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Interviewing Victims of Repeated Domestic Violence: Investigators' Beliefs and Strategies

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Most victims of domestic violence are abused repeatedly over time. Hence, investigative challenges arise concerning victims' ability to recall particular events. This research focuses on investigators' understanding of memory-based problems associated with repeated victimization and their strategies to facilitate recall. Eighty-one Swedish police officers completed a questionnaire probing their beliefs about memory for repeated events, aims of witness interviews and specific memory-enhancing techniques. A large proportion reported not making any extra preparations or using specific techniques to tackle the challenges of interviewing victims of repeated violence. However, respondents were largely aware of problematic memory features, including source monitoring errors, and they reported using scientifically supported techniques.

Key words: investigative interviewing; repeated victimization.

Domestic violence is common, and in the majority of cases, victims are abused repeatedly over time (World Health Organization, 2002). The effects of this violence are lasting and far-reaching, evidenced for example by the numerous negative effects on physical and mental health (Campbell, 2002), as well as those associated with children's exposure to parental violence (Kitzmann, Gaylord, Holt, & Kenny, 2003). Domestic violence is traditionally among the least frequently reported crimes mainly due to trivialization, concerns for privacy, fear of reprisal, protection of the offender and perceptions that the police consider repeated domestic incidents to be unimportant (Felson, Messner, Hoskin, & Deane, 2002). To investigate the crimes that are reported to the police effectively, it is important that investigators know and are trained in proper strategies to enhance a victim's remembering. Such interview techniques require sharp cognizance of memory phenomena and the interpersonal dynamics that encourage trust and facilitate recall. In this article, we present the results of a survey of professional investigators' beliefs and interview practices

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regarding interviews with victims of repeated abuse.

Difficulties in Investigations of Repeated Violence

Interviewing victims of violence is a difficult task and, in cases of repeated violence, practical investigative challenges arise concerning victims' abilities to singularize recurring events (Guadagno, Powell, & Wright, 2006). The information gathered during investigative interviews with the victim is especially important because for an offender to be charged with a crime and accordingly, to be able to provide a defense, legal guidelines require that an individual criminal event be particularized. That is, multiple incidents of abuse must be distinguished from one another with respect to temporal, spatial, affective and other unique contextual details.

Recalling individual instances of recurring, similar events is particularly difficult. Indeed, research indicates that frequency and similarity of events interfere with recollection (Dodson & Johnson, 1996; Means & Loftus, 1991). Correctly attributing contextual, or source details to particular memories is fundamental to the completeness of memory and to one's interpretation of past, current and future experiences. Source monitoring involves making attributions about the origins of memories, including the various conditions under which memories are formed (Johnson, Hashtroudi, & Lindsay, 1993). Research supports the position that source monitoring is easier when sources are distinct (Dodson & Johnson, 1996). Several factors have been identified as interfering with source attributions, including age (Ferguson, Hashtroudi, & Johnson, 1992; Lindsay, Johnson, & Kwon, 1991), emotional processing (May, Rahhal, Berry, & Leighton, 2005), emotional self-focus (Mather, Johnson, & De Leonardis, 1999) and the goals and decision criteria of retrieval (Dodson & Johnson, 1993).

Research suggests that when source details are less available, individuals tend to rely more heavily on inferences drawn from general, schematic knowledge when making source attributions (Bayen, Nakamura, Dupuis, & Yang, 2000; Mather et al., 1999; Sherman & Bessenoff, 1999; Spaniol & Bayen, 2002). For example, a woman who cannot recall where she was on a specific weeknight may guess that she was at home because she typically spends weeknights at home. This is confluent with the finding that schemas are used when reconstructing episodic memories (Alba & Hasher, 1983; Brewer & Treyens, 1981; Johnson & Raye, 2000). A schema is a general knowledge structure of associated concepts based upon experience. Schemas facilitate the filtering and interpretation of information in order to integrate a meaningful, consistent and expectancy-confirming representation of experience (Alba & Hasher, 1983). Though schematic and automatic types of memory are efficient, easier and quicker, they are less useful and potentially misguiding in situations that require specific and factual recollection. Research consistently demonstrates that reliance upon general knowledge (Hicks & Cockman, 2003; Hyman, Husband, & Billings, 1995), schemata (Kleider, Pezdek, Goldinger, & Kirk, 2008; Tuckey & Brewer, 2003) and stereotypes (Mather et al., 1999; Sherman & Bessenoff, 1999) can lead to an increased frequency of source attribution errors. Thus, it is a very difficult task for investigators of repeated victimization to elicit accurate, complete and highly detailed memories of specific instances of events that become represented generally.

Schematization of recurrent violent events—violent event scripts—has not yet been studied, but based on prior literature we theorize that recall of such events is particularly vulnerable to source

misattributions and stereotypic memory errors. Moreover, greater degrees of similarity among events and heightened stress (Deffenbacher, Bornstein, Penrod, & McGorty, 2004) will further impede retrieval. This assumption has guided interviewers to inquire about the most recent, first and worst episodes of domestic violence because they are most likely to be unique and therefore better remembered (Russell, 2008).

Improving Recollection in Forensic Contexts

Since police investigators are largely responsible for acquiring evidentiary event details, their interviewing strategies and awareness of victim memory problems are critical to case development and pursuant legal action. Some surveys have examined police officers' knowledge and beliefs about eyewitness psychology (Benton, Ross, Bradshaw, Thomas, & Bradshaw, 2006; Brigham & Wolfskeil, 1983; Kebbell & Milne, 1998). While eyewitnesses are regarded as an important source of information in criminal investigations (Kebbell & Milne, 1998), results frequently reveal that police officers are unaware of or mistaken on factors that can affect memory (Benton et al., 2006; Granhag, Strömwall, & Hartwig, 2005). Studies also show that many police officers are poorly trained and lack confidence in their abilities to conduct interviews of eyewitnesses (Dando, Wilcock, & Milne, 2008; Wright & Holliday, 2005).

The Cognitive Interview (CI) is an interview technique based on scientifically tested and agreed upon principles of memory and knowledge representation (Fisher, Geiselman, & Amador, 1989). A central feature of the CI is a mental reinstatement of context by which, building upon Tulving and Thomson's (1973) encoding-specificity theory, recall is superior when the conditions at retrieval match those at encoding. Additional instructions of the CI (with its revisions) include establishing rapport with the witness, transferring control, using witness-compatible questions and encouraging an uninterrupted narrative, with focused retrieval and guided imagery techniques to improve concentration and avoid misleading information (Fisher et al., 1989). Given the potential of the CI to enhance memory for contextual information, the technique would be expected to be useful in helping victims of repeated abuse particularize their memories for singular instances.

Research has generally supported the effectiveness of the CI in improving recalled information, citing that while errors increase as a function of an increase in the amount of information recalled, there is neither a concomitant decrease in the overall accuracy rate for details (Köhnken, Milne, Memon, & Bull, 1999) nor an increase in susceptibility to leading questions (Geiselman, Fisher, Cohen, & Holland, 1986). In fact, the CI is the interviewing model advocated for investigative use with cooperative witnesses and victims in England and Wales (Dando et al., 2008). While the CI has been demonstrated to be superior in experimental (Köhnken et al., 1999) and field (Fisher et al., 1989) settings, many investigators are reluctant to use it because its instructions are time-consuming and mental reinstatement of context may be inappropriate with a traumatized victim (Kebbell, Milne, & Wagstaff, 1999). Training investigators in the CI is fairly easy, but results from training studies show that officers tend to find some techniques helpful, but others unhelpful (Kebbell et al., 1999), which may explain why the frequency of usage of the techniques is low (Memon, Holley, Milne, Koehnken, & Bull, 1994).

Present Study

The purpose of the present study is to examine police officers' awareness of

memory-based problems of repeated victimization as well as their strategies for enhancing victims' recall. Research on this topic is meager. In the most relevant study to date, Guadagno and colleagues (2006) examined police officers' and legal professionals' perceptions of interview techniques with children who are repeatedly victimized, but their findings are limited by sample characteristics ($N = 12$). To probe investigators' knowledge and interviewing practices, we conducted a more extensive survey of police officers with experience of investigating domestic violence and conducting interviews of battered women. We expected that they would be aware of source monitoring problems and CI techniques, but due to the scarcity of previous research, we made no specific predictions regarding the extent of their knowledge or preferred interview strategies.

Method

Procedure

Police chiefs at 6 of the 21 regional police authorities in Sweden were contacted and asked for assistance with distributing a questionnaire. All six police chiefs complied with the request and a total of 207 questionnaires were sent to the chiefs for further distribution among officers in their staff. Instructions stressed that all respondents should have experience conducting interviews in cases of domestic violence. Respondents did not receive any compensation for completing the survey.

Respondents

In total, 81 police officers (40 females and 41 males) completed and returned the questionnaire, yielding a response rate of 39.1%. Respondents' age ranged from 27 to 64 years ($M = 47.3$, $SD = 9.7$). Their professional experience ranged from 0.50 to 42 years of police service ($M = 23.5$, $SD = 12.1$), and their experience investigating domestic violence ranged from less than 1 year to 35 years ($M = 7.1$, $SD = 6.5$). The average number of interviews conducted, regardless of case type, was 2,400 ($SD = 2{,}984$)[1] and in cases involving repeated domestic violence against women, the average was 231 ($SD = 262$).

Questionnaire

A questionnaire was developed based on a review of the relevant research literature. The questionnaire consisted of two sections. In the first section, respondents rated their perception of witnesses and victims as sources of information in criminal investigations. Using Likert scales ranging from 1 (''never'') to 7 (''always''), respondents indicated how often (a) witnesses and (b) victims provide the major leads in an investigation, how often (c) witnesses and (d) victims remember as much information as would be desired, (e) how often women exposed to repeated domestic violence have difficulties remembering details from particular instances and (f) how often such difficulties hinder prosecution of a case.

In the second section, respondents were asked open-ended questions about what they consider to characterize memories for repeated events, what is most important to achieve in witness interviews, any specific techniques that they find to be of particular value to help witnesses in general, and victims of repeated violence in particular, to remember details, and whether they make any particular preparations before interviewing repeatedly abused women.

Coding of Verbal Responses

To categorize respondents' answers to the open-ended questions, two research assistants with previous experience of coding open-ended question responses developed a data-driven coding scheme. All statements indicating the use of a specific interview strategy or technique, officers' experience of

the utility of a technique, special preparations made or their knowledge about memory in cases of repeated events were noted. For each question, the responses were then combined into more comprehensive categories, allowing for a more methodical classification of statements and facilitating the interpretation of the data.

The two coders achieved an inter-rater agreement of 89%, indicating that they coded 89 out of the 100 analyzed statements identically (Cohen's $\kappa = .81$; based on eight categories). Of the 11 disagreements, 4 were cases in which they had categorized a single statement differently. The remaining seven disagreements were cases in which one of the coders had failed to code some aspects of the statement as belonging to any category. The disagreements were resolved in discussion between the coders and the coding scheme was altered accordingly. Subsequently, all questionnaires were coded by one of the coders.

Results

Importance of Interviewing

The percentage distribution of responses to the forced-choice questions is reported in Table 1. Respondents reported that witnesses and victims frequently provide the crucial leads in investigations but less often recall as much information as they want. In addition, respondents indicated that repeatedly victimized women have difficulty remembering details from particular abusive events. Finally, investigators' responses varied regarding how often a battered woman's inability to recall particular details hinders prosecution: the three most frequent responses were "often" (34%), "sometimes" (34%) and "rarely" (19%).

Interview Aims and Strategies for Witnesses and Victims

The categorized responses to the open-ended questions concerning interview aims and strategies are reported in Table 2. Investigators were largely aware that memory for repeated events differs from memory for single events: 86% responded that such is the case, while only 14% believed that this is not so, binomial $p < .001$. Specifically, 46% noted difficulties in particularizing repeated events, 18% reported problems arising from habituation to and normalization of abuse and 17% stated that recall for single events is typically more detailed. Regarding their perceptions of important interview factors with witnesses, the two most frequently cited aims were to retrieve as much objective information as possible and to establish rapport and trust by making the interview climate comfortable and calm. For victims, the interview strategies most relevant to enhance recall were initial use of free recall and open-ended question types before detailed probes, establishing rapport and

Table 1. Percentage distribution for forced-choice questions.

Topic	Never	Very rarely	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very often	Always	*M* (*SD*)
1. Witness crucial leads	0	1	6	35	44	14	0	4.6(0.84)
2. Witness' amount of recall	0	0	17	48	30	5	0	4.2(0.79)
3. Victim crucial leads	0	1	4	14	38	42	1	5.2(0.91)
4. Victims' amount of recall	0	0	11	30	48	11	0	4.6(0.84)
5. Problems particularizing	0	4	4	17	47	28	0	4.9(0.97)
6. Hindrance to prosecution	0	9	19	34	34	5	0	4.1(1.0)

Note. Means are based on the rating scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*always*).

Table 2. Frequency and percentage distributions for open-ended questions.

Response category	Frequency	Percent
Witness interview aims ($N = 79$)		
Maximize objective information	41	52
Establish rapport	26	33
Minimize influence	5	6
Other aim	5	6
Assess witness reliability and case facts	2	3
Memory differences ($N = 78$)		
Separation difficulties with repeated events	36	46
Effects of habituation to violence	14	18
Single events are more detailed	13	17
Do not know	12	15
Other difference	3	4
Victim recall strategies ($N = 74$)		
Free recall and open-ended questioning	25	34
Establish rapport	18	24
Cognitive Interview	18	24
Other strategy	7	10
Alternative route	5	7
Crime scene visit	1	1
Strategies to enhance source monitoring ($N = 69$)		
No strategy	19	28
Anchor events to timeline	16	23
Alternative route	12	17
Allocate extra time	9	13
Cognitive Interview	4	6
Other strategy	4	6
Use of written materials	3	4
Concentrate on best remembered event	2	3
Specific preparations for battered women ($N = 74$)		
No specific preparation	30	41
Study the case	18	24
Mental preparation	14	19
Other preparation	7	9
Setup A/V recording devices	5	7

Note. Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.

use of the CI. In essence, this means that 82% of investigators reported employing the CI or elements thereof.

Interviews with Repeatedly Victimized Women: Techniques and Beliefs

While many respondents reported not using any special techniques to help victims of repeated violence remember source details of particular events, 23% described anchoring events to a timeline using, for example, television shows, seasons and holidays, and 17% reported using alternative routes to recall, such as inverting the chronological order of the narrative or attempting to prime contextual cues such as specific smells or wounds. When asked if they prepare for interviews with repeatedly abused women differently than for other interviews, 41% of the investigators said that they do not. The remaining respondents reported specific preparations, most frequently studying the case or mentally preparing for the interview.

Discussion

We surveyed Swedish police officers with experience as domestic violence investigators to examine their understanding of memory-related problems and their techniques and strategies to enhance recall. Specialized law enforcement officers are useful to study because they offer insight into police beliefs and strategies and are also active instructional models for current and future generations of investigators. The present study sheds light on two important and interdependent, but understudied topics: investigators' knowledge of memory and effective interviewing of victims in the specific context of repeated abuse.

Our results indicate that experienced domestic violence investigators view witnesses in general and victims in particular as very important sources of information in criminal investigations. The inability of victims to particularize specific violent events was thus seen as a hindrance to prosecution. Most of our respondents were aware that memories for repeated events differ from those for singular events in important ways. Specifically, respondents distinguished single event memories as more detailed and cited memory impairment for recurring events, due largely to an obscuring adaptation to abuse. With these issues in mind, they reported placing emphasis on rapport-building and using scientifically supported techniques to frame questions and elicit details. Most respondents mentioned the CI by name or reported endorsing various elements thereof, such as context reinstatement. Further, they frequently reported establishing rapport and using free recall and open-ended questioning before focusing or guiding the narrative. These strategies imply awareness that the retrieval process itself can affect memory, as well as an effort to limit external influences.

When interviewing repeatedly abused women, many investigators reported concern for interpersonal dynamics and the importance of maintaining composure, allotting extra time and being flexible with sensitive victims. To elicit source details, two main strategies emerged: use of alternative routes and timeline construction. Some alternative routes to recall (e.g., inverting chronological order) were removed from the revised version of the CI due to lack of support (Fisher et al., 1989). However, the strategy to construct a timeline of personal and general events to establish temporal details was successful at enhancing recall in an experiment by Means and Loftus (1991) because it is an objective and verifiable way to anchor an event and prime for more specific episodic details. Since it appears to be employed by a substantial proportion of investigators, this strategy may be worth further empirical investigation.

Notably, a large percentage (41%) of investigators reported not making specific or extra preparations for interviews with victims of repeated violence. It seems counterintuitive that so many investigators who largely rely upon a victim's leads and are aware of the challenging nature of these interviews do not tailor their interviewing style accordingly. However, this finding is consistent with prior research indicating that while officers embrace many techniques learned in specialized training, they often report not employing them, citing time constraints and impracticality or inadvisability of usage. Considering the experience of the sample, it is also possible that their interviewing techniques largely automate with repeated practice and that proceduralization accounts for much of this result (Fiske & Taylor, 2008). Future research on actual practice may help clarify whether a lack of preparation indicates that appropriate techniques are not employed.

Limitations and Future Recommendations

We sought to shed light on criminal investigators' knowledge of memory factors that can influence witnesses' and victims' memory accounts as well as their interview techniques to facilitate thorough and accurate remembering. While our results are based on a fairly large sample, they cannot be generalized to all Swedish, European or other investigative police forces. Hence, more research is needed to establish the generalizability of our findings. Still, our findings are encouraging because they show that many investigators are mindful about the privacy and comfort of the interview environment and that they report using techniques that are endorsed by advocates, researchers and experts (Russell, 2008).

Although a majority of the respondents reported making extra preparations for interviews with repeatedly victimized women and use of specific techniques to enhance source monitoring, our data do not indicate whether these preparations and techniques effectively accomplish the intended goals. Since investigators appear to be aware of the difficulties of disentangling singular event memories from general schematic representations, the necessary motivation among the police to adopt new and effective techniques is likely present. It is thus an important task for psychologists to provide effective tools built on a sound scientific basis and to sift off those that are of no or little practical use.

A final point concerns the use of self-report measures to examine beliefs and behavior. Researchers have long debated the impact of limitations of self-report data, including construct measurement, response biases and inaccuracy in reflective self-assessment (Chan, 2009; Holtgraves, 2004); however, self-report measures may be appropriate and valuable for assessing beliefs and extent of knowledge. While our data do not indicate the frequency of employment or utility of the techniques that investigators report to use, the finding that these investigators are largely aware of the relevant psychological processes is an important contribution toward the understanding of repeated victimization and development of effective interviewing techniques.

Note

1. The terminology in the Swedish criminal justice system does not distinguish between the subjects of interviews; therefore, this number includes all investigative interviews irrespective of a subject's status as a suspect, witness or victim.

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