

## Peer Discussion Affects Children's Memory Reports

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### SUMMARY

This study explored the memory conformity effect in children. Younger (6–7 years;  $n = 60$ ) and older (11–12 years;  $n = 62$ ) children watched a video individually (individual witness condition) or in dyads (co-witness condition). The dyads believed that they were viewing the same video as the other member of the pair while in fact they saw different versions. Next, children in the individual witness condition answered questions, whereas children in the co-witness condition discussed the event on the video with each other. Finally, all children completed an individual free and cued recall task. In the co-witness condition, more than 60% of the children recalled at least one detail from the alternative video, whereas over 23% of the children in the individual witness condition reported such a detail. Moreover, in free recall—but not in cued recall—the memory conformity effect was stronger for older than for younger children. Copyright © 2007 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

On 10 September 2003, the Swedish Foreign Minister Anna Lindh was attacked and stabbed to death at a department store in Stockholm. The attack was witnessed by a large number of people and the central witnesses were seated together in a room immediately after the attack. The witnesses naturally started to talk to each other. When the police finally interviewed them, some witnesses overheard what others had said to the police. Moreover, some of the witnesses were related (e.g. a mother and daughter) and it became evident that they had discussed what they each had witnessed prior to the interview. Hence, all the key witnesses were exposed to social influence. Based on the witnesses' testimonies, the so-called national alarm broadcast 2 hours after the attack described the perpetrator as wearing a military jacket with a camouflage pattern. In fact, however, the perpetrator was wearing a grey sweater. The incorrect description stemmed from the contagious contacts between witnesses. The officers in charge of the investigation later admitted that the incorrect national alarm severely obstructed the search for the perpetrator (Granhag, Ask, & Rebelius, 2005). This case, in which eyewitnesses affected each other's memory reports, is not the only one of its kind (see Memon & Wright, 1999). A case that illustrates the effect of social influence on children's memory reports is the McMartin preschool investigation during which seven teachers were accused of abusing hundreds of children. The investigation did not result in any prosecution. An analysis of the transcripts from the investigative interviews of the children questioned (Garven, Wood, Malpass, & Shaw, 1998) revealed specific tactics which could have increased social pressure to conform, such

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as telling children what other children had said and providing positive reinforcements for confirming the allegations.

The effect of misinformation in the form of contradictory evidence provided by other witnesses on memory has hardly been studied. Moreover, no study to date has examined the effect of misinformation from a child co-witness on the memory report of child witnesses. With adult participants, researchers have used different paradigms to examine the mechanisms underlying social influence. For example, Roediger, Meade, and Bergman (2001) asked participants to watch slides depicting household scenes with a confederate. During a collaborative recall task, the confederate reported items that were not in the scene. Results from the subsequent individual free recall test revealed a social contagion effect in that participants reported items that were reported by the confederate during the collaborative task (see also Meade & Roediger, 2002). Although studies using this paradigm revealed robust findings, the situation in which witnesses take turns recalling scenes is somewhat artificial. Gabbert, Memon, and Allan (2003) developed a more ecologically valid method to study the effect of co-witness conversation on eyewitnesses' memory reports. These authors presented members of dyads with a different video clip of the same event. The clips were filmed from different angles such that the critical details that were visible varied slightly in the clips. Participants watched the video in dyads and were led to believe that they were watching the same video. Half of the dyads were instructed to discuss the event before an individual recall test. Questions were given to them to structure this task and dyads had to provide the most accurate collaborative response. The control group completed the questions alone. More than 70% of the participants in the discussion group erroneously recalled an item acquired during the discussion. These participants incorporated posthoc misinformation provided by their conversation partner in their memory reports. As an analogy to Asch's (1955) work on influencing responses on perceptual judgment tasks, the effect of discussion between witnesses on their subsequent memory reports is often referred to as 'memory conformity' (Gabbert et al., 2003). Previous studies on memory conformity have shown that both young and older adults are susceptible to this effect (Gabbert et al., 2003; Wright, Mathews, & Skagerberg, 2005; Wright, Self, & Justice, 2000). The current paper examines the memory conformity effect in children. With an increasing number of children testifying in civil court or in criminal cases (e.g. ChildLine Scotland, 2004) this issue is highly relevant. As illustrated by the high profile sexual abuse case mentioned earlier, it is not uncommon to have multiple witnesses being questioned about the same event (see Bidrose & Goodman, 2000; Garven et al., 1998). Moreover, studies conducted by Principe and colleagues (Principe & Ceci, 2002; Principe, Kanaya, Ceci, & Singh, 2006) indicate that young children's conversations can create elaborative reports based on what they have heard even when they have not witnessed an event themselves. In one of their studies (Principe & Ceci, 2002), a group of 3.5- to 5-year-olds witnessed a target event. A second group of children were the classmates of those in the first group, but did not witness this event. The remaining children (control group) were not the classmates of the children in the first group nor did they witness the target event. Interviews revealed that conversations with peers can lead to false reports of non-experienced events. Specifically, children in the classmate group were more likely than those in the control group to state that they actually saw the target event. While the Principe and Ceci study focused on preschoolers, we included a slightly older group of younger children in the current study given the more complex nature of our task (i.e. a structured discussion with a co-witness). Furthermore, to explore developmental differences in susceptibility to memory conformity we included an older age group. Previous research using standard postevent misinformation procedures has revealed age differences in suggestibility in that younger children tend to be more susceptible to suggestion than older children. In these studies, children were misled by an

adult interviewer (e.g. Candel, Merckelbach, & Muris, 2000; Poole & Lindsay, 2001; Roebbers & Schneider, 2002). Hence, it is plausible that these age differences might extend to situations of peer conformity. We predicted, then, that younger children would be more vulnerable to misinformation following a discussion than older children.

In the current study, participants watched slightly different video clips of the same event. After individually viewing the video, participants recalled the witnessed event either alone or in dyads. All participants were subsequently required to complete an individual recall test in order to examine whether they would report details acquired during the discussion. As stated earlier, there is some evidence to support the hypothesis that younger children will be more susceptible to suggestion while the older age group in this study should yield performance levels comparable to adults based on earlier research (e.g. Cole & Loftus, 1987).

## METHOD

### Participants

In this study, 122 primary school children (60 boys, 62 girls) participated. Two different age groups were included. The mean age of the younger age group ( $n = 60$ ) was 6.62 years ( $SD = 0.49$ ), whereas the mean age of the older age group ( $n = 62$ ) was 11.72 years ( $SD = 0.52$ ). The younger age group included 29 boys and 31 girls. The older age group consisted of 31 boys and 31 girls. Children participated after teachers and parents had given informed consent. They received a small present in return for their participation.

### Materials

Inspired by Gabbert et al. (2003), we filmed two silent versions of a girl entering an unoccupied university office. Both versions lasted 50 seconds and contained the same events in the same sequence. However, version A showed details not present in version B and visa versa. For example, in version A there is a glass filled with Coca-Cola and a Coca-Cola Bottle on the desk. In version B, there is only a glass filled with Coca-Cola on the desk. There were four such discrepancies between the two versions. Films were presented on a Fujitsu Siemens notebook, screen size 14.1 inch.

### Design

The study employed a 2 (age group: younger children vs. older children)  $\times$  2 (condition: individual witness vs. co-witness) between-subject design with children of both age groups randomly assigned to either the individual witness condition ( $n = 60$ ) or the co-witness condition ( $n = 62$ ). Dependent variables were the proportion of correctly reported details (i.e. hits) and the proportion of reported details from the alternative video clip (i.e. unseen details) in free and cued recall.

### Procedure

The children in the individual witness condition saw the video alone. Half saw video version A and half saw video version B. Children in the co-witness condition were led to believe that they were seeing the same video. They viewed the video one at a time, but immediately after each other so there was a marginal delay between one participant and his/her co-witness seeing the video. One witness was asked to draw while the other witness

watched the video. After viewing the video, children in the individual witness condition answered some questions about what they had seen, whereas children in the co-witness condition were engaged in a discussion.<sup>1</sup> In both conditions, participants received identical questions. Questions were read aloud by the experimenter and included a request for a free recall of the event and six more specific questions (e.g. 'What was the girl wearing?', and 'What objects were on the desk?'). Children in the co-witness condition were instructed to discuss the video with the other witness of the pair and to come up with one answer to each question. So, as in Gabbert et al. (2003), the children were asked to form a consensus. There was no time limit for providing an answer.

Following the control recall task or the discussion, children took part in unrelated filler activities for about 30 minutes. In the final phase, all children were engaged in an individual free and cued recall task. The same experimenter asked for a free narrative by instructed them to 'give a description of everything you saw on the video in as much detail as possible. Please, try to describe everything that happened in the correct order as well as all the details of the main character and the office'. When children indicated that they did not remember anything else, they were encouraged to remember more by asking them: 'Please try again. Is there anything else you can remember?' Next, children answered eight cued recall questions after the following instruction was given: 'Now I would like you to ask some more specific questions about the video. Please, answer them as accurate as possible'. Four questions referred to details depicted in both video clips (neutral questions), two critical questions pertained to information that was only visible in clip A (e.g. 'What was the colour of the girl's cap?'), and two critical questions pertained information that was only visible in clip B (e.g. 'What jewellery was the girl wearing?'; see Appendix A). Question order was counterbalanced.

### Scoring

A coding list was developed containing 16 or 17 details (depending on version) deduced from the video clip.<sup>2</sup> Free recall was scored in terms of percentage correctly reported details as a proportion of the total number of items presented (hits) and percentage reported details from the alternative video clip (unseen details). One point was assigned to each hit and to each unseen detail. For the four neutral cued recall items one point was assigned to each correct answer (neutral hits). With respect to the four critical cued recall questions, one point was given for each correct answer (critical hits) and one point for each incorrect answer referring to a detail from the alternative video clip (critical unseen details).

## RESULTS

### Free recall

Mean percentages hits as a proportion of the total number of items presented in free recall were 40.69 ( $SD = 14.43$ ) and 33.84 ( $SD = 13.40$ ) for younger children in the individual

<sup>1</sup>Due to technical difficulties only a few of the discussions were audiotaped.

<sup>2</sup>Video A contained details not present in video B and visa versa. However, there was another difference between the two videos. Video A contained a detail that was presented *differently* to video B. Specifically, in video A, the girl entered the room while she was just holding her mobile phone whereas in version B, she was clearly sending a text message. In free recall, then, children who viewed version A received 1 point when they reported that the girl was holding her mobile phone. However, children who viewed version B received an additional point for reporting that she was sending a text message. In the cued recall task, we only included questions that referred to details presented in version A but not in version B and visa versa.

witness and co-witness condition, respectively. For the older children these means were 62.10 ( $SD = 16.57$ ) and 61.74 ( $SD = 16.92$ ), respectively. To examine the effect of age and witness condition on percentages hits, an ANOVA was conducted with age and condition as between-subject factors. This revealed a significant main effect of age [ $F(1,118) = 77.86$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ;  $\eta^2 = 0.40$ ], indicating that older children reported more details from the video correctly than younger children. Moreover, a non-significant main effect of condition [ $F(1,118) = 1.66$ ;  $p = 0.20$ ] and a non-significant Age  $\times$  Condition interaction were found [ $F(1,118) = 1.35$ ;  $p = 0.25$ ].

In the individual witness condition, 14 (23.3%) children included at least one unseen detail in the individual free recall, whereas 38 (61.3%) children in the co-witness condition reported at least one unseen detail [ $\chi^2(1) = 17.96$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ; Cramer's  $V = 0.38$ ].

In the individual witness condition, the mean percentages of unseen details reported during individual free recall were 4.76 ( $SD = 6.85$ ) and 1.90 ( $SD = 4.94$ ) for younger and older children, respectively. In the co-witness condition, these means were 11.43 ( $SD = 12.67$ ) and 18.75 ( $SD = 17.57$ ), respectively. To examine the effect of age and witness condition on percentages unseen details, an ANOVA was conducted with age and condition as between-subject factors. This revealed a significant main effect of condition [ $F(1,118) = 30.51$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ;  $\eta^2 = 0.21$ ] but no significant main effect of age [ $F(1,118) = 1.10$ ;  $p = 0.30$ ]. Moreover, a significant Age  $\times$  Condition interaction was found [ $F(1,118) = 5.72$ ;  $p = 0.02$ ;  $\eta^2 = 0.05$ ]. Posthoc  $t$ -tests indicated that both younger and older children in the co-witness condition reported more unseen details than younger and older children in the individual witness condition, but that the effect was stronger for older children [ $t(58) = -2.54$ ;  $p = 0.01$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.66$  and  $t(60) = -5.07$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ; Cohen's  $d = 1.30$  for younger and older children, respectively] (Figure 1). In both the

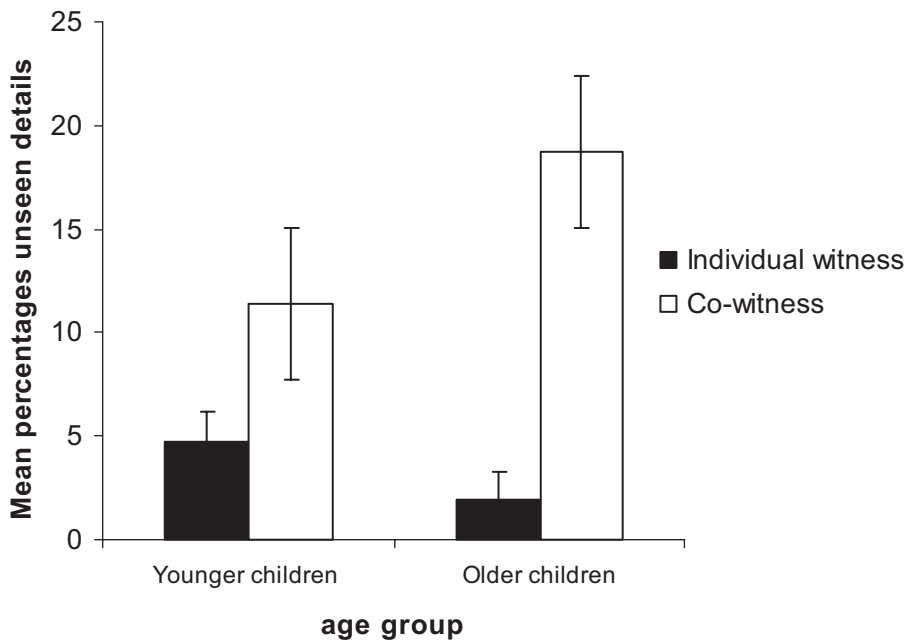


Figure 1. Mean percentages of unseen details reported during an individual's free recall in the individual and co-witness condition as a function of age. Error bars represent the standard error of the mean

Table 1. Mean percentages of correctly answered neutral questions (neutral hits) and mean percentages of correctly (critical hits) and incorrectly (critical unseen details) answered critical questions of the cued recall test (standard deviations in parentheses)

|                               |            | Neutral hits  | Critical hits | Critical unseen details |
|-------------------------------|------------|---------------|---------------|-------------------------|
| Younger children ( $n = 60$ ) | Individual | 64.17 (19.35) | 38.33 (23.43) | 10.83 (18.20)           |
|                               | Co-witness | 67.50 (26.38) | 32.50 (19.86) | 17.50 (20.92)           |
| Older children ( $n = 62$ )   | Individual | 76.67 (20.69) | 52.50 (22.12) | 11.67 (18.26)           |
|                               | Co-witness | 83.59 (15.04) | 41.41 (22.55) | 23.21 (22.24)           |

individual witness condition and the co-witness condition, there was no relationship between video clip (A or B) and number of reported unseen details [ $t(58) = 1.22$ ;  $p = 0.23$ , and  $t(60) = 0.92$ ;  $p = 0.36$ , respectively].

### Cued recall

Mean scores on the cued recall task are shown in Table 1. Four cued recall questions referred to details presented in both video versions (neutral questions). Older children answered more neutral questions correctly than did younger children [ $t(120) = -3.85$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ; Cohen's  $d = 0.70$ ]. With respect to correct answers to critical cued recall questions, we found a significant main effect of age [ $F(1,118) = 8.35$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ;  $\eta^2 = 0.07$ ] indicating that older children answered more questions of this category correctly. Moreover, a significant main effect of witness condition showed that children in the individual witness condition answered more critical cued recall questions correctly than did children in the co-witness condition [ $F(1,118) = 4.50$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ;  $\eta^2 = 0.04$ ]. The Age  $\times$  Condition interaction was non-significant [ $F(1,118) = 0.43$ ;  $p = 0.51$ ]. Likewise, with respect to the incorrect answers on the four critical cued recall questions, a significant main effect of condition was found [ $F(1,118) = 9.23$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ;  $\eta^2 = 0.07$ ], indicating that children in the co-witness condition reported more unseen information than children in the individual condition. The main effect of age and the Age  $\times$  Condition interaction were both non-significant [ $F(1,118) = 2.11$ ;  $p = 0.15$  and  $F(1,118) = 1.50$ ;  $p = 0.22$ , respectively].

## DISCUSSION

This study produced two main findings. First, 6- to 7-year-olds and 11- to 12-year-olds displayed a memory conformity effect, in both free and cued recall. Second, in free recall, there was a developmental difference in susceptibility to the memory conformity effect that was in the opposite direction to that predicted. In other words, the memory conformity effect was stronger in older children than in younger children.

Similar to Gabbert et al. (2003), we found a memory conformity effect in that witnesses, who discussed the target event, incorporated more unseen details in their memory report than witnesses who did not discuss the event. Our findings come close to those of Gabbert and her colleagues. Specifically, in our study over 60% of the participants reported an unseen detail after discussing the target event, whereas in Gabbert et al.'s study over 70% of the participants reported such a detail. In contrast to Gabbert et al. (2003), however,

14 participants in the individual witness condition reported at least one unseen detail. This means that they reported details they did not see or talk about. An explanation for this finding might be the first individual recall task. During this task, the control group had to answer questions like: 'What was the girl wearing?' In clip A of the video, she was wearing a cap whereas in clip B she was not wearing a cap. When a child erroneously stated that the girl was wearing a cap, he/she might have incorporated this information in his/her memory. Inference from the seen details might be another reason as to why children in the individual witness condition reported details from the alternative video. For example, in clip B there was a glass filled with Coca-Cola on the desk. Children might have inferred a bottle of Coca-Cola (clip A) from this seen detail. Previous research indeed has shown that children are particularly vulnerable to self-generated misinformation (see Holliday, 2003).

The current data replicate earlier findings (e.g. Candel et al., 2000; Roebbers & Schneider, 2002) in showing that memory improves with age. In both the free recall and the cued recall task, there were more hits in the older than younger age group. Despite the older children having a better memory for the event, they were more susceptible to misinformation, at least in free recall. Thus, acceptance of misinformation was unrelated to memory for the original event details. This is consistent with the work of Marche and Howe (1995). In their study, 4-year-olds watched a slide sequence either once or consecutive until all subsequent memory questions were answered correctly. Three weeks after acquisition, the children either did not receive postevent information or received either correct or misleading information. Again 1 week later, children were involved in four recall trials. The finding that corresponds to our results is that approximately half the time that the children reported misinformation in the Marche and Howe study, they also reported the original information.

Contrary to our prediction, the memory conformity effect was stronger in free recall in older than in younger children, despite this increased level of memory accuracy. There are a number of possible reasons for why there was no such Age  $\times$  Condition interaction in cued recall. One is that the younger children reported fewer details overall in response to open invitations or free recall prompts as found in previous studies (e.g. Davies, Tarrant, & Flin, 1989; Lamb, Sternberg, Orbach, Stewart, Mitchell, & Esplin, 2003). Another reason might be that when children are prompted with specific questions, accuracy is reduced for both younger and older children (see Milne & Bull, 1999 for a review). So both younger and older children would be equally susceptible to memory conformity under cued recall. A further possibility is that age-related differences in the strength of the encoded memory trace (e.g. Howe, 1991) might explain why older children reported unseen details in free recall. Holliday, Douglas, and Hayes (1999), for example suggest that age differences in suggestibility may be confounded due to the fact that younger children encode less items of information than older children. Our hit rates indeed imply that younger children encoded fewer items during the study phase than older children. It is likely, then, that they encountered fewer critical details during the discussion phase because their discussion partner's memory for the target event was also limited. Older children presumably encoded relatively more details during the study phase and as a result, they might have been exposed to more contrary information during the discussion. One of the shortcomings of this study is that we were not able to record all the discussions. Nevertheless, it was noted that the discussions of the younger children were very brief as compared to those of the older children. Further research should examine the relationship between the content and the nature of the discussion and the memory conformity effect. Furthermore, as suggested by an anonymous reviewer, the mere act of viewing the video in dyads might have affected how children encoded the video and later memory performance. This could be investigated

in a future study by having an additional control group of children who view the video in pairs but then are interviewed individually before the final interview.

It is worth noting that the current study is not the first to show a reversal of the usual age trend in suggestibility. Ornstein, Merritt, Baker-Ward, Furtado, Gordon, and Principe (1998), for example, showed that 6-year-olds made more intrusions (i.e. reported more non-experienced details) than 4-year-olds. Specifically, 12 weeks after a mock physical examination, the older children were more likely to report expected-but-omitted features than the younger children. These authors argue that prior knowledge and expectations affect intrusions for expected-but-omitted details. Like in the current study, older children's richer knowledge structure for to-be-remembered events might account for their increased levels of intrusions.

In sum, studies on children's suggestibility have shown that the relationship between age and susceptibility for misinformation is complex and inevitably varies with many internal characteristics of the child witness as well as task variables and retrieval environment (e.g. Holliday et al., 1999). Although the relation between age and memory conformity and the underlying mechanisms warrant further evaluation, the current findings are straightforward in showing that peer discussion affects children's memory reports. The current findings have important implications for investigators who gather evidence from child witnesses. They not only show that children, like adults, are likely to incorporate information provided by their peers in their memory report. They also suggest that older children may be even more likely to do this than younger children.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study was supported by a grant to the first author from The Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) (grant number 451-03-013). We thank two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments on an earlier draft of the manuscript.

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APPENDIX A

Neutral and critical questions of the cued recall task

|  |                      |
|--|----------------------|
| What did the girl do with the door?                                      | Neutral              |
| Upon entering the room, where did the girl walk at?                      | Neutral              |
| What did the girls take from the drawer?                                 | Neutral              |
| What was the colour of the girl's pants?                                 | Neutral              |
| What was the colour of the girl's cap?                                   | Critical (version A) |
| What did the girl do with the candy after she took it out of the drawer? | Critical (version A) |
| What was next to the glass on the desk?                                  | Critical (version B) |
| What jewellery was the girl wearing?                                     | Critical (version B) |