgements about 4 of the 7 real interviews (57%) in which they mentioned the amount of information.

Taken together, these results suggest that officers believed that children adhere to the topic, provide direct responses, and do not elaborate when recalling abuse. However, none of these beliefs were reliable indicators of credibility. Officers also believed that children provide little information without prompting when reporting abuse. Using this

belief, they correctly judged the credibility of three-quarters of the interviews.

Discussion

We found that police officers' beliefs about the characteristics of children's abuse statements influenced their decisions. More specifically, officers' beliefs about what and how children report abuse affected whether they thought that statements were provided by real children or by adults playing the role of the child. The accuracy of their judgements was around chance, which indicates that these beliefs did not always accurately represent the way in which children actually make statements about abuse. Officers believed that 5–6-year-old children have a particular level of development, which should be expressed through the language that they used, the plausibility of their statement, and their description of an upsetting or traumatic event. However, most of their beliefs did not help officers to identify which statements were provided by actual children.

Why did most of their beliefs not help? One reason is that children vary greatly in their ability to report abuse; ranging from children who have difficulty expressing their statement, provide a seemingly implausible account, and do not appear visibly upset during their statement to children who are more articulate and expressive, provide a more plausible account, and are visibly upset when giving their statement. Given the wide range of reporting ability and styles, using idiosyncrasies to judge children's statements is not a useful technique. Making judgements about children's statements that were not much better than chance using idiosyncratic detail is very similar to people's judgements about whether someone is lying or telling the truth. For example, although there is a belief in society that when people are lying they avert their eye gaze, this belief has not been supported by research evidence (for reviews see Vrij, 2000, 2008).

Our results have important implications. If police officers' incorrect beliefs about children's statements of abuse are not challenged or disrupted, these beliefs may undermine their decisions. For example, if an officer holds the belief that certain characteristics indicate that a child is providing a false statement, the officer should be less likely to authorize the case to proceed to prosecution. If this belief is incorrect, then the child is severely disadvantaged. Even if a case proceeds to prosecution, people's beliefs about children's abuse statements may have an impact later on in the legal system. For example, jurors' beliefs may influence their decisions. Although they should be more likely to view a video-recording of the interview (rather than reading a transcript of it), their beliefs may still have an impact. Many studies have shown that potential jurors hold many beliefs about children's disclosure of abuse; for example, over half of those surveyed agreed that children could easily be manipulated into giving false reports (Kovera & Borgida, 1997; Morison & Greene, 1992; see Shackel, 2008, for a review of adults' beliefs about children's abuse reports).

To reduce the impact of police officers' and jurors' beliefs, these beliefs should be challenged in training and in the courtroom, respectively. The danger is not in the beliefs per se, but how they might influence people's decisions. Once people are more informed about the effects of their beliefs, they may be able to limit the influence of their beliefs. In the field, police officers' beliefs are not challenged, which illustrates the usefulness of the current study. Many of our participants were surprised to learn that they made several incorrect identifications. Even the more experienced officers, who had conducted lots of interviews with children, were surprised at their low levels of accuracy. Indeed, interviewing experience does not prevent people from having beliefs that contradict best practice interviewing and in fact may promote those beliefs (Powell, Hughes-Scholes, Smith, & Sharman, in

press). In training, challenging police officers' beliefs may be as simple as the task that we used in the current study: asking them to identify which statements were made by real children and the reasons for their identifications.

Finally, although it was not central to our research question, it is worth noting that police officers had difficulty distinguishing between the real interviews with children and the simulated interviews with adults playing the role of the child. This finding was consistent with deception detection research showing that adults perform no better than chance at judging whether other people's descriptions are of real or false events (see Masip, Sporer, Garrido, & Herrero, 2005; Vrij, 2000, 2008 for reviews). Our finding highlights the effectiveness of using simulated interviews during training. Indeed, these simulated interviews were convincing no matter whether the role of the child was played by a trained adult or by a work colleague.

In conclusion, we have demonstrated that police officers hold specific beliefs about children's abuse statements in three areas: that the language of the child's statement should be consistent with the child's age, that the event is considered to be plausible and the way in which children describe the traumatic event. Although officers used these beliefs to make decisions about whether the statements that they read were provided by children, the accuracy of their decisions was only about chance. Officers' beliefs were based on the characteristics of children's statements; however, these beliefs were not useful in making decisions because of such a wide range of children's abilities to make these statements. The results emphasize the importance of challenging officers' beliefs during training to reduce – if not eliminate – the effects of those beliefs on their decisions.

Acknowledgements

Note

1. Actors playing the role of the child were trained to respond in a way children do in the field; interviewers found that actors playing the role of the child were realistic and important for their interview training (Powell & Wright, 2008). For further information about the role-play procedure, please see Powell, Fisher, and Hughes-Scholes (2008).

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